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Reflective Practice in Open and Distance Learning: how do we improve?

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Collected Conference Papers
September 2005

Edited by Anne Gaskell and Alan Tait

The Open University
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Contents

Reflecting on Practice in Open and Distance Learning: the need for a situated approach

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This chapter serves as the introduction o the impressive set of 30 papers contributed by participants to the 11th Cambridge international conference on Open and Distance Learning (ODL). We have greatly enjoyed editing the papers, and our remarks here have been stimulated by the thoughts of colleagues from so many parts of the world as they consider how we can improve our practice through reflection.

Reflective practice lies at the heart of much initial and continuing professional development, and of organisational development, and indeed lies at the heart of discussion of learning in any context. It has been particularly influential as a framework for discussion of adult learning, especially in widening participation and diversity contexts. These developments come together in practical terms in the use of learning logs, journals and portfolios, and are increasingly deployed as ways of supporting the learner's understanding of her or his learning process (so-called double loop or meta-learning).

Yet discussion of reflective learning has in our view some critical weaknesses, derived mainly from the ways in which metaphors for learning have become reified and used as accounts of actual practice. Despite the existence of some powerful critiques of Kolb's learning cycle as schematic (Kolb 1984), it can and still is offered as a description of how learning actually takes place. This is equally true of the "deep and surface" metaphor of Marton and Säljö (Marton and Säljö 1976) offered as if this was more than a metaphor for the variety of ways in which effective and ineffective learning takes place. The case can equally be made about Honey and Mumford's "learning styles" (Honey and Mumford 1982), which have become routinised in their application in the classroom, and of Gardner's multiple intelligences (Gardner 1982) which can similarly be used in some very unsophisticated ways as if we had more than one species of humanity. Constructivism and social constructivism are in the process of suffering the same fate, and are particularly used to validate computer conferencing. Lave and Wenger's "Communities of Practice" are now used so glibly as a term that a mere abbreviation – a COP – is frequently employed to denote supposed actuality (Lave and Wenger 1991). All of these accounts of learning have, we suggest, become ideological: that is, have excepted themselves from critical scrutiny and have become convenient or, worse, misleading accounts of the complex experience that learning makes up. The ways in which Schön's work is accepted as a given shows that this ideological turn is also true of learning from reflective practice (Schön 1983).

All of these frameworks have originality and considerable explanatory power. However, the ways in which they are now introduced as factual accounts of learning, rather than

essentially metaphorical attempts to illuminate how learning might take place suggest to us that we need to examine them critically. They have become normative accounts of what good practice should be, substantially untested by empirical research as to what is actually happening, nor respectful of the finiteness of any investigation of that range of complex processes that takes place when someone learns.

The frameworks for understanding learning briefly outlined above have some elements in common, and one principal element is the attempt to include the learner's worlds. This is clearly helpful over and above earlier instruction-based models that were dominated by teaching rather than learning. However, the failure to understand their essentially metaphorical rather than empirical status has led in our view to their uncritical adoption, and thus away from, rather than towards, understanding.

Thus in this chapter we propose that the time is ripe for more situated accounts of learning, as opposed to the simplified models that are offered as blueprints. By a situated account we intend to mean an account that takes adequate note of the actual phenomena of learning in a given situation, for a given individual at a given time. A situated account needs to be able to encompass issues such as:

- To what extent is learning from experience involuntary?
- What is the role of making mistakes, and is the experience of making mistakes potentially the best context for learning?
- Why do some of us learn from experience on some occasions or in some periods, but not at others?
- Is the articulation of what we have learned essential to the learning process?

Figure 1 sets out graphically the variety of ways that individuals learn, impacted by life events. These can take us through learning that is primarily engaged with individually and/or within the family; or within an occupational setting; that may be deliberately farmed for learning or from which learning may in its mysterious ways suddenly emerge; and equally that may not lead to learning in any appreciable way. This set of paths in all their complexity does not offer the linear certainties of some models but does however lend itself, in our view, to accounts of learning based more fully on the phenomena of situations and not on learning models that have become ideological in their shaping of our understanding. The patterns and paths in Figure 1 propose that learning is deeply embedded in positive, negative and for some, traumatic experiences. Learning from experience is fragmented, and most often informal in the sense of taking place outside organised educational processes. When any of us says "What I really learned from that situation was that…", any accurate account of that learning must acknowledge a complex range of stimuli and involuntary insight that is rendered near impossible if any of the simpler models are accepted. A due modesty is necessary in the face of learning from experience: it remains a mystery and as such all the more important and worthy of study.

Given that set of cautionary notes about reflective learning, how does this impact on organisational development? Or how through reflection can we improve what we do in open, distance and e-learning? In other words, while we should acknowledge the complexity of learning from experience, we have to work towards some practical outcomes. Our second area of caution lies in the way in which reflection for learning in organisational contexts too often ignores the politics of what happens in organisations. To develop purposeful reflective activities so that organisations can learn will be

facilitated or impeded by the ways in which power is distributed and used, or in other words will reflect the management and leadership styles that are prevalent. Thus rather than summarise all the range of reflective practices set out in the papers in this volume, we would point to the need to engage at all levels in the organisation – on the principle that leadership is distributed – with the challenges that exist in trying to harvest knowledge from experience. These include the powerful in organisations being able to hear accounts that challenge their insights or in some cases their decisions. Only in this way can a further dimension of ideology be avoided: if not, the understanding and practices of senior management can sometimes lead an organisation on to the rocks. Equally those working at other levels need to be able to hear analysis of their practice that might identify, for example, how their discourse attempts to subvert the organisation to serve their, rather than its, purposes. Thus learning from reflection requires as a prerequisite the capacity to engender conversation that surfaces assumptions and defines and revisits purposes: it is an activity that requires those engaged in it to work on the basis of equality of status while of course retaining differentiated accountabilities (the core mistake in this context is to think the latter excludes the former).

The 30 papers included in the proceedings provide a rich variety of perspectives on these issues and will be a valuable source to inform debates among delegates at the conference.

Authors examine the importance of reflective practice to inform continuous professional development (Gouda and Banks) and to deliver change through institutional commitment (Tshivhase). Embedding reflective practice within the staff development of part-time and often distant tutors is also of critical importance to the student experience (Edmunds and West; O'Rourke). Reflective practice does not, however always result in change, and barriers which hinder its impact are also considered (Simpson).

Activities to achieve the Millennium Development Goals of universal primary education and gender equality (United Nations, 2000) are well represented here. Reflective practice is discussed in the context of teacher education (Kamau; Onguko) and specifically in the development of academic literacy skills (Thomson; Mitchell). ODL also has an important role in widening access (Vilakati and Chandraiah) and improving the status of women (Akhter).

Important links are made between a reflective approach to practice and a commitment to quality improvement (King), whether in the context of programme and tutor evaluation (Islam) or in the context of external quality assurance processes (Sun Luyi). Reflective practice also has an vital role in improving the quality of online learning processes, through the pedagogic design of online learning architectures (Sorensen and Ó Murchú) or through the use of narrative enquiry (Webster and Mertova). Integrating critical thinking into online learning processes (Ó Murchú and Muirhead) is a key area as are ways of engaging students with online discussions and building online learning communities (Mac Keogh and Lorenzi; Fox). Authors also reflect on the role of new technologies in enhancing learning processes (Crosta and McConnell) and extending access, for instance through global access to new online initiatives (Wasserstein).

The fundamental role of research in reflective practice and its impact on enhancing student support is discussed (Fung; Ukpo). Authors have also taken the opportunity to explore the nature and application of reflection itself, for example through the links between practice and praxis (Gokool-Ramdoo; Fung) and the role of problems and

breakdowns in promoting reflection (Bronfman; Daweti). The transformative experience of reflective practice is also examined in the context of how one can learn to become a reflective practitioner (Gokool-Ramdoo; Haynes) and examples provided of reflection on one's own practice (Parsons). Reflection as a group process can also provide many benefits (Haynes; Roman, Mitchell and Daweti) specifically in the context of programme development and delivery (Nonyongo and Shabalala).

In conclusion, reflection on our own practice is core to individual and organisational change. We hope this conference provides you with a very positive experience, and that it creates the opportunity to stand back and engage in reflection to enhance your future practice at both personal and occupational levels!

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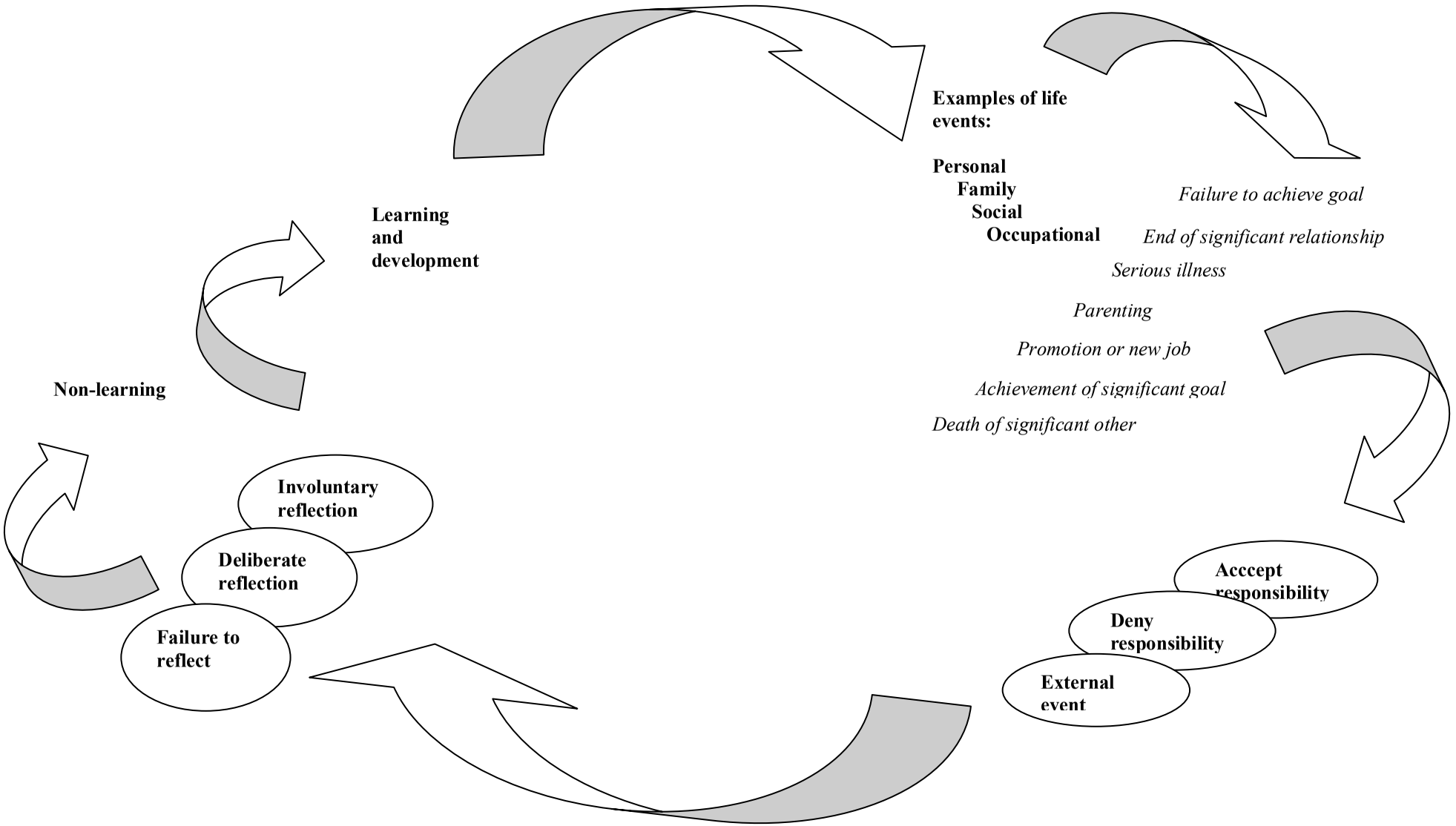

Figure 1: Reflection and Learning, a situated approach

Knowing Facts: Women Empowerment and Distance Education

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Introduction

Educational opportunities for girls and rural children have been particularly limited in Bangladesh. Special efforts to encourage school attendance among girls through food for education programmes have now been replaced by a Government stipend programme. Special incentives in secondary education in terms of tuition waivers and also a female stipend programme have contributed to achieving gender parity. Following the Dakar declaration (2000), the Ministry of Education, Government of Bangladesh developed the National Action Plan (2003-2015), with four major components 1) Early childhood education 2) Formal Primary Education Programme 3) Non-formal education programme 4) Programme for female education. The plan has laid special emphasis on universal school enrolment and quality education. The target for net enrolment is 83% in 2005 and 92% in 2010. The literacy rate in 2001 was 41.6% (in 11 +year age group, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and 45.3% (in 7+ years in the year 2001) One of the complicated issues to be dealt with is child labour (currently estimated at 7.5%) which is linked to poverty and hinders school participation. Constraints to achieving equal participation among girls and women are rooted in a historical context of discriminatory attitudes, typical of patriarchal society, and a traditional culture of social practice.

Distance education offers a new format for teaching and learning. In this field, technology offers many promises, many of them financial in nature. Universities hope to save money by delivering education to students who are unable to attend classes because of time and distance. Nevertheless, the main challenge is not only with the content or method of delivery but also the need to introduce new courses that take full advantage of the new media.

Distance education through the use of two way audio-visual synchronous communications has become a possibility in today's educational settings. It can be an effective technological media for creative, cost effective teaching, while reaching a large number of students and reducing faculty utilization. In modern society, along with comprehensive developments in disciplinary knowledge and the emergence of new subjects, the forming of the knowledge economy through the internationalization of high-tech production, and with the establishment of social information, makes it possible to introduce life-long education.

This paper will focus on aspects of the implementation and teaching of a continuing education course, using the opportunity of media which will be cost effective. It will also discuss the challenge of introducing special courses for higher secondary students on women's rights and women's history which will ultimately enlighten their mind and body.

Rationale

Secondary education begins to expose students to the differentiated roles of science, humanities and social science. This is also an appropriate stage to provide children with a sense of history and give them opportunities to understand their constitutional duties and rights as citizens and the different acts and laws which preserve these. Access to secondary education will be widened with emphasis on the enrolment of girls in commerce, science and through vocationalization in specialized institutions or through the refashioning of secondary education

Women's access to education must be treated as their fundamental right. And it is only through education that they will get chance to prepare themselves to play their roles in the nation's social, economic and political spheres as equal members of society. We know that attitudes are difficult to change, but this change can only be brought about by making the facts known. . Introducing the course on women's right in formal courses as a separate course or a part of sociology will help to empower women; non-formal continuing education is essential rather than an option to lead a healthy lifestyle and to maintain good household management. Reducing poverty is one of the fundamental aims of the internationally agreed upon Millennium Development Goals. One of the many strategic activities undertaken to achieve this goal is to provide training and education for many unskilled women workers to enable them to become higher skilled, as we know that women are often low paid workers due to lack of training and less opportunity to become skilled. Technical and vocational education and training therefore become an important aspect of the Millennium Development Goals. The traditional system could not meet the massive need for training in the vocational field. The application of ODL system in this field creates a great opportunity to reach the MDG target.

The role of distance education in empowering women through formal and non-formal continuing education

Education has importance in the context of the centrality of the influence of cultural behaviour in the lives of Bangladeshi women. Education, combined with a change of attitude can only play an important role in bringing about transformation by enabling women to make an entry into men's sphere. Through education, one can become self-reliant, more aware of the changes in surroundings, and have better self-esteem. The importance of education is aptly reflected by the various forms of discrimination against women subjected to their social and economic dependence on men in a male-dominated society of Bangladesh. In order to improve their lot, they must have wider access to education. There are many factors at work ensuring women's lower educational participation and attainment including lack of education amongst the adult of the family, distance of school, need to help in the household, too many siblings and purdah. Early marriage and motherhood are among the most important factors. Both in the rural and urban areas therefore, there is a close but complex connection between education and marriage.

Sometimes parents do not view the curriculum offered in the schools as practical and they are unsure as to whether and how education will affect a girl‘s value in the marriage market. Distance education can thus play a major role in enhancing the status of women in Bangladesh. Education is seen as the indispensable agent to bring about the change

between what we are and what we want to be. In this context a role for distance education is not an option but an unavoidable imperative for many of us in that it can provide educational opportunities for women, particularly in rural areas where, for many reasons, many women do not continue their education beyond middle level. For these reasons, it is proposed to introduce formal and non-formal continuing education for women. The traditional system of training individuals for technical and vocational career often cannot meet the massive need and so among the options available to achieve the target of MDGs is the application of open and distance learning,

Objectives

1. To make women aware of their basic legal and human rights, so that they can resist any injustice which may happen to them.
2. Encourage women by through knowledge of the facts.
3. Skill development towards economic independency through non-formal and continuing vocational education
4. By developing capacity , reach them to the doorsteps of economic empowerment

The lives of Bangladeshi women are so complex that no simple solution is possible to their problems. It is very much impractical in the present context of Bangladesh scenario to suggest overnight and radical changes .One must, therefore, finds ways that are acceptable, if not to all the people, at least to the majority of the population. Usually, women are conditioned from their birth. They are forced to relate everything to the male, to their families and even to society. Women must be liberated, so that they can begin to think of themselves as individuals and, like men, learn to think and to lead. Socio-cultural constraints are responsible for women's lower participation in educational fields. The constraints may be summarized as follows:

- There is very little access for women to enter into the public field. Some practices, such as early marriage, even prevent girls from going to school. The proportion of women in the agricultural sector in Bangladesh is 59%, in industry 13%, in services 28% and in parliament 2.0%. Adult literacy rate for females is 30.8% and for males 49.9%, the gender gap is 19.1%. (Source: HDSA, 2000 and HDR 2003)
- Inadequate incentives and poor economic condition deter girls from education.
- Lack of participation in community life and any active attempt to change negative attitudes towards women's active participation in education and the present economic status of women make things stagnant. Incidents of sex violence are a recent concern for girls and women going to school and work places.

Role of Open School in imparting the special course for women

Open School is one of the schools (faculty) having the highest number of students. The school provides basic education to thousands of disadvantaged and poor people of our country. The School conducts two formal programs SSC (Secondary School Certificate) and HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate). The SSC examination is the first public examination and the minimum entrance requirement of 8 years of schooling, so there is a heavy rush of students for admission into the SSC course of study. The certificates provided through these programmes are parallel and equivalent to that of the national education system and have received equivalency from the board of equivalency. Open School has the aim of inclusive education and has a plan to incorporate the following

proposed course for women students. If some special courses, non-formal programmes and vocational courses for the girl students of H.S.C could be introduced, no doubt the open school of Bangladesh Open University would fulfil its goals of inclusive education. The following table of student enrolments in different faculties of Bangladesh Open University, indicates that Bangladesh Open University is reaching its goal very successfully.

Student Enrolment in Bangladesh Open University

Name of the faculty	*Name of the program*	*Male*	*Female*	*Total Students*
Open School	S.S.C. H.S.C.	149368 71951	118125 58161	267493 130112
School of Education	C.Ed. B.Ed. M.Ed.	21884 13681 3789	17193 11193 3100	39077 24874 6889
School of Social Science, Humanities and Language	CELP CALP BELT B.A./B.S.S.	14107 1595 1744 28127	6046 399 748 18752	20153 1994 2492 46879
School of Agriculture and Development	B.Ag.Ed. CLP CPFP DYDW	4517 692 655 385	502 21 20 12	5019 713 675 397
School of Business	CIM PGDM M.B.A. CEMBA/CEMPA	1170 10858 1559 534	206 1916 173 59	1376 12774 1732 593
School of Science and Technology	DCSA B.Sc. Nursing	2733 238	482 950	3215 1188
	Total	329587	238058	567645

Source- Student Support Service (BOU)

The contents of the Course planned for the HSC Programme are as follows: the course is designed to keep similarity with the undergraduate courses of the Department of Women Studies of Dhaka University.

Formal programme

1. Definition of gender
2. Women's movement
3. UNO and women's development
4. CEDAW
5. Status of women in Bangladesh
6. Legal rights
7. Different acts:

a. The Child marriage restraint act, 1929
b. Consent in marriage under Muslim law
c. Dowry prohibition act 1980
d. The Muslim marriage and divorce registration act 1974
e. Act regarding violence against women
f. Economic status of women
g. Political status of women
h. Social status of women
i. Govt. measures to uphold women's cause

Non-formal programme

1. Food and nutrition
2. Hygiene and sanitation
3. Reproductive health and child care
4. Family and health care

Vocational Programme

1. Developing skills for home made products
2. Poultry farming
3. Vegetation
4. Typing
5. Electronic appliance and their maintenance
6. Other income generating programs

It has been commonly noted that the initial demand for admission into higher secondary vocational courses is very great in traditional system. Despite on the popularity of this course, it is proposed to introduce vocational courses through ODL system along with tutorial service.

Role of media

Bangladesh Open University (BOU) is the only and has the largest coverage in the country for imparting distance education. Effective coverage is still in a process of expansion. Besides the main campus at Gazipur, the University has 12 regional centres and 81 study centres all over the country. The media centre of BOU is undoubtedly very modern, and has the capacity to run its own channel. Shortly Bangladesh Open University is going to sign an agreement with National Television of Bangladesh to provide one hour programmes, six days a week. At present it is limited to 20 minutes 3 days a week. This will create a bigger scope for BOU to make more challenging formal and non-formal programmes. By formal programme, it is meant that the proposed courses will be included as a part of social science, social welfare etc. Non-formal education covers any organized and systematic learning conducted largely outside the formal educational subsystem that may or may not be accredited. These courses would be mainly supported by audio-visual programmes, leaflets, brochures and booklets on the issue related to the benefit of women in developing the quality of their lives.

As media plays a critical role in raising awareness and sensitizing the public, the issues and concerns on health and family planning processes need to be widely articulated and

disseminated through Radio and Television. To maximize the impact of these messages, there is a need for this sector to be further organized and strengthened.

The Potential Role of Education to Empower Women

Educational attainment is without doubt the most fundamental prerequisite for improving women status in all spheres of society. Education can improve the circumstances in which females enter marriage, for example they can agree or disagree in marriage according to their choice. Education has both direct effects on women's status and indirect effects that operate through increased earning potential. Educated women's assertiveness can be contagious: if one educated women protests against her husband's misbehaviour, her neighbour who studied up to certain level may also start to protest against her husband's misbehaviour.

The distinction between the term equality and equity must also be clearly understood. Equality means sameness, equal in the Constitution, in law, etc. irrespective of gender, caste, race or age or education. Equity means women having choices, opportunities and capabilities to access or exercise their legal rights, resources, etc. Social development should therefore prioritize and promote more equitable development strategies that are gender neutral in all respects. Women's education is vitally important and specifically significant in the context of Bangladesh, where women are destined to be disadvantaged, and development efforts stand threatened.

Women's invisible contribution to the society not only adversely affects women, but it affects society at large. If women do not know about their real history or legal rights, how can they resist injustice? At the same time they should gain some work skill to prove them as a potential member of the family. John Stuart Mill (1806) declared that the power of earning is essential to the dignity of a woman, if she has not independent property.

Strategies to incorporate the special courses for women in HSC program of BOU:

1. Learning materials should be developed to reduce and eliminate barriers that prevent and restrict women's participation in society.
2. Curriculum of vocational education should be developed on the basis of national curriculum of Technical Education Board.
3. The theoretical part of vocational education should be developed through print material and audio-visual support; the practical side could be covered in the tutorial centres regional centres and on the main campus.
4. The courses should be developed to build on women's diverse experience and not impose rigid external expectations and arbitrary requirements.
5. Supportive and friendly environments should be created in the context to make women understand about feminist study.
6. Vocational training through non-formal education should be based on pragmatic situations and in developing the programme emphasis should be given to life skill development.
7. The nature and prevalence of social aspects of learning should be taken into consideration to introduce feminist learning. Carefully gender neutral concepts and language should be used in the module.

8. The tutors should be appointed competent for distance education with useful, appropriate orientation.
9. Massive public awareness is essential regarding the necessity of women empowerment through the special courses and programs.
10. Counseling cells could be established in 12 RRC of BOU. It will help the students by giving booklets and advice.
11. The feminist courses offered in other country through distance education should be taken as an example.

Possibilities

In Bangladesh there exists a National TV media, many Private TV channels and Radio networks that can be effectively utilized to reach grassroots level in order to make them aware of their own situation. Bangladesh Open University Media Centre can produce different type of programmes and broadcast through National and Private Channels. This would also encourage social mobilization and provide a platform of action. Television at present covers nearly 98% and Radio covers 100% of the area of Bangladesh. It is expected that the campaign on women's issues using the Television and Radio can be successfully transmitted to the audience, both women and men, as it should be our effort to bring them together on the same platform for a coordinated drive.

Concluding remarks

The foregoing discussions give an overview of the planned introduction of a special course to provide non-formal continuing education and vocational education for the girl student of Higher Secondary School level. As such it is expected that implementation of the proposal, being a new one in the country, will definitely enable BOU to offer a broader scope of access to underprivileged mass .education programmes. Before that, a critical analysis of different aspect of this programme is necessary and there should also be a needs-based well conceived plan. BOU should make a conscious step towards the fulfilment of its constitutional commitment to provide educational opportunities to the underprivileged population of the country.

Marry Wollstonecraft in her book A Vindication of the Rights of Women observed that women’s lower position lies in the false system of education collected from books written on this subject by the men who did not consider women as human beings. The Open School of Bangladesh Open University has the access and capability to overcome the myth. The thing which is necessary is a change in attitude and a strong commitment towards society in the development of the disadvantaged classes of society.

A heideggerian perspective on reflective practice and its consequences for learning design

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Introduction

The influential work done by Donald Schön has given rise to an abundant academic literature concerning reflection, both on the concept itself and on the new possibilities it opens on adult and professional learning. In this paper we want to make a contribution on how to become a reflective practitioner. We start by reviewing different accounts of reflection, then moving to Schön's interpretation of the concept because we think that it is this interpretation that opens more possibilities for learning design. The focus of this research is to make parallels between Schön's interpretation of reflection and heideggerian philosophy. We then discuss the consequences for learning design that stem from these parallels and we illustrate these consequences giving two examples: a software tool for learning Civil Engineering and an on-line course on Communication.

The concept of reflection

When considering reflection we find different accounts of the concept. We cannot escape the work done by John Dewey who defined reflection as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (Dewey, 1933) By "grounds" Dewey refers to evidence by which the reliability and worth of a belief can be established so as to justify its acceptance. In other words, Dewey's definition of reflection means validity testing. This process follows the hypothetical- deductive model: identification and formulation of the problem, reasoning from evidence, developing of hypotheses, testing of hypotheses, and their reformulation based on feedback from research. Dewey referred to this reflective process as "critical inquiry" (Mezirow, 1991).

In his experiential learning theory, David Kolb discusses the meaning of reflection while describing *reflective observation*: "An orientation toward reflective observation focuses on understanding the meaning of ideas and situations by carefully observing and impartially describing them. It emphasizes understanding as opposed to practical application. A concern with what is true and how things happen as opposed to what will work; and emphasis on reflection as opposed to action" (Kolb, 1984).

For Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), reflection is an activity in which people "recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over, and evaluate it". However, the most important contribution of these authors is that they extend the definition of reflection to include attending to one's feelings as well to one's beliefs.

The problem of these interpretations of reflection is that they consider only a small part of our professional activity: when we can stop action and think back on it. But most of the time the practitioner cannot escape from action, he/she needs to stay involved in

action and nonetheless thinking on what he/she is doing while doing it. In order to account for a less detached interpretation of reflection, we will turn to Donald Schön's definition of the concept.

Donald Schön's interpretation of reflection and Heidegger philosophy

On the basis of his observations of the *artistry* showed by competent practitioners, Donald Schön proposes two fundamental concepts in order to explain this artistry. These are *knowing-in-action* on the one hand, *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action* on the other hand (Schön, 1983; Schön, 1987).

Knowing-in-action refers to the know-how revealed in our daily action when doing our jobs, e.g. the instant analysis of a balance sheet. There are in fact many actions we perform spontaneously, without having to think on them. Often, we are not aware of having learned to perform these actions. "Even if sometimes we think before the action, it is still true that most of the time our spontaneous behaviour concerning practical skills does not come from a previous intellectual operation. Nonetheless, we show a kind of knowledge" (Schön, 1996).

Our knowledge-in-action allows us to cope with daily life. However, sometimes we experience "surprises", either good or bad. An error in a computer programme resists correction, the outputs of an advertising TV spot are much better than expected, a carefully designed information system is rejected by its users, etc. Something unexpected reveals then to us.

In Schön's interpretation, "reflection" starts when there is a *surprise*, when there is a *breakdown*: something produces unexpected results, and/or we begin to look at something in a new way. We may respond to this situation by reflection and we may do so in one of two ways.

We may reflect *on* action, thinking back on what we have done in order to discover the causes of the unexpected outcome (*stop-and-think*). And we may reflect *in* action, i.e. in the midst of action without interrupting it, carrying out on-the-spot experiments to change the situation, "thinking on our feet". The point for reflection-in-action is that we can think about something *while* doing it, it is the capacity to respond to surprise through improvisation on the spot.

In both cases, reflection has then a critical function, questioning the assumptional structure of our knowledge.[1]

In the light of the work done by Schön, Jack Mezirow makes the distinction between *reflective action* and *critical reflection.* Reflective action refers to a very brief break (sometimes a few seconds) in the action and asking oneself "What's going wrong?", and then evaluate the situation. Critical reflection involves the questioning of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built and leads to discuss problem definition instead of problem solving. On the basis of this distinction, Mezirow defines reflection as "the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience" (Mezirow, 1991).

[1] In this sense, reflection is close to the concept of accommodation (Piaget, 1985).

By opening the possibility of reflecting in action, Schön's concept of reflection (and knowledge) move away from the detached approach proposed (at least implicitly) by Kolb, Boud et al, etc., and even by John Dewey[2]. Schön's approach needs involvement, even commitment, with action. We claim that Donald Schön's interpretation of reflection is a phenomenological, even heideggerian, one.[3]

Our argumentation is based on the work done by Hubert Dreyfus, one of the best specialists on Heidegger philosophy and who has made important contributions applying heideggerian thinking to learning and artificial intelligence. Although Schön did not make reference to Heidegger philosophy, we have found several parallels in the work of the two.

Heidegger says that our everyday action is rooted in the ability to act pre-reflectively when we are thrown in a situation. We don't think, we just do, and we cope with the situation. Tools are characterised by their transparency. Heidegger called this *availableness* (*zuhandenheit*). This is close to Schön's concept of knowing-in-action (see above).

However, when we face a breakdown (i.e. a "surprise"), when something is not "ready at hand", we move to what Heidegger calls *occurrentness* (*vorhandenheit*). According to Dreyfus there are some stages in this move, going from *conspicuousness* (a short breakdown) easily repaired, to *obstinacy* (which implies stop and think, planned reflection- "what if's", "if-then-else's", etc. -, all of this in a context of involved action), and to *obstrusiveness* (detached theoretical reflection). We believe these heideggerian distinctions are close to the concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Dreyfus, 1991).

The following table summarise the parallels between Heidegger philosophy and Schön's interpretation of reflection:

What happens	**Schön's interpretation**	**Heidegger's interpretation**
No breakdowns, no surprise	Knowing-in-action	Absorbed coping, availableness
Short breakdown	Reflection-in-action	Conspicuousness
Persistent breakdown	Reflection-on-action	Obstinacy, occurrentness
Flaw	Reflection-on-action	Obstrusiveness, occurrentness

[2] To be fair to John Dewey, he did not believe that it was necessary to go through the entire reflection cycle in order to learn.
[3] Probably Mezirow's work on reflection has also been influenced by phenomenology.

Consequences for learning design

In order to help learners to acquire the artistry of competent practitioners it is necessary to thrown them in the swampy lowland where there are messy, confusing problems, that defy planned solutions and traditional problem-solving, where there are not stable rules, where problems and situations must be reframed. This kind of setting, where learners will encounter "surprises" and will then reflect-in-action and on-action is what Donald Schön calls a *reflective practicum*.

Reflective learning literature deals mainly with reflection-*on*-action. There are many and well known techniques for that, such as reflective journals and reflective coaching. Nevertheless, we think that the real challenge is to design learning situations that allow for reflection-*in*-action. Mainly because the huge majority of the situations we face every day when we find a surprise are not situations that allow us to stop and think. We have to think on the situation while dealing with it. For instance, in education, "the classroom teacher must constantly act on the spot and cannot step back and postpone acting in order to first reflect on the various alternatives to this action and consequences of the various alternatives" (van Manen, 1995). As Schön says, "what distinguishes reflection-in-action from other kinds of reflection is its immediate significance for action" (Schön, 1987).

In order to learn a skill, a competence, Hubert Dreyfus distinguishes seven levels : novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, expertise, mastery, and practical wisdom (Dreyfus, 2001). In the levels of expertise and beyond, practitioners reflect *in* action when facing "surprises", they think on what they are doing while doing it. The proficient performer sees what needs to be done but still has to decide how to do it. The expert not only sees what needs to be achieved, he also sees *immediately* how to achieve his goal thanks to his vast repertoire of situational discriminations.

The question is then how to train to become an expert, i.e. a person who masters the ability to reflect *in* action. Our answer is based on two points: breakdowns, and a repertoire of cases.

Breakdowns put people in the right mood for learning, because it reveals what you are not able to do. A repertoire of cases allow people to make situational discriminations while being in action. But - as Dreyfus says - to become an expert is not sufficient to have worked through a lot of cases. The cases must matter to the learner in order for them to become emotionally involved. Students should not be confronted with objective descriptions of situations, but rather be led to identify with the situation of the characters of the case and experience their agonized choices and subsequent joys and disappointments (Dreyfus, 2001).

We will now describe two examples of the above: a software tool that allows one to reflect-in-action from breakdowns, and an on-line course on Communication that allow both for reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action from breakdowns and a repertoire of ad hoc cases.

A software for simulating structures in Civil Engineering

Students in Civil Engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) used Growltiger, a software conceived in the beginning as a design tool but which became a

very powerful learning tool. It incorporated a finite element algorithm for studying equilibrium forces. Students could draw on the screen a structure such as a beam of a truss for a bridge, specify the materials and the dimensions, then lead the bridge, and the programme showed them deflections, moment diagrams, etc.

Students could simulate the structure's behaviour under different load conditions, explore the space of possible bridge designs, and to find "surprises" in this process. We can see here reflection-in-action: "interacting with the model, getting surprising results, trying to make sense of the results, and then inventing new strategies of action on the basis of this new interpretation. Students could iterate very quickly with this design tool." (Schön, 1996)

A blended learning course on communication

An online reflective course on Communication that has been designed for Spanish saving bank's employees.[4] The course is structured in six learning units, every unit having the same structure as below:

- First, trainees read a reflective story (a mini-case that tells a story with a breakdown, a surprise, that can be interpreted in terms of human communication) and participate in an online discussion of this story in a forum. Participants reflect then *on* action. The point here is that the mini cases create not only breakdowns but also emotional involvement because the stories are real stories of what happens in the daily work at this savings bank.
- Second, trainees are encouraged to access some readings on communication theory that allow for a new interpretation of the reflective story. Then follows an online discussion of participants' *own* examples of the same kind of story. Here, participants are encouraged to reflect *on their* action.
- Third, following a given procedure, trainees must run a face-to-face exercise on human communication (with a colleague, a friend, etc.), then report the results via e-mail, and finally participate in an online discussion on what happened in this exercise. While doing the face-to-face exercise, participants must reflect in action; when they participate in the related online discussion they are allowed to reflect *on* action.
- Finally, trainees must write an evaluation report of the above exercises, in the light of what they have learnt hence reflecting again *on* action.

As we can see, this course is not a completely online course. Participants must do some face-to-face activities. This is because human communication is an embodied phenomenon. As human beings, we are not like minds in a vat, we have bodies and our bodies play an important role in the communication process. Therefore, if one wants to learn to communicate (which is not the same as to learn about communication) one must also train his/her body to communicate and reflect on what happens to the body in the face-to-face exercises. Moreover, we think that in human communication courses face-to-face exercises are the only way to allow people to reflect in action, the subsequent online discussions allowing them to reflect on action.

[4] In fact, this course on Communication has been designed by a company whose members were trained in the applications of Hubert Dreyfus' ideas, among others.

Conclusions

We believe that, in order to become a reflective practitioner, it is not only necessary to reflect in a detached mode, out of the action and its subsequent emotions like the sense of involvement, etc. Most of the time practitioners cannot escape from action. Consequently, in addition to well known techniques for reflection after the action, we shall design learning settings that allow for reflection in action.

In order to do this, Donald Schön's interpretation of reflection seems a very powerful one. We have found several parallels between this interpretation and a heideggerian one on how we know and how we learn. This new interpretation of reflection opens the possibility of designing learning settings that allow for reflection *in* action, hence becoming a more competent reflective practitioner. Breakdowns are the triggers of learning by reflection-in-action, and a repertoire of cases is what allow for an immediate response to the situation.

Based on the above we have described two examples of learning that allow for becoming a reflective practitioner: a software for simulating structures in Civil Engineering, and an on-line course on Communication.

Further research needs to be done in order to find how information and communication technologies (ICT) can mediate human interaction that allow for reflection-in-action, and which ICT-based tools can be designed in order to promote this kind of reflection by creating breakdowns and offering a vast repertoire of ad hoc cases.

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Action Research and Tutoring in the Online Learning Community: New Implications for Adult Teaching and Learning

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Introduction

This paper presents some reflections based on a study carried out as a research student at the Department of Education, Sheffield University (UK). The research context is a post-graduate blended Master in Open Education and Training (MOET) offered by the Bocconi University in Milano (Italy). The study was carried out as an Action Research approach where the teacher/tutor's personal online experience leads to considerations about possible ways to improve the learning process in online learning communities at post-graduate level.

Some issues are analysed and some conclusions drawn so that the personal experience described might help the tutors to improve their teaching/learning experience online.

The Online Learning Community

The use of technologies for teaching and learning has recently grown at a fast rate in the context of University post-graduate adult learning courses. One of the metaphors recently used for teaching and learning in this field is that of the "Learning Community" (LC).

Within a learning context, it is central to clarify that a community is not simply a group of people but a phenomenon involving more than a group and having different features and dynamics. The LC generally implies the development of commitment and trust among the members that is distinct from simple groups. Participants learn themselves how to handle functions within the team without being assigned to roles, or rotating roles and without the tutor's continuous intervention and the constant presence of a leader. (Michaelsen, et al, 2002; McConnell, 2000)

When these phenomena are mediated by the use of new technologies the simple LC becomes a typical Online Learning Community (OLC). One of the main tools used for this is CMC, Computer Mediated Communication which is as a way of exchanging thoughts, ideas and information in a form of asynchronous communication, via a computer keyboard and screen, connected to other computers through the Internet. It is possible to transfer text and pictures, as well as sounds, carrying out a conversation without being at the same time, in the same place. (Berge and Collins, 1995) In this case, the use of CMC in Distance Courses is considered as a Group Conference, where a

"many-to-many communication" protocol prevails: messages posted by someone, and stored in a virtual locus, (Feenberg, 1989) can be read by all the participants of the conversation.

The ONL becomes then a "virtual" place where people can communicate with each other without meeting physically and where the collaborative learning process can take place.

An Action Research Approach for online tutorship: new implications for Teaching and Learning in the Community

The first edition of the Master in Open Education and Training (MOET) post-graduate blended course at the Bocconi University in Milan (Italy) lasted from February till October 2004. The "blended course" term used here derives from the fact that it was carried out partially online, with the use of new technologies for teaching and learning (CMC) and partially face to face.

The main goal of the MOET was that of providing a theoretical basis for the application and realization of online teaching and learning and to train expert designers about online courses in organizations. It was designed in a blended version, with face-to-face meetings involving twenty per cent of the overall course work. Participants were mainly assessed at the end of each block with final individual face-to-face examinations. One of the features that characterise Italian online courses is that the role of the tutor is separated from that of the teacher. Indeed, while the former is considered as the online process expert, the latter is defined as the content expert who does not necessarily need to participate in the online learning process. This feature is present in the MOET course too.

The main technological tool used to support the online asynchronous written text communication was the Conference System "First Class". Hence, learning took place mainly through CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) and sometimes through the exchange of private emails and a subscription to a common mailing list.

The following section is based on some reflections made after the experience of online tutoring in the MOET using an Action Research Approach. One of us (Lucilla Crosta) has been tutoring on the course for a total of three months. Lucilla's online tutoring was the result of a continuous process of planning, action, observation and reflection based on the Action Research Cycle, of improvement of her own teaching practice and of discussion with colleagues. The following account is the result of this process.

The Community staff

One of the main problems observed during the past editions of this blended course was the relationships among staff members. Due to organizational changes, the staff composition evolved during the years and it was not always easy for people coming from different countries and with different backgrounds to work together. What was more, not all members had the same level of knowledge in relation to online courses and this caused disharmony and conflicts that influenced both the well being of the group and that of participants.

Stringer (1996) states how the presence of a big institutional community can influence the life of the smaller one that it contains.

An interesting issue was characterised by the fact that the online tutors were those who were not directly involved in the course design process. Kennedy and Duffy (2004) state how it is important that the "team" is the one who delivers education and not the individual staff member. Indeed collaboration among staff members was essential for the success of the MOET course.

One of the key elements that would help to sustain and improve a meaningful learning experience in the online community is that of the "community staff". With this term we refer to the group of people that designed, coordinated and organized the learning experience of a specific setting and did their best to make the learning experience enjoyable. The community staff is important for the success of the learning process, because it represents a first approach to the community concept that participants will face later online. Indeed, the lack of physical contact and of physical relationships, typical of the online environment, might be overcome in a certain way if the course community staff help participants to feel less isolated from each other and if they are able to transmit a general commitment to the course, democratic teaching and learning principles, social relationships, cohesiveness, collaboration, trust and so on. If this occurs, participants will soon own the feeling of being part of a community and they will behave accordingly. Given the great potential that the metaphor of LC owns while teaching and learning with adults, it is not surprising that it plays an important role in the learning process

One interesting feature noticed during the MOET course was that although the intention of the course staff was that of creating and forming online communities, they did not have the time for building them. Hence although this was one of their main goals, they were aware of the fact that this effectively did not happen. Indeed, in the MOET course, the team of participants never reached the status of a real online community. Finally, Lucilla had a general feeling that in all groups she worked in, participants did not own their own identity as a community; their work was more cooperative than collaborative and it supported a more individualistic and competitive view of learning rather than a more collaborative one. This situation in our view, led to learning being personalised.

Online Assessment

This feature, although central while teaching and learning online, is very often absent from the majority of studies dealing with LCs.

Although in the MOET all assessments were carried out on an individual basis, depending on the online or face-to-face activity, it was noticed how the online peer assessment experience in the last block stimulated reflection among participants. However, at the same time, it was also clear how difficult it was for some people to assess other fellows' work, since they had no experience of doing this, having always been assessed by the teachers. Another interesting issue observed was that when participants knew that they were not supposed to be assessed for their online group work, they seemed to reduce the level of their online collaboration and participation. Despite the high marks participants received for their assignments, the learning process undertaken was not at high level, since their personal commitment was not to reflect deeply on their learning experience but just to produce work. Lesser attention was given to the process and more to the course content and this emerged also during the assessment procedures.

What influences the LC life and the learning process was also the issue of assessment. Indeed, knowing in advance the way participants will be assessed will influence the way they learn in the near future (Mason, 2002) and this is both in relation to traditional learning settings and more in relation to the online learning environment where the use of the community metaphor is enhanced. According to McConnell (2002), a more individualistic method of assessment will lead to learners working as individuals, while peer review or group assessment processes will drive adults' motivation to learn online in more collaborative ways. Hence, for a higher community learning level process, a mix in the use of self, peer and group assessment methods is preferred. Participants will feel more responsible for their community, for their learning and for the learning of the others and they will be able to achieve higher learning goals.

The Ethics of Care and the Sense of Proximity

During my experience as an online tutor in the MOET, I became more and more aware of how the moral, psychological and affective support was crucial for participants' learning experience, more than the need for explanations of content. I noticed how at the beginning and at particular phases of the learning experience, people were happy to receive this kind of support from the tutor. The tutor/participant relationship was quite informal and her interventions and feedback quite constant. Indeed, I am convinced that the way the tutors behave online, influences the way people behave and learn online: promoting for example a more relaxed and informal environment favours the online learning process and vice versa. Further, a possible source of anxiety for me was the fact that the role of the tutor was split from that of the teacher. Indeed, since the teacher was the content expert, he/she became someone to report to although he/she was not online. Hence, from this point of view it was not always easy to understand what were his/her expectations in relation to a particular situation, also because he/she was not completely aware of what was happening online. Thus, in my view it was not easy to reconcile the tutor and the teacher's views. What is more, both the process and the content were strictly integrated in the learning experience and so it was quite hard sometimes to understand and to share questions directly related to the context and some other times questions addressing the learning process.

Another important issue noticed was that of trust: I noticed how in order to be a good online tutor and to own a kind of authority it was essential to gain participants' confidence. I also noticed that when there was a lack of trust learning was lost. Nodding's theories (Goldstein, 1999) about "Ethics of care" and the "Sense of Proximity" represent good metaphors that can help in supporting the process of learning online and the development of the community.

In order to create the learning community and to implement the online collaborative process, it may be helpful to consider the role that, the "Caring relationship" plays. Goldstein (1999) starts by considering Vygotsky's theory of social-construction of knowledge where in the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) teacher and students or students and students exchange a common ground of knowledge and construct it. Goldstein argues that the relationship between the teacher and learner in the ZPD is very similar to that of Nodding's theory drawn from feminist moral theory's notion of the "Ethic of Care" where the process of construction of knowledge resembles that of a caring encounter. The "tutor" should scaffold the student in the learning activities and

decrease his/her intervention, and while the student gains more and more autonomy they learn how to take care of the others. The tutor "cares" for the creation of this community and for the relationships among its members. According to McConnell (2000) the presence of a supportive learning environment is central when designing for computer supported collaborative learning. When learners facilitate, encourage, help, provide feedback and act in trusting ways to each others, this can produce the conditions for risk taking and acting differently from the norm. Learning occurs together with the sense of community and of trust. Trust is indeed creating an atmosphere of caring, taking time to listen to each other producing feelings of security, taking risks and push themselves and the others beyond their boundaries (McConnell 2002).

Goldstein asserts that "the major implication of this enhanced view of the knowledge-making process is the conclusion that caring relationships are a central part of intellectual growth and development" (Goldstein, 1999, p. 669). Gregory (1994), reporting Nodding's thought adds an important feature to this thesis, asserting that although the community approach tries to stress democratic principles among its members, it does not consider that it is easy to make people immediately democratically collaborative with each other, since they own different views and conflict is easy to emerge. It must be taken into account that differences are part of the community too.

According to Hodgson and Reynolds (2002) the shape of identities can be indeed harmonious and conflictual as well as collaborative and this is what we might expect to happen in online learning contexts. The presence of "Conflicts" can support the development of individual as possibility of exchange, although it is essential to avoid its negative degeneration (McConnell, 2005). The "Community metaphor" in teaching and learning also has a dark side of power and democracy that is not usually addressed and known enough. (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005)

Further, I noticed how the presence of face-to-face meetings at the beginning, in the middle and at the course end, helped me and participants to establish a closer relationship. Indeed, people had the chance to fill the gap that "the distance" produces and to establish more informal and closer relationships. Hence, the design of face-to-face meetings was vital for the course life. I think that the presence of face-to-face meetings gave a great input to the online community life. However, I also noticed how, when someone attended these face-to-face meetings from remote locations, using synchronous communication tools such as chat, video and so on, I felt like they were present with them and this improved my sense of "proximity" with them too. I noticed that other participants experienced the same and the same was for those participating at the face-to-face meetings from remote locations. For what was my online experience, I cultivated closer relationships with those people together whom I communicated more often online, rather than with the others. Hence, for me the online environment was not a barrier to socialisation but a great starting point for it. The use of a synchronous chat for example, supported the creation of closer relationships. Synchronous communication can be considered as a tool able to enhance peoples' sense of identity online and their sense of proximity and it might constitute at the same time a good substitute to face-to-face meetings when they are not feasible for all. The MOET blended course design also taught me that within the whole online experience just few and regular synchronous contacts are sufficient for improving physical proximity among participants. If these synchronous "virtual meetings" are designed at regular intervals, the asynchronous communication can continue to represent a meaningful tool for the people of the

community also without physical face-to-face meetings. In this respect, Goldstein quotes the importance of "the Sense of Proximity": people are always looking for "the near", people need to establish a "physical contact" when they relate to each other and this concept is very diffused online and also linked to the previous concept of the "Ethics of Care". Allucquerce asserts that "Members of electronic virtual communities act if the community met in physical public space" (Allucquerce, 2000, p. 519). Hence it is very important to bear in mind that in an Online learning environment participants are always looking for a kind of a "physical proximity" with others and this was also my experience in the MOET course.

In my view, for a community this sense of proximity is important because it helps in creating a sense of belonging and of identity. Sometimes the synchronous communication can help in this: it provides a sense of belonging to a community that is felt as our own since we contribute to its creation and since we feel responsible for it. Finally, in my view in the online environment the "sense of proximity" is crucial for the teaching practice and for the cultivation of the community.

Conclusion

The emerging issues analysed above represent just a first approach to a better understanding of online learning communities and to the improvement of teaching and learning online. Although this is presented as a personal and individual experience of tutorship, it might help other professionals to better develop their practice and may make a contribution to the development of the same research field. The importance given here to the issues of community, assessment, proximity and care should not be undervalued, since they may constitute some of the key factors for the success of the learning process in online environments. The value given to tools such as the chat room, the collaborative assessment, the ethics of care applied by the tutor while interacting online for example, may represent crucial means for the improvement of online teaching. My personal experience lead me to reflect on the importance that these means own if transferred to the online environment, where the lack of physical presence, the lack of a physical space may require different and new tools if compared to the traditional one. My personal impression was also that the tutor played a key role in this and that the success or the failure of the online training process may depend also to him/her. For what was my experience the tutor issue was one of the most important one, since his/her behaviour produced direct positive or negative consequences among course participants. In my view it is also important to give more attention to the assessment issue, since it will influence the way how participants will learn online. Finally, we should remember that although online, we always need to feel a kind of proximity with others, since our daily life is done in "proximity": our online practice should support those tools that remind us proximity rather than distance. It is certain that due to its new features and to its new characteristics, the online learning environment requires new studies and creative approaches that must take into consideration its differences when compared to face-to-face traditional teaching contexts.

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Standpoints, Frames, Lenses and the Learning Organisation

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Introduction

The notion of reflection has been used in a variety of ways that convey different meanings and interpretations. In this paper I begin with a discussion of the relationship between knowing, learning and reflection, and the role of our worldviews and paradigms in these experiences. I then explore how the *learning organisation* perspective has been applied to institutions of learning, particularly to universities. I draw from experiences and events at the University of South Africa (UNISA) to illustrate the application and impact of reflection at individual, team and organisational levels. In conclusion, I highlight the challenges and opportunities that reflection presents to universities as they revisit their role and purpose in society.

Coming to know our world

Our context, culture and the period in which we live have a lot to do with what we become, the values we hold, and the assumptions we make. Our context also shapes our worldview – our assumptions about what kinds of things do or can exist, their conditions of existence, how they relate to us, and so on. Each culture, community and institution promotes a particular worldview. We tend to be unaware of the worldview that dictates our particular approach to the work we do because we are held captive by the dominance of the culture's perspective.

Over time, different ways of looking at reality have evolved. There are four broad theoretical perspectives or paradigms that have influenced research and the construction of knowledge in the social sciences (McKenna, 2003:216; Guba & Lincoln, 1994:109-111):

- Empiricist/Positivist
  This paradigm identifies a reality that can be discovered, measured and manipulated. It relies on the generation of laws that allow control and prediction of the environment. Great value is placed on objectivity. Knowledge is seen to be value-free and neutral, and is attained by the objective observation of reality, which is "out there".

- Constructivist/Interpretivist
  Realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple constructions that are local and specific in nature. The focus has shifted from the positivist prediction and generalisation to understanding and interpretation. The interpretive paradigm is context-based and knowledge is seen to be a process of making meaning through interaction. Understanding depends on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions.

- Critical
  The critical paradigm has much in common with the interpretive paradigm but it goes beyond the understanding of multiple perspectives. It seeks to challenge and transform the social power relations and to emancipate individuals from oppressive ideologies and any form of injustice or manipulation. The critical paradigm is the basis of most feminist research which aims not only to understand the structural shaping of experience but to do so in order to effect change.

- Post-structural
  The post-structuralist paradigm considers the way in which academic knowledge domains delimit enquiry and polarize alternative norms as having limited value. Post-structuralists believe reality is 'languaged into being'. In the critical paradigm, there is an aim of emancipating individuals from these powerful and "false" accounts of reality. In the post-structural paradigm, the purpose is to deconstruct how the accounts of reality are created by language within a particular context at a particular time. Their focus is therefore predominantly on discourses.

These paradigms serve as frameworks or frames of reference within the boundaries of which reality is studied and understood. We tend to give attention to and defend those aspects that fit our frame. Moreover, each of these paradigms applies methodological reflexivity that systematically seeks to distinguish scientific knowledge and professional practice from the ordinary (Lynch, 2000:30). For example, in the positivist paradigm, the community of scholars carefully reflect on the rigour with which prescribed procedures have been followed, and the extent to which a scientific contribution approximates the maturity of sources cited. The critical paradigm, on the other hand, is concerned with the ways in which practitioners examine and declare their own beliefs, assumptions, and standpoints, uncover ideological biases in practice and unequal power relations in social structures, and problematise taken-for-granted understandings. This kind of reflexivity is seen to arise "as a radical concern, and as a radical threat to the traditional canon of impersonal, value-free, and dispassionate inquiry" (Pels, 2000:2). Yet, Lynch (2000:26-7) points out that reflexivity is not an epistemological, moral or political virtue; it is an unavoidable feature of the way our actions are performed, made sense of, and incorporated into social settings.

Critical reflection in teaching and learning

Learners and teachers bring an extensive background of knowledge, experience and expectations to the learning environment. It follows that learning is regulated not only by our personal frames of reference and the lenses through which we look, but also by the qualities constituting the environment in which we operate. In a general sense, we all engage in reflection as we learn and teach. We pause to consider our motives, options, the choices and decisions we should make, and lessons to be learnt. An element of teaching and learning that impels us to reflect critically is the notion of a problem – a puzzling, curious, or perplexing situation. Reflection, therefore, places an emphasis on learning through questioning, experimentation and systematic investigation, to lead to a development of understanding (Loughran, 2002:33-4; Schön, 1987:25-31).

We might engage in *reflection-in-action*, which is thinking about what we are doing while we are doing it; or in *reflection-on-action*, which is retrospective deliberation about what we have done (Schön, 1987). Our reflection could be *technical* – focussing on how

best to accomplish a certain goal or whether teaching performance meets certain well-established criteria, or *practical* – focussing on the appropriateness or effectiveness of our actions and the adequacy of the goals towards which their actions were directed. At a *critical* level, as suggested by the critical paradigm, "reflection involves a questioning of not just teacher actions and effects and the assumptions underlying action, but also the institutional contexts in which education is offered and even whether education is serving moral and ethical purposes" (Marland, 1997:55). We give thorough consideration to the ideologies that shape the curriculum and delimit how we teach, social and institutional norms that govern our actions, historical and structural conditions that aid or impede learning, kinds of interventions that we could pursue, and the appropriateness and impact of our actions.

In Freirian terms (Freire, 1993:69; Van Aswegen, 1998:279-280), critical reflection involves naming and changing the world through word and work. The dynamic and dialectical movement between doing and reflecting on doing is *praxis*. The process of critical reflection results in authentic knowledge and autonomous action. For Carr & Kemmis (1986:33), praxis is

> informed action which by reflection on its character and consequences, reflexively changes the knowledge-base which informs it. … Creating a culture of critical reflection enhances our educative potential, and provides practitioners with opportunities to deconstruct conventional academic practices, whilst effectively participating in genuine …collaboration.

Van Aswegen (1998:112) sums up what critical reflective practice entails by identifying the following main components:

- habitual inquisitiveness
- well-informed and dialectical reasoning
- open-mindedness
- proactive though
- fair-minded evaluation
- honest self-evaluation; focused inquiry; persistence
- empathy into diverse opposing points of view
- willingness to take risks
- deliberate and principled thinking about the thinking process
- insight into the social construction of the situation
- creative synthesis
- autonomous, responsible and informed action
- reflective learning

Reflection as a defining element of a learning organisation

A learning organisation is defined by Senge (1990) and Burgoyne, Pedler and Boydell (1994) as one where: people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire; new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured; collective aspirations are set free; people are continually learning to learn together; and an organisation continuously expands its capacity and transforms itself to meet future demands. Learning is defined as

occurring under two conditions. First, learning occurs when an organisation achieves what is intended. There is a match between its designs for action and the actuality or outcome. Second, learning occurs when a mismatch between intentions and outcomes is identifies and is corrected. A mismatch is turned into a match (Argyris, 1992:2).

Phillips (1994:103) adds that continuous organisational transformation, or renewal, requires learning settings that promote *dialogical learning* through which people learn about the culture of the organization, and *self-reflective learning* which is directed at personal change. The emphasis of the latter is on critical reflection about oneself as a member of larger social units. Closed, *single loop* learning in which too many strong feelings and opinions are kept undiscussible is transformed into *double loop* learning which shakes the foundations of our beliefs and perspectives and generates new ideas and insights in order to do different things (Argyris, 1992; Argyris & Schön, 1996). Further, *triple-loop learning* is created when individuals develop new processes or methodologies for arriving at re-framings, such as moving from brainstorming to rigorous self-critique and from paradigm shift to paradigm invention (Snell & Chak 1998: 339 in Steyn, 2003:220). It involves transforming people by altering the images from which they derive their identity.

But how does the learning of *individuals* become that of the organisation? Nonaka (199:97) argues that learning in the organisation "always begins with the individual", and that organisations learn when "an individual's personal knowledge is transformed into organisational knowledge valuable to the company as a whole". In Senge's model, though, the *team* is crucial because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental teaching unit in modern organisations (1990:10). However, it seems that Freire's conceptualisation of transformative learning can reconcile the two views. He maintains that although it is necessary to reflect privately and individually, it is the social dimension of critical reflection that becomes transformative (Freire, 1993:69). In this view, the individual-organisational learning relationship is optimally and mutually productive when mediated through teamwork and team learning.

University as learning organisation

As regards the university, Patterson asks the following questions (1999:9-10): Universities are organisations that are dedicated to learning; they create knowledge, but are they learning organisations? As organisations, do they apply new knowledge to improve their performance, do they change to new ways of operating? Do they adapt to new circumstances and pressures in the environment in which they function?

This interest is prompted by the changing landscape within which universities must sustain themselves. Laurillard (1999) emphasises that the university sector as a whole must learn; it must adapt to the profound changes evident in the social, political and economic environment in which the sector finds itself. She maintains that the university sector has a vital role as the engine of progress for the community. The more it addresses the concerns of society in its research, and the more it widens access to all members of society to benefit from the fruits of that research, the more it supports a genuine 'learning society'.

Institutional transformation

Universities world over are in and furnishing strategic responses to changing environmental conditions and pressures. The University of South Africa (UNISA) has undergone a series of transformations from its early days as an examining body to a recently restructured and comprehensive ODL university. In the interest of building a democratic and intellectually vibrant learning community, the institution has been looking internally at its curricula, institutional culture, language policies, style of management, student participation and success rates, and staff profiles. As UNISA repositions itself as an African university, it has publicly embraced the continental vision of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Thus, for example, a Centre for African Renaissance Studies was established, and new modules in Indigenous Knowledge Systems and HIV/AIDS are now offered. The western orientation of some of the existing programmes has also been redesigned in a manner that takes into consideration the African context. There are also ongoing institutional projects that are geared at improving the quality and relevance of tuition, learner satisfaction, and wider stakeholder involvement and collaboration.

Collaborative reflection and learning

From the constructivist perspective, learning is social in nature. Our understanding of the world forms out of our interactions with others and the shared constructs that we develop. Understanding resides primarily in the practices that we are part of and individual identities are themselves constructed, in part, through the roles we fulfil within institutions. When critical reflection is undertaken as a social act of knowing, it makes it possible to collectively make and remake history with others. It creates space for, and gives voice to, those who seek reaffirm their social realities and build new, more representative cultures of learning and teaching (McLaren & da Silva, 1993:55-56). As McKee (2003:401) puts it, being ready to reveal the assumptions and values, that undergird our knowing gives us "the possibility of saying to our colleague, 'This is how I am looking at this. Let me show you how to look so you can see what I am seeing'." However, Walsh (1996:225) notes, "Reflection always seems like a luxury, time taken out from real work. In the thinking about it, it almost seems that [learning institutions] intentionally keep reflection out".

Collaborative reflection in the Bureau for Learning Development

Over the past few years, our unit, then known as the Bureau for Learning Development (BLD) went through a series of major changes and developments. These include a change of name from the Bureau for University Teaching, formulation of a vision and mission that resonate with the university's, reorganisation of our work into four key performance areas, a substantial increase in staff numbers, and active marketing of our services. Our collaborative reflection also involved redefining who we are and what we do. There had been growing discomfort with the limiting designation of *instructional designer,* so we adopted and marketed the designation *learning developer* (Daweti, 2002; 2004). Following our recent merger with another distance education institution (Technikon Southern Africa) and we have had to come up with a new name that encompasses the identities of both units. The *Bureau for Learning Development* and the *Centre for Courseware Design and Development* are now jointly known as the *Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development*.

What still evade the collaborative discourse are the critical questions of our learning development philosophy (or philosophies). It seems we might have done a good job at the technical and practical levels, but the critical issues must still be excavated. Nevertheless, we have recently identified themes for four research circles around which we will organise our reflective activities: Assessment, Theory and Practice of Curriculum Development, Teaching and Learning in an ODL Context, and ICT in Education. In the long run, what is achieved at departmental and team level should enrich institutional and individual practice.

Learning to be self-reflective individuals

Reflective learning involves an internal critique of our mental models and privately held theories. It is also a critical process that takes place externally –opening our practice to the scrutiny and critical appraisal of others (Tricoglus, 2001:138; Van Aswegen 1998:71).

Becoming reflective learning developers

Everyday presents opportunities to think reflexively about our practice as individual learning developers: when we receive a new request to help design or review a course, when we plan and eventually carry out the design, write a review report, receive feedback from an academic department, interact with participants at a seminar, and so on. Moments of reflection are most intense when things do not turn out as expected or when our efforts are criticised. Colleagues share their experiences after they have experimented with a new approach, or when they find an article that presents an interesting perspective on an issue. Twice a year, we have one-to-one meetings with our director to talk about "projects/activities in which you are involved, the value you believe you have added, the value that has been added to you, and your developmental needs". To facilitate the discussion, we have started compiling individual portfolios based on the key performance areas of our job description. To the extent that we individually think about how we contribute to departmental goals, we can be constructively critical about our own frameworks as well as the organisational infrastructure and culture.

Teaching others to become reflective

When we help others to become reflective, we are essentially asking them to interrogate the frames and lenses that guide the meanings they make and the assumptions they overlook. The ability to be reflexive is as important as the ability to master and apply knowledge. All our qualifications and learning programmes have to be designed in a manner that enables learners to develop three interconnected competences (Department of Education, 2002):

- *practical competence* – the demonstrated ability, in an authentic context, to consider a range of possibilities for action, make considered decisions about which possibility to follow, and to perform the chosen action;
- *foundational competence* – understanding of the knowledge and thinking that underpins the action taken; and

- *reflective competence* – ability to integrate or connect performances and decision-making with understanding and with an ability to adapt to change and unforeseen circumstances and to explain the reasons behind these adaptations.

In small but incremental ways, many modules are integrating reflective exercises with other forms of teaching and assessment. The excerpt below is taken from the BA ODL module ODL202-K:

> *Activity*
> The text below is extracted from a study guide first printed in 1973 and revised in 1988. Read it carefully and then write down
> 1. your reactions – feelings and thoughts – to the text; and
> 2. as many critical questions as you can generate about the author, time of writing, truthfulness of the account, representation of the cultures, etc.
>
> <text>
> *Feedback*
> The activity we have just completed is an example of learner-content interaction. You could extend it to learner-learner dialogue by going over your responses with a fellow learner. … Among the questions I would ask about the author and the account are the following:
> - When and where did the author gather this information from?
> - When last did the author interact with at least one member of the cultural groups she/he is writing about?
> - To what extent do these polygamous practices still take place as reported in this text?
> - How much generalisation is made about a whole cultural group; do all the Pedi or Toda people engage in these forms of marriage?
> - Who arranges these marriages and who furnishes the reasons for maintenance of polygamous traditions?
> - What choices would I make if I lived in communities described here?
> - What is the teaching point of this text?
>
> One important point that we always have to keep in mind about written texts is that the author is not physically present to clarify or defend his/her position. There may be mismatches among the author's intended message, the language of the text, and the reader's constructed meaning. This is of particular concern in the ODL context...

Conclusion: Reflexivity or self-righteousness?

Perhaps it is in order to conclude by casting a critical lens on reflexivity. While the reflective practice and reflexivity have become important processes in social and human sciences, they could mask a rationalising of our practice (Loughran, 2002:36). This is

possible particularly because it is naturally easier to be immersed in the language and culture of our frame than it is to risk losing our professional identities (McKee, 2003:403-4). Unchecked, reflexivity can betray an air of self-righteousness, as Pels (2000:8-9) warns:

> The show of 'honesty', 'bravery', 'self-evidence' and 'non-contradiction' which often frames such reflexive duplications easily conceals the delicate blackmail which is involved in applying one's own analytic framework at once to oneself and to one's adversaries. …In such cases, the call for reflexivity indeed becomes vicious – in the emphatic sense of insinuating 'real' or 'objective' motives, interests, or impulses which allegedly act behind the backs of those who we do not wish to take at their word (which is somewhat like inoculating a lethal virus into a strange body and watching it self-destruct). The imperative to become self-aware thus becomes a policing demand, issued by a theoretical exhibitionist who has previously set all the cognitive and moral conditions for its emergence or its suppression: self exposure turns into a devious way of exposing the weaknesses of others. … If you are unprepared to 'know thyself' on my theoretical conditions, you are an unreflexive bastard, and I must tutor you in my explanatory theory, which will liberate us both.

It imperative, therefore, that in our enthusiasm to tell and show our standpoints and frames, and in our justification to invite others to do the same, we tread ever respectfully. Structures can change overnight, but creating safe spaces for individual, team and organisational learning and reflection takes time.

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Involving part-time tutors in reflective practice

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The National Extension College in the UK has been in operation as a distance education provider for over 40 years. It was established by a social entrepreneur, Michael Young, with an explicit ideology of redressing disadvantage by providing educational opportunities for those unable for a variety of reasons to be educated by the traditional establishments in the UK. Set up as a precursor to the Open University, over the years the College has offered over 120 courses each year to a wide range of distance, open, blended and e-learning students. With between 10,000 and 20,000 students enrolled at any one time, the range of courses and of students has varied widely. Some students are of school age, choosing to work from home. Some are leisure students, studying for pleasure. Some are in work and using NEC to gain their work-related professional qualifications, in accountancy for example. However, the majority of NEC students are those seeking traditional educational qualifications and while they value, and indeed demand, e-support systems such as submitting essays by email, they have remained surprisingly wedded to paper-based instruction packs over the years. This, of course, has been supported by recent research on the limitations of screen-based education and NEC, and its tutors, are now accustomed to a mixture of old and new ways of delivering distance education.

In recent years, the NEC has seen considerable change in the traditional model of a tutor-supported home student. Increasingly, those seeking distance education are no longer those unable to attend face to face provision, but those who are too busy to do so. This has changed the profile of the student body considerably – new students include those highly qualified and seeking a work-related qualification in a convenient way. More and more professional courses are being offered as a result. NEC itself, in partnership with Unison, one of the UK's major trade unions, now offers professional qualifications for trading standards officers in local government, and for leisure and recreation managers, again often working in a local government setting. Large companies are now seeing the benefits of distance or blended provision and NEC works with employers such as Coca Cola Enterprises on the training of their staff. This has included a degree course, in partnership with the University of Bradford, offering staff the opportunity to earn while they learned over a four year period. Currently, NEC tutors are running a programme, Skillstart, to offer staff at CCE a Level 3 Diploma in Manufacturing and Distribution. This change in the student body has been paralleled by changes in the type of tutor recruited by NEC.

The teaching of NEC courses is not carried out by the full-time employees of the charity, but by a shifting population of part-time tutors, many themselves choosing to work from home but others working full-time in universities, schools and colleges. They are a very diverse group and have often only two things in common: the subject that they teach and

the fact that they are working for a distance learning provider. Despite its 40 year history, NEC has never established a coherent reflective practice system for its tutors, or indeed for its full time staff. Many tutors work with NEC for a long period of time and are familiar with its systems. However, their collective wisdom remains with them and is not tapped into by NEC except on an ad hoc basis. Good work has taken place on individual programmes, which are usually externally evaluated and written up but there is no collective system for disseminating the substantial body of knowledge built up over the years, whether to its own staff or to the wider educational world. NEC tutors are widely dispersed, do not know one another, have no peer group, and are spread across many subjects. The challenge for this distance learning charity, therefore, is how to devise a reflective practice system that makes sense.

This challenge is being met by a range of changes in the internal workings of NEC. NEC has now established a reflective practice system to engage with the practitioners it hires regularly and who are willing to participate. The first step was a questionnaire to all existing tutors, asking about the sort of communication and networking they themselves would value. 45 tutors (146 were mailed) responded. This response rate, of 31%, is fairly low and the assumption, as always in surveys, is that those interested in the idea of practice networks would be the ones to respond. The non-respondants may feel that their reflective practice needs are covered by their full-time posts. Of the sample of 45 responding, the majority supported a range of activities that would build up a best practice system in the NEC context. 42 supported the offer from NEC to set up a programme of professional development for tutors. This may reflect a necessity, in that the establishment in the UK of Sector Skills Councils to identify the training needs of various professions is leading to control of the professions through the development of a 'licence to practice'. For some professions, including medical and legal areas, regular updating is already required and tutors are now assuming this will spread to the teaching profession with a consequent compulsion to undertake continuing professional development (CPD). NEC, in common with other employers of part-time tutors, is assuming that its tutor base will need CPD provision if they are not obtaining this through full-time employment elsewhere.

NEC seeks to make this a positive development, not just a career necessity, by linking CPD to a reflective practice system. Reflective practice is now being integrated into a professional portfolio system for all tutors. In the survey of tutors, although 42 wanted CPD in principle, they had clear preferences on the form that should ideally take. 24 wanted information on their own subject and 24 wanted general information on teaching and the world of education. However, a larger number, 34, said that they would value opportunities to attend professional conferences and seminars, and this would suggest that peer contact is important to them. 27 expressly wanted more peer conversations. There was a lower level of interest for participating in educational research, possibly because of pressure of work, with 22 expressing an interest. Equally, only 19 wanted to acquire more qualifications, possibly because they had high educational levels already. No suggestion met with rejection, however, and the survey did reveal that there are several practice-oriented activities that a reasonable number of tutors would value. NEC's response has been to set up a series of activities to meet such needs. Based on this survey, NEC's first step was to establish a peer exchange system using its IT resources, to discuss practice. Using its own VLE, a lively tutor space has been established. Group reflection encourages tutors to articulate what is often buried best practice knowledge. It also allows for an accretion of information that can be collated, analysed and re-

presented to the tutors over time. It also allows tutors, individually and collectively, to identify their own knowledge gaps and this enables a dialogue between NEC and its own part-time tutors about CPD and support. One of the immediate training needs identified related to IT support, given that all tutors are moving to online student support, in addition to using the VLE for peer conversations. NEC now offers tutors an IT support worker to assist with connection and usage issues and tutors are also offered a training course, Tutoring Online, on working with students using new technology.

From these beginnings, it is clear that tutors value being able to ask for advice and share knowledge about many of the practical problems in teaching, particularly in relation to the distance learning mode. The peer discussions also guide NEC in identifying issues of common concern. One of the main worries expressed by tutors was the relationship between their assessment and that of their peers and NEC has therefore established standardization meetings in each subject area. Tutors also value up-to-date information on examining bodies, proposed changes to the syllabus and options and modifications. Not all tutors can adapt their classroom teaching style to the needs of the distance learner and NEC therefore decided to establish a support system that would harness the experience of tutors who have worked with NEC for many years. NEC found that a system of "lead tutors" enabled more experienced teachers to support and advise newer entrants and that having such a hierarchy has been welcomed. Ironically for a distance learning provider, great value is placed by the tutors on supplementing use of the VLE tutor space with at least one or two face to face meetings a year, to enable tutors and NEC staff to discuss practice issues.

Some tutors have a specialized role in relation to working with disadvantaged students. NEC runs a variety of programmes with additional services and support offered to students facing particular difficulties. It has found that non-standard programmes of this type tend to yield particularly useful information about how to improve distance learning practice. This, in turn, enables the organization to modify its main programmes. One such non-standard NEC programme requiring additional tutor input was Equal Access to Open Learning (EATOL), a national project funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). This provided distance learning courses and additional support to people with disabilities and with caring responsibilities. Earlier project work had shown that learners with disability or those with caring tasks had relatively low retention rates of less than 30% course completion and the EATOL project developed ways of supporting students to raise retention levels. For this the role of tutor was critical.

Tutors, in addition to the traditional distance tutor role of providing academic support and marking assignments, took a proactive role. The funding allowed a generous allocation to the tutor of guided learning hours with sufficient time to contact students between assignments, to answer ongoing questions and concerns, as well as giving feedback on the work itself. The programme also included support from mentors, with the mentors helping with practical problems and with encouragement to study. The NEC student management system proved a significant factor: tutors and mentors could access an on-line version of their students' application forms, all contacts with the student were logged on-line, including assignment feedback. Tutors, mentors and administrative staff all had access to information on student progress and this enabled good joint working, avoided overlap and gave the student an integrated support system. A peer tutor group was established, both to encourage discussion and to give an easy way of disseminating information to tutors. Minutes of mentors' meetings and analysis of student

questionnaires were posted on the tutor site. Tutors were also given useful web-links such as the relevant examination boards. Examples of good practice included tutors calling students for a chat before each assignment, tutors arranging for materials to be available on tape and being willing to receive and mark assignments on tape, helping students by talking them through blockages etc. Tutors were also involved with the students at the start of the course in constructing a personal learning plan, vital for students whose health meant that they would be likely to stop studying from time to time.

The NEC experience showed the importance of providing tutors with handbooks and initial training on working with students facing particular disadvantage, followed by continuous on-programme development. The most important factor appeared to be the welcoming style of the tutor. While 31 students (out of 33 responding) were happy with the guidance given by their tutor, and while 56 (out of 61) found their support useful, only 11 students (out of 19 responding to this question) felt happy to contact their tutor regarding problems. This would suggest a strong inhibition on the part of students, one that tutors would have to proactively overcome. Involving tutors in specialized programmes of this type also acts as a form of development for the tutor. Pat Bryant, an established creative writing tutor, worked with students who were visually impaired. She adapted her material to work with tapes, using them as notebooks and for the submission of assignments. Students who had lost creativity and confidence as their sight deteriorated confronted problems of access and re-integration and managed to overcome them, with several students subsequently moving into integrated writing groups. The tutor also benefited:

> It was one of the most challenging and rewarding teaching experiences I have ever undertaken and the feeling of celebration and achievement unequalled.

If reflective practice is to be a part of the NEC system, it is essential that the organization is prepared to change its own practice as a result of such reflection. NEC tutors offer a wealth of experience and over the years, the organization has sought to shape provision in line with their advice. NEC tutors were closely involved in a research project to investigate the needs of distance learning students with ME. They were asked to contribute their views on how best to support students with ME and the support that should be offered to tutors. Their response - 64% of tutors returned the questionnaire- reflected their enthusiasm both to disseminate their views, and to suggest changes that would improve the support offered to students. This may have been partly related to the tutors' own experiences – 33% had personal experience of teaching students with ME. Their ideas and suggestions have formed the basis of a guidance document for NEC staff and tutors and changes in the way tutors are informed about the needs of their disabled students. As a result of the research project on students with ME, NEC tutors became far more aware of the tutoring issues springing from teaching those whose energy levels fluctuate over time. Tutors of students with ME have to deal with the suspension of studies and with the sporadic unavailability of the student. Pre-set structures and timetables simply do not work with this group of students and the research showed that a supportive and flexible attitude on the part of the tutor was critical. One of our tutors, supporting a student with ME who wished to learn Gaelic, held an informal ceilidh in the student's house to increase her sense of inclusion – the student passed the exam easily!

In a distance learning delivery organization, the impact of reflective practice is felt across the entire organization. One of the findings of the tutors on working with students with

ME involved looking again at how both the instructional material and the assignments are structured. If a student is extremely tired, breaking down information into 10 minute topics can help, and breaking down the assignment into a small group of related questions can encourage a student with a short concentration timespan. Clearly, there are pedagogic concerns and care has to be taken but in many cases material can be adapted. The administrative systems were also affected: tutors do need to be briefed in advance if a student has special needs of any kind, and to know that the back office systems will support them. There are also financial effects. Students with additional support needs have a higher cost input and the organization has to be prepared for this.

NEC is very much at the beginning of a long-term aim to create an intellectualized practice organization and its overall strategy includes staff, tutors and Trustees. The reflective practice activities of tutors are part of a system of reflection for staff (through monthly seminars) and Trustees, who have set aside one business meeting in favours of a "Trustees' Seminar" to discuss how current educational issues relate to the work of NEC. A virtual library is being established on the NEC Intranet to record and make available cross-organisation reflection and to form a base for the exchange of knowledge and ideas. As with any service delivery organization, it is hard to prioritise reflection on practice and NEC seeks in a way to institutionalize this, to make it simply part of the job. To date, all concerned have responded with commitment and interest.

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The New Learning Technologies in Higher Distance Education: theoretical benefits through the prism of a Case Study

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Introduction

Many arguments have been advanced for and against the use of the new teaching and learning technologies in higher education. The aim of this article is to review a number of these arguments – in particular those arguments that have stood the test of time. The article will then go on look at the implementation of new technologies in one specific context i.e. in the conversion of a traditional distance education programme into an online programme. The background, objectives, implementation strategies and initial outcomes of this conversion will be discussed. Finally, the arguments for implementing new technologies in higher education will be reviewed in the light of the experience of the programme conversion and an attempt will be made to abstract some generalisable lessons.

Before we can start to review the arguments for using new technologies in higher education, it is necessary to be clear on what we mean by the new technologies. Therefore the next section will briefly outline the main technologies.

The New Teaching and Learning Technologies

The new teaching and learning technologies can be classified in two broad categories - those technologies which are primarily used for communication between *people* (human-human interaction) and those which are primarily used by individuals on their own (human-computer interaction)[5]. The first category will be referred to as the communication technologies and the second category will be called the learning resources technologies. In what follows, the concentration will be online versions of the new technologies but it should be noted that most have precursors in non-online implementations that are still widely used (especially in distance education at the tertiary level).

The communication technologies are usually broken down into synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous technologies are those which require the individuals communicating to be using the technology at the same time. The computer based synchronous technologies include online chat, audiographics, whiteboard, online video-conferencing and live web-casting. Asynchronous technologies allow for a period of time to elapse between message and response. The computer-based asynchronous technologies include e-mail, bulletin boards, list servs and computer conferencing.

[5] This categorisation is broadly based on Peter Goodyear's taxonomy - see Goodyear 2001, pgs 12-14. It should also be noted that the two categories given above follow the two elements of, what are known collectively as, the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

The learning resources technologies can be viewed on a continuum from those resources that were not produced primarily for teaching and learning purposes through those that were explicitly produced for teaching and learning purposes and onto those which are used essentially as learning aids.

The first level of online resources technologies would include websites (with relevant information!), computer databases and online (possibly full-text) academic journals. The second level of online resources would be material put online (often by individual teachers) for their students (such as notes, syllabi, learning objectives, references, key questions, etc.). Often, the aim of this material is simply to provide a framework for students and to help guide them through course content. At other times, this material can be quite extensive with substantial amounts of content put online. The third level of online learning resources are Web-based training (WBT) and Web-based education courseware packages, also called instructional software or tutorial programs. These instruct students (usually acting alone) in a particular subject matter. Courseware packages are usually multimedia i.e. they include text, graphics, stills, animation, audio and video. The predominant format is for content to be broken into small 'blocks' or 'chunks' (sometimes called learning objects) which build on each other. Students proceed through the learning objects interacting with the material in the way pre-determined by the designer. The fourth level of online resources technologies is a disparate group which have, at various times, been used in teaching and learning environments. They include intelligent tutoring systems; expert systems; online simulations; modelling or analysis tools; educationally-oriented microworlds and virtual reality environments.

Table 1: Schematic Classification of Online Teaching and Learning Technologies with Examples of Each Category

<table>
<tr><th>Communication Technologies</th><th>Resource Technologies</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Synchronous:
- Online Chat
- 'White Board'
- Online Video Conferencing</td><td>Level 4:
- Intelligent Tutoring Systems
- On-line Simulations
- Micro-Worlds
- Online Modelling Systems</td></tr>
<tr><td>Level 3:
- Online (Multi-media) Courseware</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Asynchronous:
- E-mail
- Newsgroups
- Computer Conferencing</td><td>Level 2:
- Tutor Created Web-pages
- Institution Created Online Materials</td></tr>
<tr><td>Level 1:
- Public Access Web-pages
- Online Abstracts and Citation Indexes
- Online (full-text) Journals
- Online Databases</td></tr>
</table>

Because of their prevalence, it is useful to examine where Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) such as WebCT, Blackboard, Moodle, etc. fit into this classification of learning technologies. Essentially, what VLEs do is bring together, in one online environment, a

number of the technologies mentioned above. These usually include e-mail, computer conferencing, online chat, whiteboard and the capability to put multi-media resource material online with relative ease. In addition, they include a number of other facilities such as the capability to restrict access to particular groups of students, manage groups of students online, and they also provide some online assessment facilities.

Arguments for Using New Technologies in Higher Education

A number of prominent scholars have made very optimistic predictions about the potential of the new teaching and learning technologies. For example, Howard Gardner has said that technology will allow for the delivery of individualised instruction, "we have in our grasp today technology that will allow a quantum leap in the delivery of individualized services for both students and teachers. ... In the past, it might have been possible to argue that personalized or individualized instruction, though desirable, was simply not possible. That argument is no longer tenable." (Gardner 1999, pg 88). While writers such as Gardner do show awareness of the potential downsides of using technologies for teaching and learning, one is left with the overall impression that use of the new technologies will *ipso facto* lead to improved quality in teaching and learning at reduced cost. And it is not just individual scholars. As MacKeogh has pointed out various international agencies, including UNESCO, the World Bank and the European Union, have played a key role in promoting the use of the new teaching and learning technologies (MacKeogh 2001). She also states that "In recent years, a largely uncritical consensus appears to have developed among policy makers about the benefits of technology in education." (MacKeogh 2001, pg 224).

One of the most detailed cases for using new technologies in higher education was given by Bates who identified the following six rationales

- Provide information technology skills
- Responding to the technological imperative
- Widening access and increasing flexibility
- Reducing costs
- Improving the cost-effectiveness of education
- Improve quality of teaching (Bates 2000, pgs 16-34)

Space does not permit a detailed review of these arguments. However, for an in-depth discussion, readers are referred to a paper given by the author to the EdTech2002 conference called "*Arguments For and Against the Use of the New Teaching and Learning Technologies in Higher Education: What do They Tell Us?"* which is available here: http://webpages.dcu.ie/~foxs/publications_available_online.htm

The following conclusions can be drawn from the in-depth review:

- All uses of new learning technologies in higher education – especially higher distance education – must be based on the sure knowledge that students have reasonable access to the new technologies and are competent in their use
- Providing information technologies skills is not a strong argument for using new learning technologies in higher education
- While responding to the technological imperative may sound superficial, it has a number of aspects which give it weight (one of these will be discussed below)

- Increasing flexibility is undoubtedly one of the strengths of particular new learning technologies. In particular, the computer-based communication technologies have the potential to increase the flexibility with which tutorial support can be delivered to dispersed distance education students
- New learning technologies can aid the widening of access to third level education – however, if not used in a way that is appropriate to the target audience, they can lead to *decreasing* access.
- The issue of costing the use of new technologies in higher education is very complex and highly situation dependent. However, the following can reasonably be stated:

    - In general, the introduction of new technologies is likely to lead to an *increase* in overall costs rather than a reduction in costs.
    - In some instances, there may be an increase in cost effectiveness, that is "more students can be taught to the same standard for the same level of investment" (Bates 2000, pg 19).
    - The various learning technologies have major differences in their cost structure. On the one hand, the major cost of using online communication technologies to provide flexible tutorial support is frequently the cost of tutors' wages as the number of hours which tutors can spend online is potentially very substantial. On the other hand, the major cost element in the use of online resource technologies is frequently the initial cost of producing the resources[6] (especially as one goes up the levels of these resources).

- The new teaching and learning technologies are highly flexible and tailored applications can be devised for a wide range of circumstances. The major issue is whether a suitable application with a reasonable cost structure can be devised which delivers a programme at an appropriate level of pedagogical quality to a specific target group.
- The highly flexible and inventive ways in which online asynchronous communication technologies can be used has meant that it is the technology which has received most interest from those researchers and practitioners who are interested in using technology to improve the quality of student learning. However, as noted above, the use of this technology can be expensive. This has led some researchers to investigate ways in which the technology can be used to improve student learning while keeping costs moderate. (This issue will be returned to below.)

Having briefly reviewed these arguments for the use of new technologies and some of the lessons that can be drawn from this review, we will now proceed to look at these rationales in practice in one distance education programme.

[6] In other words, the cost structure of the use of communications technologies is analogous to the cost structure of conventional on-campus education while the cost structure of the use of resource technologies is closer to the cost structure of traditional distance education (Curran and Fox 1999). However, it should also be noted that different levels of resource technologies have widely different cost structures (Rumble 2001, pg 80). In general, they require substantial numbers of students to offset their initial costs of production.

Oscail's BSc in Information Technology Programme

Oscail is Ireland's National Distance Education Centre. It is a faculty of Dublin City University (DCU) which is one of the seven universities in Ireland. Oscail works co-operatively with the other universities in the development and delivery of its programmes. Oscail provides three undergraduate and three post-graduate programmes.

One of Oscail's undergraduate programmes is the BSc in Information Technology. This programme consists of four subject areas – Computing (C), Communications Technology (CT), Management Science (MS) and Human Sciences (HS). Each of these subject areas have four modules – two modules presented at diploma level and two presented at degree level – see Figure 2.

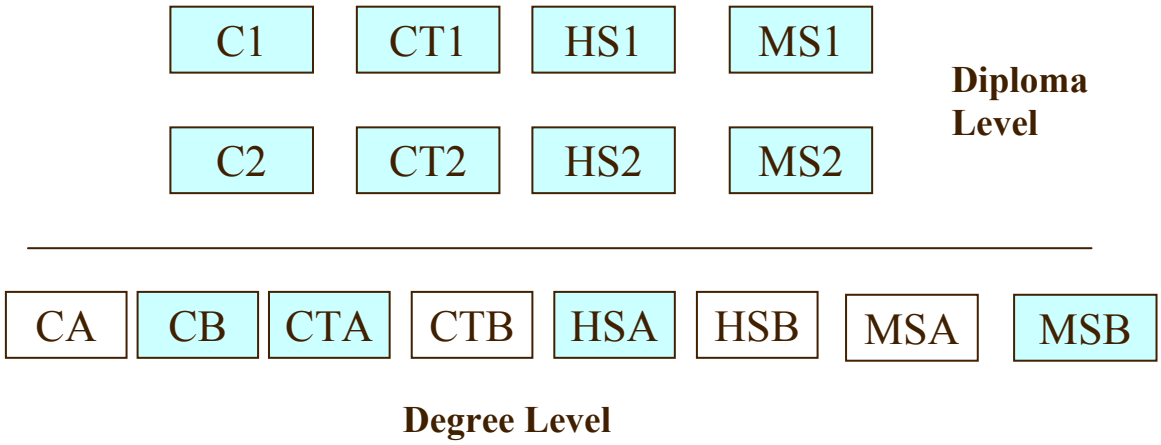

Figure 2 – Modular Structure of Oscail's BSc in Information Technology

In order to obtain a degree, students must successfully complete all eight diploma level modules, four specified degree level modules (CB, CTA, HSA and MSB) and two of the remaining four degree level modules i.e. fourteen modules in all. (Taking four modules is roughly equivalent to the workload of one year of full time study.)

Until 2003, students undertaking the BSc in Information Technology studied in classic 'second generation'[7] distance education mode i.e. it had the following elements:

- Students took 1 to 4 modules per year (with most students taking 5 to 6 years to graduate)
- For each module undertaken, students received a specially written Module Text
- For each module undertaken, students obtained 1 to 3 textbooks
- Tutorial support was via tutorials presented at local study centres (8 two-hour tutorials per academic year per module) supplemented by telephone support
- Library support provided in local study centres (but, in practice, rarely used)
- Assessment of each module consisted of continuous assessment and a 3 hour exam – each of these two elements contributing 50% of final module mark
- Continuous assessment consisted of three assignments per Module
- Students accumulated module credits towards the award of a degree.

[7] For the definition of 'second generation' distance education, see Nipper 1989.

Going Online

Starting in 2003, Oscail decided to convert the BSc in Information Technology (IT) from traditional distance education to online delivery. This decision was made for a variety of reasons but it did not emerge fully formed and it may be instructive to review what was happening in the years before this decision was made.

During the 1990's, Oscail had tracked the access to microcomputers (at work, home, etc) of its BSc in IT students. Access increased steadily over the 1990s to a point where by the late 1990s, all students had access to microcomputers, even if it was not home access[8]. Internet access lagged behind by about a year or two but from the late 1990s, Oscail started to use the Internet in an ancillary fashion, for example, by providing assignments and past exam papers online. While these were still available to students by post on request, within a few years, these postal requests practically disappeared.

A critical change was the provision of individual DCU e-mail addresses and personal portal pages by DCU in 2002 to its students. This allowed the people responsible for the administration of the programme to provide individualised information to students and move the extensive use of the postal system for communicating with students to online communication. For example, all communication to students regarding areas such as registration, allocation of students to tutors, scheduling of tutorials at local study centres, etc. was moved online. This change had two major consequences (1) it resulted in a substantially more cost-effective administration of the programme and (2) students got used to going online to obtain information.

Another critical change happened in 2002, the survey of students indicated that home access to the Internet had reached almost 100%. This coincided with the regular re-accreditation review through with every DCU programme has to go through every four or five years. This review allowed Oscail to investigate the potential of the online delivery of the programme to improve delivery and to meet the other revised quality objectives identified by the review process. It should be stressed that a pragmatic approach was adopted from the beginning, i.e. the potential of online delivery to meet specific objectives was investigated and then an implementation strategy adopted which would allow the programme co-ordinators to evaluate whether the online delivery met these objectives. This implementation strategy was usually tentative and experimental. These experiments were evaluated and, if the evaluation proved satisfactory, they would be expanded to other parts of the programme.

It should also be pointed out that considerable pressure came from students to increase the use of online technologies and frequently feedback from students indicated they thought that Oscail's implementation of the use of new technologies was too slow[9]. When probed, students would frequently say that they considered the traditional methods of distance education delivery were 'old fashioned' and 'out-of-date'. Perhaps, not too much should be read into these comments as, when Oscail did implement various online

[8] Oscail provided access to microcomputers to students on particular modules of the IT programme at local study centres from the inception of the programme in 1986. However, from the early 1990s, the demand for this access started to decline and by the late 1990s, students no longer attended the access sessions provided.

[9] A frequent comment took the form of "This is an IT programme, why is Oscail not making more use of IT?"

technologies, other students would complain and say that they preferred the traditional methods. Obviously, new technologies should only be implemented if there are sound pedagogical or other rationales. Nevertheless, course providers do have to be cognisant of student perceptions of their programmes.

Scheduled Online Instruction

In 2003, the first major change occurred when students undertaking the degree level modules were given online as well as study centre tutorial support for the modules they were undertaking. The objectives were mainly pragmatic. In the preceding two years, due to the number of students involved and the availability of local expertise, the number of local study centres for these modules was reduced to two study centres (in Dublin and Cork – Ireland's two main cities). This meant that some students had to travel substantial distances to attend tutorials with the consequence that the number of students attending tutorials fell dramatically. (As is normal, attendance at tutorials on the programme is not mandatory but it does correlate with persistence on the programme and attainment of good assessments.) It was for this reason that students on these modules were offered online tutorial support.

The method of online delivery adopted was termed Scheduled Online Instruction. In this method, the academic year was broken up into four periods, three periods that corresponded to the periods before the three assignments and one period leading up to the examination. For each of these periods, a number of computer conferences/forums are set up by the tutor in which students could communicate with their tutor and fellow students[10]. The tutor may also carry out functions as would happen in a face-to-face tutorial such as offer resources, synopses, ask and answer questions, etc.

The forums are open for fixed periods – usually for three weeks - during which time the material to be covered for the next assignment can be discussed. At the end of the period, the forums are closed and no further contributions can be added. The fixed time performs two important functions: (1) it limits the topics which students can discuss during a particular period[11] and (2) it limits the time during which a tutor has to check the online forums and answer student queries. Both of these act to restrict the tutor time required to monitor and moderate the online discussion. As noted above, unless measures are introduced to limit the time requirement of the tutor, then tutor costs can escalate. In addition, the time limits on the online discussion, act to focus the online discussion i.e. students are aware that, if they have queries or wish to discuss a particular topic, then they must do it during a particular time period. This has the effect of 'lock-stepping' the discussion and means, for example, that a student cannot initiate a topic that was discussed by the rest of the group some five or six weeks previously.

Student evaluation of the modules using the SOI method indicated that most students were appreciative of this more flexible method of getting tutorial support. (As could be predicted, the level of satisfaction rose for those students who would have found it either difficult or impossible to attend face-to-face tutorials.) However, tutors (and some students) expressed disappointment at the low level of usage of the online forums. While

[10] All computer conferences/forums are asynchronous as experiments working with online synchronous chat rooms showed that the level of discussion was mostly of a low-level. Some tutors continue to use synchronous chat but not many. The forums were set up in a VLE called Moodle.

[11] There is a period, prior to the examinations, when students can ask questions on any topic in the module.

there was many 'lurkers', it was a minority of students who actively engaged online. A number of tutors were of the opinion that this was primarily due to the novelty of the system i.e. students were still not sure of the best way to use it for their own benefit. Tutors also expressed a desire for more training in tutoring online. For this reason, substantial training was given to tutors working online in the following year.

Task-Oriented Online Learning

In many ways, Scheduled Online Instruction (SOI) meets logistical rather than pedagogical objectives. That is, it structures the online tutoring in such a way as to provide a form of flexible tutorial support that students who, due to geographical, family, work or other reasons, would not be able to attend face-to-face tutorials (or find it very difficult to attend such tutorials). However, like face-to-face tutorials, the quality of the online tutorial support provided by SOI is highly dependent on the quality of the tutor and the quality of the engagement of the students.

There were a number of specifically pedagogical objectives that Oscail wishes to attain via online learning. One of the key pedagogical objectives was the introduction of group work into the programme. In common with many 'second generation' distance education programmes, Oscail's BSc in IT programme did not **require** students to engage in group work at any point during their participation in the programme[12]. Given the pedagogical benefits of groupwork[13], this was considered to a weakness in the programme.

To bring group work into the programme, Task Oriented Online Learning (TOOL) was introduced for two degree level modules in 2004[14]. In this form of learning, students were required to engage online with their fellow students in order to complete specified tasks. Three different pedagogical techniques were used in the three assignment periods.

In the first assignment period, a number of relevant topics were posted online along with a number of resources (articles, chapters, websites, etc). Students were given a short period to prepare and then (over a two week period) had to engage with their fellow students in discussion/debate of these topics. Each student had to make a minimum number of postings. This technique was called Online Debates/Resources.

In the second assignment period, students were broken into groups of three. Each group was given a relevant topic along with resources and given two weeks to prepare a synopsis of their topic. At the end of the two weeks, each group had to post their synopsis online and, for the following three weeks, had to 'tutor' their fellow students on their topic. That is, students could ask questions on the topic of any of the other groups and it was up to the members of each group to answer questions on their topic. At the end of the three week period, each group posted a revised synopsis, clarifying any points raised in the discussion. This technique was called Online Peer Tutoring.

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[12] The majority of the students on the programme did form study groups and this is encouraged by Oscail. However, up to 2004, at no point during the programme were students required to engage in group work.
[13] See, for example, O'Malley 1995 and Dillenbourg 1999. Also, a number of educationalists have drawn attention to the need for group work as part of the formation of graduates given the importance of having the ability to work in groups in the workplace – see for example Barnet 1992.
[14] This built on work carried out in 2002 and 2003 on ways of incorporating different pedagogical techniques into online learning – see Fox and MacKeogh 2003

In the third assignment period, students were broken into groups of five or six and asked to prepare a group report on a relevant topic. Students were given seven weeks to prepare the report. Students were given standard guidelines for involvement in group projects such as division of tasks, appointment of chair, secretary, etc. In was left up to each group as to how they wished to communicate among themselves but many used the online chat and conferencing facilities provided. Each group had to provide regular short reports on the progress of their work. In this way, tutors could monitor if any groups were not functioning properly.

One key difference between SOI and TOOL was that marks were awarded for engaging in the TOOL tasks while it is left up to student whether they wished to engage online in the SOI modules.

It should be pointed out that the move to online tutorial support (particularly the use of TOOL) was greatly facilitated by the provision of off-campus access to the Online Journal Databases in 2003. DCU Library had, for a number of years, provided online access to the full-text of the articles in a wide range of academic journals. However, one had to be on the DCU campus to access these databases. This changed in the autumn of 2003 when all registered students of DCU could access the databases from home. As is well known, access to academic library material is a perennial problem for distance education students. With off-campus access to the full-text Online Journal Databases, course writers and designers could provide reference to further reading material in the sure knowledge that students would be able to access it with relative ease.

It should also be noted that the pedagogical techniques used in TOOL are more likely to be useful for the teaching and learning of discursive subject areas rather than more fact and theory driven subjects (Fox and MacKeogh 2003).

In the evaluation of the TOOL delivered modules, most students acknowledged that they learnt the material in the modules more systematically and at greater depth than they had other modules. (This was corroborated by the tutors and tutor monitor[15].) However, they almost universally complained about the additional time it took in comparison with the study time required for other degree level modules[16]. Some students estimated that they had spent three to four times the amount of time on the TOOL module as compared with other degree level modules with an average estimate of approximately twice the amount of time. This finding is, of course, an instance of the standard issue of quality versus time in studying. On the one hand, as teachers and course designers, we wish our students to engage meaningfully with the material in our courses. It is recognised that this type of deep learning takes time and effort from our students. On the other hand, our students are often less concerned with meaningful engagement and more concerned with obtaining a good mark for the course while not expending too much effort! It is obvious

[15] The tutor monitor is a senior academic who reviews a selection of the assignments marked by each tutor working on a particular module. The use of a tutor monitor is one of the key methods that Oscail ensures different tutors are marking to a common standard and it also ensures that tutors provide students with an appropriate level of feedback.

[16] Another student compliant, albeit not as frequent, was that the TOOL method of online tutoring entails less flexibility for students as to their timing of study. Of course, any method that introduced group work has to entail that the groups be 'present' at the same time (even if the 'presence' is online presence). This cannot be put forward as a reason for not having group work as part of a programme of study but it does indicate that, in a distance education programme which students undertake because of its flexibility, the use of group work is probably going to have to be quite circumscribed.

that the online delivery of the modules using the TOOL method did succeed in getting students to engage with the material in the modules. (This is not surprising given that it combined the award of marks for the engagement and also involved the support of a social group[17].) However, as course designers, it is also incumbent on us to ensure that student effort meets with a proportionate award. This led to a major change in the way that the TOOL modules were assessed. In 2005, the TOOL delivered module is being assessed by continuous assessment only (i.e. students undertaking this module do not have to do an examination[18].) Preliminary evaluation would indicate that this change has led to even greater engagement from students.

Because the pedagogical structure of the TOOL modules is devised in advance (and reified in the form of an instructional schedule for students and tutors) then the tasks to be performed by the tutors are limited to monitoring the activities of the students. These tasks have proved to be not too onerous and do not take a disproportionate amount of the tutors' time.

Online Resources Aimed at Increasing Retention

In the two methods of teaching online described above - SOI and TOOL - the objectives were, respectively, providing more flexible tutorial support and improving the quality of teaching and learning.

The advent of going online also gave an opportunity to the programme co-ordinators to investigate if online delivery could be used to assist in increasing student retention. In common with most distance education systems, Oscail programmes have a lower retention rate than comparable on-campus programmes[19].

In the BSc in IT programme, the low retention rate is concentrated in the Level 1 modules (equivalent to first year in an on-campus academic programme[20]). More specifically, it is concentrated in two Level 1 modules – Management Science 1 and Communications Technology 1. Management Science 1 is a mathematics and statistics module and, while most students have encountered the majority of the material in this module before, a substantial number of students would not have studied this material for a considerable time. The Communications Technology 1 module is a foundation module in the basic physics of relevance to communications technology and a review of communications networks. While this module does not assume prior knowledge, it does present material in a rapid fashion as it aimed to bring students to the level attained by similar courses at first year in university.

The approach taken for both these modules was to make available online to the students a substantial number of additional resources. Practically all of these resources were of a background/introductory nature – the idea being that if a student encountered difficulty

[17] Anecdotal evidence would suggest that students formed close social bonds from participating in the online group activity.
[18] It should be noted that students still have to undertake three assignments, as is normal, as well as the online and group work. Also, the amount of online and group work within the TOOL method was increased as compared to 2004.
[19] Kember 1995
[20] Students who are over 23 years of age can enter Oscail's programmes without any previous qualifications. This means that the entering cohort of students had very high variance in their previous educational attainment.

when studying any section of the module text then he or she would be able to go online and access additional resources which would bring them through the same material but at a slower pace. Sometimes the material repeated the material given in the module text but from a different perspective and using different examples.

This online material came from a number of sources. Some material came from Oscail. For example, Oscail had a text-based Preparatory Mathematics module of some 500 pages. This was mined for relevant sections and placed online in an easily accessible way. Other resources came from public websites (which proved particularly fruitful for animated clips of processes in basic physics). Still other resources were purchased by Oscail[21].

Another element has been added to the resources for the Management Science 1 module. Oscail has developed a bank of online questions relevant to sections of this module. These questions have varying levels of difficulty. (For example, the bank of questions on Logarithms has five levels with approximately ten questions per level.) Students can undertake the questions can each level and depending on their answers to the questions, they are directed to different resources. Students who cannot answer the questions at the first level are directed to basic-level resources for the topic. Students who can answer the questions at the intermediate levels are directed to higher-level resources while students who can answer the questions at the highest level are recommended to go directly to the assessment questions for the topic.

While a small number of additional resources were made available in 2004, this year (2005) is the first time that a substantial number of resources have been made available to the students of both modules. It is therefore too early to make judgements as to the success of this initiative. It will be subject to a full evaluation at the end of this academic year. Judged solely by the number hits on the site so far, what can be said is that a substantial number of students are accessing the online resources. However, only time will tell if they are making good use of them.

If the evaluation of the use of the online resources turns out to be positive, then it is the intention to extend the range of resources available to students and add online resources to other problematical modules.

Conclusions

This paper began by reviewing some of the lessons, which can be learnt from a review of the rationales for implementing new technologies in higher education. It then went on to look at the use of new technologies in one of Oscail's distance education programmes. Can any generalisable lessons be learnt from Oscail's experience?

One very broad lesson is that the uses to which the new technologies can be put in higher education are highly flexible. The key issues are to devise tailored adaptations of the new technologies which (a) are appropriate for the target audience; (b) have a reasonable cost structure and (c) meet the pedagogical objectives of the programme.

[21] Recently Oscail (and DCU) has joined with all the other Irish universities in a large-scale project which aims to develop a digital depository of learning objects. It is envisaged that this will be another source of online resources in the future.

More specifically, the use of the online communication technologies provide many ways in which distance educators can provide flexible tutorial support to particular groups of their students. The challenge is to provide this support in pedagogically rich ways that are not cost prohibitive.

Finally, the use of online resources which aim to increase student retention (mentioned above) is indicative of the many ways that the online delivery of programmes is likely to open up new avenues for distance educators. When Oscail started to move its programmes online, it did not envisage such a use. It is highly likely that, as we gain more experience with the online delivery of programmes, many new ways of delivering online learning will emerge. The key to advancement in this area will be grounded experimentation and the sharing of knowledge and experience gained.

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Reflecting on research studies on face-to-face tutorials in distance education

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Introduction

Face-to-face tutorials in distance education form part of the learner support system. They are usually used to provide further explanation of the content of course materials, leading students to explore issues beyond, give feedback on students' progress, develop students' study skills, and bring them together for mutual support to overcome isolation (Simpson, 2000). The School of Education and Languages in the Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK), whose main target learners are teachers, provides both upgrading and continuing professional development, and initial teacher education programmes. To ensure that we offer an ever-improving service to our students, critical reflection on all elements of the learning system is required. This paper relates specifically to the provision of face-to-face tutorial support (for simplicity, referred to as 'tutorials' hereafter) for distance learners who are taking teacher education courses. It reports the results of studies on tutorials for such courses and argues that more research work in this area is required for reflective practice.

Reflection, research and practice

In the context of learning, reflection refers to all those 'intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations' (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985, p. 19). According to Boud et al.'s assertion, it requires learners to revisit their experiences and be aware of their feelings, which should result in knowledge appropriation, personal synthesis and evaluation, and decisions on further activity. Applying this perspective to the context of professional practice would mean that practitioners will review their practice, leading to evaluation and better understanding of it and a synthesis of new knowledge for future action.

In criticising technical rationality, Schön (1983) rejected the positivist epistemology of practice and argued for the development of one 'which places technical problem solving within a broader context of reflective inquiry' (p. 69). For him, professional practice depends on 'tacit recognitions, judgments, and skilful performances' (p. 50) and is guided by implicit knowledge and understandings which practitioners draw upon as they reflect on or in their actions. Accordingly, in the process of reflection-on-action or reflection-in-action, professionals was not merely depend on established theory and techniques but will construct new theory through researching on/in their context of practice.

The interpretive paradigm sees educational inquiry as 'rooted in the concepts and theories that practitioners have themselves acquired and developed to serve their educational purposes (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p. 117). Therefore, practice and theory

should not be interpreted as two totally incompatible and opposing phenomena. Rather, practice is interpreted as *praxis* – 'a form of reflexive action which can itself transform the 'theory' which guides it' (Carr, 1993, p. 173). In this way, theory and practice are continuously modifying and revising one another. Reflection of professionals on their practice leads to inquiry, which is valuable for better understanding and improvement of practice; and change in practice, in turn, leads to further reflection and inquiry and the cycle is reiterated.

As an academic in a distance education university, I have not been involved directly in tutoring. Any reflection on this face-to-face teaching process will, therefore, be indirect; for example, rather than directly reviewing my experience in tutorials, I have to rely on reports from learners and tutors on their experience. Research data become very important resources for distance educators such as myself to reflect on, in order to develop theory and new insights for informing tutorial policy and enhancing tutor training.

Reflecting on my earlier research work on tutorials

Research studies on face-to-face tutorials in distance learning focused mainly on students' evaluation of tutorial support (e.g. Hiola and Moss, 1990; Naylor, Cowie and Stevenson, 1990; Morgan and Morris, 1994); their expectations and perceptions of the role of tutors (Stevenson, Sander and Naylor, 1996; Stevenson and Sander, 1998); and their self-report on tutorial attendance and the reasons for attendance/non-attendance (e.g. Hiola and Moss, 1990; Morgan and Morris, 1994). Systematic collection of feedback from students heightens tutors' awareness of student needs and difficulties, thus helping them to explore ways to improve their tutoring strategies. Also, with respect to institutions, such research data can help faculty members to plan staff development programmes on effective tutoring and provide guidance to learners on making the best use of tutorial support.

My early research work on tutorials was informed by the above literature and stimulated by my knowledge of Hong Kong learners. Previous studies have often portrayed Hong Kong students as rote learners (Watkins and Hattie, 1981; Biggs, 1987) though they have high levels of achievement motivation. Learning through group work and discussion is very rare in Hong Kong classrooms (Biggs and Watkins, 1996) and Chinese students usually adopt a learner-listening approach (Jin and Cortazzi, 1998). In distance education, learning mainly takes place through student interaction with the self-instructional materials; there are usually no lectures and the face-to-face contact with tutors through tutorials is limited. With a strong belief that interaction and dialogue in learning encourage students to construct meaning (Morgan, 1995) and move towards a deep learning approach, the OUHK advocates that tutors should play a facilitative role (Wright, 1987). Students are required to become independent and active participants rather than passive recipients – a role which, for Hong Kong students, is inconsistent with their previous practice. This immediately raises the question: Can students who were used to a more didactic way of teaching approach accept a facilitative tutoring style?

My earliest contacts with OUHK Education students (before the conduction of research studies) during tutorial visits or by telephone reinforced the speculation that they may have a different conception of tutorials. Though new students are briefed on how to study

through distance education and the role of tutorials, learners still equate tutorials to lectures and often complain that tutors are not providing 'adequate teaching'. This raises a further series of questions:

- What do learners expect from tutorials and their tutors?
- How frequently do they attend tutorials, given that these are optional?
- How do they rate the tutorials that they have attended?

Research studies were conducted to answer the above questions, and the findings (see Fung and Carr, 1999, 2000) provided the following information about Education students' participation in, and views on, tutorials:

- They were keen to attend tutorials, with 70 to 80% of the students attending 75% or more of the tutorials.
- They expected tutorials to be used primarily for helping them to understand course materials and provide guidance on assignments and examinations.
- The majority did not attend tutorials to gain psychological support.
- They preferred tutor-centred tutorial approaches to learner-centred ones, and valued highly systematic explanation provided by tutors.
- They recognized the advantages of learners participating actively in tutorials though they were not keen to do so.
- Despite their expressed preference for lectures at the start of the course, they rated positively tutorials which included a mixture of lecture and group discussion.

As can be seen above, my earlier studies on tutorials indicated that OUHK Education students have a high tutorial attendance rate, an outcome which has been reported in other local studies (Kember et al., 1992) and may result in part from the geographical nature of Hong Kong. The high tutorial attendance of teachers was not primarily for gaining psychological support (Fung and Carr, 1999) but for face-to-face academic support. They preferred tutorials with clear objectives, which helped them to learn the course and perform better.

While students preferred lectures, they did not reject the use of learner-centred tutorial approaches. Their main concern was what they could gain from tutorials. As long as their objectives were achieved–for example a fuller understanding of the course materials and requirements of assignments– they would rate those tutorials very positively.

The high attendance rate combined with students' expectations of tutors suggested that they preferred more structured tutorials and would not be satisfied if tutorials were only used for 'trouble shooting'. In staff development work with tutors, an increased emphasis was, therefore, placed on the importance of organizing more focused tutorials and using a mixture of tutoring approaches.

Researching tutorials from a different perspective

While my previous research studies appeared useful for improving tutoring approaches, they did not provide me with in-depth understanding of the learning process in tutorials. Theories in teacher education have posited that collaboration (Fullan, 1991; Wideen, et al. 1996), reflection (Haggarty, 1995; Loughran, 1997) and knowledge construction (Richardson, 1997) are essential aspects of teacher learning. Drawing on the current

literature in teacher education and distance education, a small group of colleagues (including myself) in the School is conducting a study aimed at gaining an integrative understanding of teacher learning through distance education. The project, which is still in progress, examines all aspects of learning – through course materials, face-to-face tutorials, assignments, online communication and school mentoring – from the teachers' perspective. The research participants are in-service teachers enrolled in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Primary) (PGDE) programme. This section presents and discusses the data concerned with learning through tutorials.

Methodology of current research

Based on the three dimensions of teacher learning mentioned above, a questionnaire consisting of structured items was developed, with 16 items related to the learning process in tutorials. The questionnaire was piloted and then sent by mail to all the 173 students enrolled in the PGDE programme.

Results and discussion

Altogether, 114 students returned the questionnaire, a response rate of 65.9%. The participants responded to each item based on a 7-point scale, with 1 being 'strongly disagree' and 7 being 'strongly agree'. The results are shown in Table 1 below:

Dimension	Items	Mean	S.D.
Collaboration	1. During tutorials, I often share with others my understanding of the course materials and views on different educational issues	3.85	1.24
	2. In the tutorials, I actively work together with my classmates to complete tutorial activities or discussion.	4.17	1.36
	3. I think group discussion in tutorials is not very rewarding.	3.83	1.35
	4. During tutorials, I like to work out with other teachers problems encountered in daily teaching practice.	4.11	1.22
Knowledge construction	5. I often need to rely on the tutor's explanations during tutorials to help me read the course materials at home.	3.31	1.47
	6. During tutorials, I often draw connections between the tutor's explanations and what I have already learned.	4.35	1.31
	7. I often make use of others' views discussed in tutorials to deepen my own understanding of the course materials.	4.27	1.36
	8. I usually find myself developing new understanding on educational issues at the end of the tutorials.	4.32	1.18
Reflection	9. I usually evaluate my own viewpoints against those discussed by other classmates during the tutorials.	3.93	1.11

	10. Tutorial discussion and activities usually guide me to think about new ways to improve my practice.	4.65	1.15
	11. My main task in attending tutorials is to routinely note down the tutor's explanations.	4.48	1.39
	12. Tutorial discussion helps me think about ideas and concepts presented in the course materials from different perspectives.	4.84	1.12

In a 7-point scale, a mean value above 4 shows that respondents are in agreement with the statement. In general, the teachers did not 'strongly agree/disagree' with any items as the mean values ranged between 3.31 and 4.84. More specifically, however, the data revealed the following characteristics of the PGDE students with respect to learning in tutorials.

- Collaboration
  Teachers did work with their classmates to complete tutorial activities and in discussion (item 2) and they also liked to cooperate with other teachers in working on problems encountered in classroom practice (item 3). However, they did not often share with others their understanding of the course materials and views on different educational issues (item 1). As practitioners in their initial teacher training, teachers are more concerned with daily practice than debates on educational issues, and their personal experience allows them to collaborate and help one another in solving problems encountered in teaching.

  The effectiveness of experience sharing and discussion is, however, unclear. The mean value for the statement 'I think group discussion in tutorials is not very rewarding' is 3.82 – indicating that students were not in strong disagreement with it. The data here informed me that it appears necessary to help students develop their discussion and collaborative skills.

- Knowledge construction
  According to their self-report, students did not often rely on the tutor in order to understand the course materials (item 5). They often found themselves able to develop a new understanding of educational issues at the end of tutorials (item 8), which was probably achieved through drawing connections between the tutor's explanations and what they had read (item 6), and making use of others' views to deepen their understanding (item 7).

  If what was reported by teachers really happened, they have constructed a deeper understanding of, and new insights into, the concepts and issues raised in the course.

- Reflection
  Students agreed that tutorial discussion and activities guided them to think about new ways to improve their practice (item 10), and that these also helped them to think about ideas and concepts presented in the course from different perspectives (item 12). Teachers have reflected on their learning and their practice, allowing them to consider viewpoints from different perspectives.

However, they did not truly evaluate their viewpoints against those of others (item 9) – an indication that they were not adequately involved in self-evaluation and their reflection may not have been critical. More significant, many students agreed that they would routinely note down tutor's explanations during tutorials (item 11). This result seemed to contradict their reporting that they did not rely on tutor's explanations to understand the course materials. Perhaps, this finding shows that the emphasis in Chinese culture on teachers as the authority and expert (Pratt et al., 1999) is still deeply rooted in our learners. For them, tutors' views are important and should be noted down for future reference.

Data from the first stage of the study showed that PGDE students are now quite different from Education students a few years ago. They appear to be more keen to engage in group activities and achieve collaboration, knowledge construction and reflection during tutorials. Self-report data, however, may not provide a fully genuine picture of the learning process. The questionnaire survey is only the first step in this study. The second stage, which is ongoing, involves interviewing students and observing tutorials. Such qualitative data provide a more comprehensive picture of what is happening in tutorials and give us a fuller understanding of the learning process. Based on the future findings, collaborative action research involving faculty members and tutors can then be planned and implemented.

Informing tutorial practice through research

As mentioned above, the literature on teacher education advocates teachers' learning through collaboration, knowledge construction and reflection. This requires human interactions and Peters (2000), for example, has argued that distance education must provide sufficient opportunities for dialogue, by which he means 'direct and indirect oral interaction between teachers and students' (p. 33). This reinforces the importance of exploring the learning process in tutorials in order to develop ways to enhance learning by interaction in tutorials for teacher education courses. However, there is a paucity of research in this area.

Research plays a fundamental role in reflective practice; and in open and distance education, there has been an increasing interest in applying research results for critical reflective practice (Evans and Nation, 1998). According to Robinson (1995), the literature on learner support in open and distance education is mainly descriptive and prescriptive, focusing on guidelines and reports of experience, rather than empirical enquiry or research. She also pointed out that research studies in learner support have not been able to build models or formulate theoretical explanations. My earlier research work on tutorials, as in studies reported elsewhere, was not built on any theoretical framework. Findings from such research provided feedback to improve practice but did not build up any theory or model about learning in tutorials. Reflecting on the limitations of such kinds of survey research and the need to address issues specifically related to teacher learning, the ongoing study makes use of theories in teacher education as an underlying rationale to explore the extent to which distance learning tutorials can help to achieve the aims of teacher education.

More research in this area is required as distance education becomes an increasingly common approach for training teachers. When a robust theory or model about teacher learning in tutorials of distance education courses has been established, distance

educators' practice and reflection on practice can be theory-based, enabling *practice* to become *praxis*.

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How does one learn to be a reflexive practitioner?

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Defining Reflexive Praxis

Reflexive praxis is the one of the most challenging processes of teaching as well as of learning. It reminds me of driving lessons when the instructor keeps on saying – look way ahead but to keep an eye on the rear-mirror. To me, it means looking ahead with the wealth of experience that looking behind has provided. Reflexive praxis demands enormous rigor, self discipline and self critique. It involves doing constant post-mortems of the teaching and learning practice. It is a constant articulation of 'beefs' regarding either that makes for a refined attempt at reflexive praxis.

I start off with the assumption that reflexive praxis is incumbent to both the teacher and the learner. Reflexive praxis is constant process, interlinked with one snapshot feeding into another at regular intervals. It refers to the kind of self evaluation that improves teaching and learning and heightens the quality of that activity. It is concerned with individual quality circles and the formal or informal documenting of that process.

An analytical framework involving the concepts of individual ontology, transformative learning and self directedness, in my view, contributes best to an understanding of reflexive praxis. As a teacher and as a learner in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) context, I find that my main concern is with transformative learning and self-directedness as powerful engines of personal change and development. It is crucial to realize that reflexive praxis involves constant learning and readjustment in the teaching/learning situation. Through the transformative learning process, reflexive praxis promotes engagement in teaching and self-directedness in learning. At one end of the continuum, through reflexive praxis, a teacher's main object is to become effective and a learner's main object is to become self-directed as he/she learns to take control over his/her continuous learning process. I find myself navigating along this continuum repeatedly from one end to the other depending on how I position myself – a learner or a teacher. Based on my personal experience, in this paper, I will discuss how one learns to become a reflexive practitioner as a teacher and as a learner. The following engaged discussion delineates how I arrive at my personal understanding of the concept.

Reflexive praxis – an engaged discussion

hooks (1994) and Baptiste (2002) have helped me realize that reflexive praxis is a transformative experience that can only happen once one is aware of one's political location and when one develops a certain critical approach to that location. Reflexive praxis is the result of making an intimate connection with oneself by critical self-analysis. Constant analysis of one's location in various teaching situations helps uncover how personal prejudices and complexes becoming constraints in the teaching practice. This also helps arrive at solutions.

Advocated first by Freire (1972), at one end of the continuum, reflexive praxis is the constant fine-tuning of personal sensitivity of engaged teachers. At the other end of the continuum, less engaged ones approach their task in a more pragmatic and often automatic manner without much concern for students' experiences and socio-cultural as well as economic contexts. Analyzing how teachers relate to themselves in the context of a specific teaching situation "can prove to be a valuable training tool" (Baptiste, 2002, p.9) that can lead to personally empowering situations. This becomes a moment of learning as well as teaching. The discipline of "continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively" leads to personal mastery. This mastery should benefit the personal development of both learners and teachers as both become committed to their own lifelong learning. At the other end of the continuum, from the Human Resource Development approach, Senge (1990, pp.6-7) argues that this commitment benefits both the learner and the organization. I tend to agree more with hooks' argument that "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (hooks, 1994, p.15). In a similar vein, Vella (2002) demonstrates the motivational power of surrendering the traditional role of 'teacher' for a position as 'fellow learner' and of carefully examining her own knowledge prior to beginning a course (Vella, 2002, p.6).

hooks (1994), Vella (2002), Baptiste (2003), Schied *et al* (2001) Senge (1990) and Watkins and Marsick (1993), contribute to the view that the following form the core of our transformed understanding of education: reflexive praxis, dialogue approach, contextualizing the curriculum, needs assessment and participatory decision-making. Lack of space prevents me from detailing the potential contribution of these elements which need be clearly positioned vis-a vis the practitioners – both teacher and learner. Their particular interactions with any of the above elements are what will define their individual transformative experiences. In my opinion, Moore's transactional theory is a succinct summary of reflexive praxis (Moore and Kearsley, 1986). He advocates constant critical dialog between variations on the above elements, especially in terms of learner-content, learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction (Moore, 1989). This process, in my view, heightens both transformative learning and self-directedness.

Reflexive praxis, transformative learning and self-directedness

Reflexive praxis, transformative learning and self-directedness exist in mutually reinforcing relationships. Transformative learning explains how our culturally framed assumptions and presuppositions become paradigms within which we operate and which give meaning to our experiences. Critical reflection on these paradigms may result in a paradigm shift that transforms the individual and makes him/her open to new experiences that challenge or confirm previous ones. It is argued that transformative learning reflects a process as well as an outcome of adult development. The ideal conditions that can foster transformative learning include having accurate and complete information regarding one's position, being free from coercion, distorting self- deception, being able to weigh evidence and assess arguments as objectively as possible and be open to alternative perspectives. I tend to believe, that transformative learning contains the right ingredients for personal development and a heightened sense of control over personal choices. Transformative learning is therefore seen as that process of sifting new information and combining it with existing experience and constructing new knowledge that guides action, thus resulting in personal development.

A reflective practitioner should first delineate his/her position in relation to the context in which he/she wants an analysis of his/her interaction. A thorough understanding of one's ontology is what will enable the reflexive practitioner grasp the transformative experience of teaching and learning. My view of teaching is closely linked to hooks' view that "to educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the sorts of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (hooks, 1994, p.13). Respect is an element that should provide a fertile crucible for effective interaction since it promotes the required level of comfort. Teachers and learners should ensure that they both operate in an environment where there is a strong sense of mutual respect.

As part of reflexive praxis, the teacher's transformative process contributes greatly to the advancement of knowledge – that is what adds to knowledge's elasticity stretching it beyond its boundaries. From the learner's perspective, it is desirable that reflexive praxis promote self-directedness. Any discussion of self-directed learning must be grounded in the concept of learning. Moore and Kearsley define self-directed learning as the "ability to undertake all or most of the design of one's own learning, to evaluate performance, and to make adjustments accordingly. Such learners are able to formulate their own learning objectives, identify resources that will help them achieve their objectives, choose appropriate measures of achieving the objectives, test and evaluate their performance (Moore and Kearsley, 1986, pp. 119-120). Constant reflection upon the learner's learning process is bound to generate some kind of transformative learning that will eventually promote self-directed learning whereby *emancipatory* control of the learning process is passed on to the learner.

To understand reflexive praxis in the ODL context, it is important to ask how does one teach and how does one learn in the ODL context? What defines the teaching/learning experience in the ODL context which automatically precludes or limits contiguous contact? As in the contiguous context, to analyze reflexive praxis, the reflexive practitioner is first located in his/her individual teaching situation. The dialogue approach, is then instrumental to discuss and demonstrate the transformative experience as teacher and learner.

Dialogue approach

The process of self-analysis is easily done with the dialogue approach to education. To facilitate dialogue, Vella (2002) and hooks (1994) agree that sound relationships with the student should be fostered in a healthy and safe environment that is constantly conducive to constructive learning. Senge (1990) concurs on the above: "the discipline of team learning starts with 'dialogue', the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine 'thinking together'" (p.10). hooks further demonstrates how debilitating the lack of dialogue can be by discussing how as a black woman she had to fight internal and external constraints as a student and later as a teacher. Within those relationships, "the variables we can control are time, affirmation, mutual respect, open dialogue, open questions that invite dialogue, engagement in

significant work, role clarification, responsibility, and immediate response to questions and issues that are raised" (Vella, 2002, p.26).

hooks (1994) argues that critical reflection on our culturally framed paradigms in the course of our teaching may result in a paradigm shift that transforms the learner and makes him/her open to new experiences that challenge or confirm previous ones. Teachers can enable learners to become active participants in constructing and reconstructing their experiences of the world they live in. Otherwise, "it is difficult for individuals to shift paradigms" (hooks, 1994, p.38).

The dialogue approach leads to the collective mounting of the learning curriculum. In my view, control should be shared between tutors and learners, who will ground theory in their lived experience, will clarify the student-teacher relationship and will also make the curriculum more relevant. Moore's point (1972, p. 84) "it is less widely recognized that when a learner has grown beyond the need for dependency, a teacher's proximity is more inhibiting and his distance more stimulating becomes immediately relevant. Moore endorses the point made by Harper (1971, in Moore, 1972, p.84) that, "the correspondence student is lead to investigate, to be independent in his study, and to have confidence in the results of his own investigation, which the student who has constant recourse to his instructor does not have". This approach encourages transformative learning for both the teacher and the learner.

Teacher/learner experience in the ODL context

This audience will agree on the differences in the practice of teaching and learning in the ODL context as opposed to the contiguous context. In the ODL context, teaching and learning are both packed into the instructional material. Teacher-learner interaction is meant to be facilitated through effective instructional design of the course material. Technically, this should provide the right space for the negotiation of the teaching/learning activity. Vella (2002, p.10) argues that such spaces should help teachers/learners uncover their biases. In this manner, it is expected that teachers will be able to unpack the assumptions they make about their students. In addition, Baptiste argues that "consequently, how she relates to them is crucial factors in determining her effectiveness as a teacher." (Baptiste, 2002). I will stretch this argument to include the learner's biases and assumptions.

As opposed to the other media that support ODL, the online forum provides greater immediacy in terms of interaction. In this forum learner interactions with the tutors and tutor intervention are clear indications of how smoothly the process is being done. Specificities of this process vary from program to program and course to course as well as learner requirement and teacher self-concept.

The teacher's experience

The main object of the teacher is to constantly improve his/her teaching effectiveness as well as enhance learner satisfaction through constructive teaching and learning. However, invariably, teaching is replaced by the instructional material. In the distance learning context, teaching is characterized by a higher degree of anonymity in the teacher-learner relationship and reflexive praxis is supported by the medium of exchange between teaching and learning.

From the teacher's perspective, it is important to take the pulse of learners to gauge teaching effectiveness. Learner feedback assignments as well as learner performance are indications of how well teaching is being received by the learner. The type and quality of feedback, in my view depends on the level of teacher engagement and social presence (Chich-Hsiung and McIsaac, 2002). Indications of high quality learner participation will be lack of learner anxiety, obvious, actual respect between tutor and learner, higher levels of learner satisfaction that go far beyond grades achieved to encompass a sense of constructive achievement, a sense of having somehow helped the learner redefine his/her context and broadening horizons. Constant reappraisal will allow the teacher to gauge how effective his/her teaching and all related components are and should enable his/her through a transformative exercise to change his/her bearings to accommodate students' requirements anew in order to enhance learner satisfaction and teacher effectiveness.

Whether while teaching or while providing other types of student support services, I have often encountered much difficulty in trying to change learners' expectation of the banking rather than dialogue approach to education. Marsick and Watkins' argument that "it is difficult for many employees to change a lifetime of mental models and work habits so quickly…. Learned helplessness is another barrier that occurs when people have learned over time that they lack control over the consequences of their actions." (Marsick and Watkins, 1994, p.356) succinctly sum up my own experience of ODL teaching in my particular context. My personal challenge to make learners 'own' their learning process was a constantly uphill struggle.

As a teacher, I have constantly attempted to engage my learners in a dialogue through mutually prepared or adapted course materials. Personalized feedback was also crucial in helping learners improve their self-esteem and confidence. I must add that as a learner I have benefited enormously from my teachers who have used a similar dialogue approach. Some of my students have reported how this approach as opposed to a more traditional approach has greatly helped change their outlook on life as well as promoted their self-directedness. In turn, as a learner, I can only concur with them.

The learner's experience

The effectiveness of distance education is determined by a complex interaction of variables which include learner variables, teacher variables and course material variables (Moore, 1986). Interestingly, my most satisfying experience as a learner has occurred in the ODL context as opposed to the contiguous context. As an online student, along with my peers, I felt that I was given the opportunity to engage in constructive learning in a way that has been very emancipatory. I cannot say that I was disadvantaged vis a vis the learner in the face to face context. On the contrary many elements inherent to online ODL have been helpful in my transformative learning process and have improved my self-directedness in a manner that has also enhanced my self-confidence.

My first distance education experience as a learner was with print-based material. The flow of communication was limited to my tutor only and interaction through air-mails was unsatisfactorily sporadic. My second distance education experience with online learning has proved to be infinitely more rewarding. I interacted much more with my fellow learners and the tutor was just a key away. As such, I believe that collaborative learning is the right approach to online distance education. I enjoyed having a peer group

who was committed to reading what I write and who valued my experience as an adult. I also learned to do the same. The relationship and solidarity developed between peers has replaced the traditonal tutor-learner or administration-learner support system. With peers in the online environment, the heightened social presence of peers provided for emotional and academic support that alleviates isolation. The discussion makes for an even more democratic environment that in a regular face-to-face class. But it also makes one more vulnerable – especially if for one reason or another one does not feel 'accepted' by peers or that the peers develop a rather difficult relationship.

The flexibility offered by distance education is what will make the concept of lifelong education a lived reality for most working people. Flexibility – the ability to work at one's pace and at one's convenience- is key to the successful outcome of individual learning endeavors. Technology-enhanced distance education accentuates the element of flexibility that is so crucial to learning in today's hectic world. In my opinion, this enhances the learners' autonomy and is in line with the concepts of andragogy. Distance education allows learners to key in their experience truly at their convenience. The anonymity of online distance education has contributed significantly to its emancipatory potential.

Minimal tutor intervention inherent in the online learning design is, in my view, an astonishing feat in andragogy. I believe that distance education as opposed to the regular contiguous teaching has enhanced learner autonomy and self-directedness. In my view, this encourages self-directedness by placing the learning onus directly on the learner. Despite minimal intervention, in my view, a strong social presence coupled with sensible feedback is still desirable. This is, therefore, the summum of my critical experience as an ODL learner.

Conclusion

The above discussion confirms my view that an ontological awareness promotes reflexive praxis in the teacher and the learner. One teaches and one learns with the awareness of one's political contexts as well as the various power relationships that are thus engendered. In turn, this generates transformative learning and self-directedness along the teacher/learner continuum. Reflexive praxis through transformative learning and self-directedness are mutually reinforcing concepts becoming thus almost an art.

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Professional dignity and reforming teachers' practice: a case study of a distance learning network in Egypt

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Introduction

Professional Networks in education aim to promote the dissemination of good practice and enhance the professional development of teachers (Sliwka, 2003). In 1997, the Ministry of Education in Egypt established the National Network for Distance Training (NNDT), which became the backbone of teachers' continuous professional development. This paper aims to investigate the views of teachers, inspectors and training experts about the effectiveness of continuous professional development using the network in developing teachers' knowledge. The term 'professional dignity' is used to describe the standpoint of experienced teachers undergoing in-service training. Accordingly, this study brings to light the impact of professional dignity on the development of teachers' practical knowledge. Finally, recommendations for planning 'effective' professional development programmes within this National Network are suggested.

Since 1991, Egypt has been pursuing a reform policy that aims to improve many aspects of its education system (Swain et al., 2003). The Egyptian Ministry of Education reform efforts include, for example, curricula development, reviewing assessment and examination systems and using information and communication technology. In line with this reform, a particular emphasis is given to teachers' expertise as they are considered to be a key factor in reforming education.

This research is a case study of teacher continuous professional development in Egypt. It aims to investigate the views of teachers, inspectors and training experts about the impact of training programmes using a distance leaning network on developing teachers' knowledge. Some issues have been addressed in relation to reforming teachers' practice inside classrooms. For example, this study reveals that "Professional Dignity", which teachers exhibit as part of their identity as classroom practitioners, has an impact on developing teachers' practical knowledge. In describing this case study, this paper first provides an overview of the National Network for Distance Training (NNDT). Second, it discusses the main findings of the study in relation to professional dignity and the acquisition of teacher knowledge.

The Egyptian National Network for Distance Training

In1997, the Ministry of Education in Egypt initiated distance network for training in order to overcome the obstacles that face conventional approaches for teacher professional development. These obstacles include, for example, the lack of financial

resources and time limitations (Bredeson, 2002). In addition, there are large numbers of teachers who require training but are located in distant and disadvantaged areas of Egypt. This network aims mainly to train large numbers of serving teachers across the country on any changes and/or developments in the Egyptian national curricula. It also aims to introduce teachers to new technologies and teaching methods.

This network consists of 57 centres where each governorate in Egypt has its own centre. In addition, there is a main centre which is located in the Ministry of Education. The role of this main centre is to develop the training programme and support the operation of the whole network. All the centres in the network are connected using **Interactive Videoconference (IVC)** technology which is used to provide distance training for teachers. The total capacity for the network centres is around 8000 trainees at the same time and the average network operation capacity is 2664 hours per year (Training Department, 2004). This illustrates the large number of training programmes which are organised every year through the network. For example, the number of the training programmes during the period (October 1999 - December 2002) totalled 1003. Furthermore, the total number taking part was **1097038** trainees. This number includes a wide range of professionals who are working in education in Egypt such as teachers in all subjects and in different stages, school inspectors and school managers.

The network aims to provide equal accessibility to the training experts between advantaged and disadvantaged districts across Egypt. However, the main pedagogy that is used for distance training via videoconference is the formal 'lecture' approach i.e. the trainees usually act as passive receivers of information while the trainer acts as a dispenser of information. For the training, the experts usually organise a series of lectures for three to seven days which are related to the training programme. These lecture series usually conclude by taking questions from the trainee teachers.

Discussion of Outcomes

This study included math and science teachers in a number of prep-schools (11-14 years) and secondary schools (15-18 years). These two subjects are considered to be key areas for growth and development in Egyptian schools (Monk et al., 1999). It also included a number of school inspectors, training experts and educational technology specialists (see table 1).

Table 1 shows the total numbers of research sample.

Schools		**People**			
Prep-Schools	Secondary Schools	Teachers	Inspectors	Training Providers	Educational Technology Specialists
10	5	187	22	11	2
Total 15 Schools		**Total 222 People**			

A mix of research methods were used in this research such as in-depth interviews, observations and questionnaires. The observations involved three training courses for math and science teachers. The interviews and questionnaires were conducted with school teachers who had the training via the network.

Professional Dignity and Reforming Practice

Teachers can be viewed as participants who belong to a community of practice. Because teachers have a joint enterprise, they function as a community, and they develop a shared repertoire and resources such as tools, documents, routines, vocabulary, symbols and artefacts, that embody the accumulated knowledge of the community (Allee, 2000). Lave and Wenger (1995) describe the community of practice as a set of relationships between persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. Within this community Berliner (2001) suggests that there are five stages that profile the teachers' journey in their profession. These are novice, advanced beginner, competent performer, proficient and expert. During this journey, teachers develop their knowledge which can be classified into two main categories: formal and ***practical knowledge*** (Tuan et al., 2000). While formal (theoretical) knowledge is considered to be a product of the studies on effective teaching, practical (professional) knowledge is seen to be practical, ***personal***, situated, local, relational, and tacit knowledge. Therefore, practical knowledge is mainly gained through the teachers' daily practice of their profession. In Egypt, there are three main categorises of teachers' knowledge (educational knowledge, subject knowledge and cultural and social knowledge). These three types of knowledge are mainly gained through study (formal) and practice (practical). Subsequently, 'effective' professional development should aim to develop both formal and practical knowledge of teachers in the light of the teaching and learning culture, which is currently teacher-centred (see figure 1).

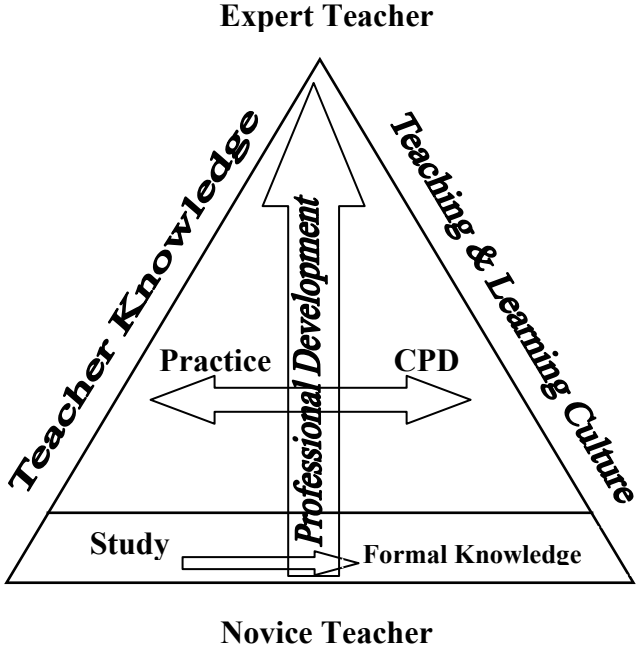

Figure 1. Model for the Development of Teacher Knowledge.

A novice teacher joins the community of practice and is willing to learn new knowledge in that community in order to develop his/her career. At this stage, he/she usually acts with an open mind to learn either from professional development courses and/or practice. When a newcomer becomes an old timer (expert), he/she starts to work within the community with more confidence in his/her skills that gained as a result of doing the job

for relatively long period through this journey from the novice to expert teachers, professional confidence is seen to be developed. Brown et al. (2003) point out that professional confidence is seen to be developmental, dynamic and complex.
A teacher's confidence in his/her **personal practical knowledge** grows day by day whatever their professional knowledge base. After a while, this confidence in the personal practical knowledge develops a kind of 'professional dignity'. On one hand, professional dignity is seen to be a factor that contributes to the teacher's performance, professional identity and self-image as a practitioner. On the other hand, professional dignity can block some reform efforts to the teachers' knowledge base. It is important to define what is meant by professional dignity. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word dignity means "a sense of your importance and values" and when someone "stand on your dignity" it means to demand to be treated with the respect that you think that you deserve. Subsequently, professional dignity can be defined as:

> "*a sense of self-respect, confidence and value to the experience that a practitioner has gained through practice.*"

This dignity is seen to be mainly developed in the aspects and skills that teachers gain through real practice. Subsequently, teachers value deeply their practical (professional) knowledge. In particular, they hold dear their educational knowledge and teaching methods which they use inside classrooms. For example, Yasmeen has been a science teacher for 19 years in a secondary school, she said:

> "*Teaching is a life, because I teach the science curriculum for long years and every year I teach it in a different way using different methods. Every year, I add new things and I face different situations which can be related to the curriculum and/or the students. Therefore, I consider the experience to be an essential part in teaching*."

During a teacher's professional development journey, they feel that their profession (educational knowledge) is similar to a building that they construct day by day based on their years of experience and their knowledge of the students and the subject matter. While a novice teacher (newcomer) needs to learn how to act in real situations, an expert teacher values his/her teaching experience. Therefore, some teachers think that it is only newcomers who need training to develop educational knowledge. For example, Khaleed is a math teacher who has 18 years experience, he said:

> "*In my view, the new teacher is the one who needs educational training courses (i.e. related to the teaching methods), but I'm an experienced teacher and I do not need these kind of courses because I have been teaching for a relatively long time. I believe that I gained and developed educational experience through these years of working inside classrooms. However, I need to develop my subject knowledge*."

However, an expert teacher also needs to know how to deal with new emerging problems that he/she encounters during practice. The majority of interviewees from teachers indicate that they prefer to have training mainly on the subject knowledge, i.e. they want to be taught up-to-date knowledge related to their own subjects (math and science). On the other hand, they believe that they do not need training in new pedagogies or teaching

methods (as they think they are already experts in them due to their long experience). For example, Mohand is teaching science in a secondary school for 18 years and he said:

> "*Old teacher (experienced) does not need training on teaching methods…As a teacher I want to know what is new in the subject knowledge and how can I simplify it for the students…The training programmes usually lead to change my subject knowledge."*

It is obvious that the expert teachers (a range 9-21 years in teaching, the sample of this study) develop a sense of self-respect, confidence and value toward their experience which can be described as 'professional dignity'. This professional dignity develops as a result of working in the classrooms with a variety of students for several years. This dignity comes to the surface when teachers face any kind of pressure to change their practice and their educational knowledge using pre-packaged and 'one-size-fits all' educational training programmes. Egypt like many other countries around the world faces the challenge to change the teaching and learning culture. In other words, the reform policy aims to change the role of teacher from a dispenser of information to become a guide and facilitator of students' learning. However, the professional dignity of teachers in Egypt is seen to adversely affect the benefits that teachers gain from educational professional development programmes. This dignity is seen to have an impact on teachers' attitudes not only by refusing to change their pedagogic strategies but also by viewing educational training programmes as ineffective and irrelevant to their work. Teachers refuse educational training programmes that aim to develop/change their teaching either directly or indirectly. Directly, typified by such comments as "*I've been teaching for 20 years, now someone comes to tell me how to teach!*" A teacher's comment on the idea of training on the new pedagogies.

The resistance to training on educational knowledge can be also be seen to act indirectly such as when a teacher joins the training but he/she participates with the idea that it is not really relevant to the reality in schools. Nada is a curriculum development expert and she leads some training courses via the National Network for Distance Training. These training courses focus on improving the educational knowledge of the teachers rather than the subject knowledge. She comments on the relevance of this kind of training courses to real problems that teachers face inside classrooms by saying the following:

> *"The teacher who benefits from the educational training courses is the one who is convinced about the importance of training. However, most teachers consider the educational training courses as irrelevant to their real practice. Therefore, they come to the training with this negative image in their mind about educational training courses and as a result they don't benefit from them"*

However, this is not the case with subject knowledge, which is also part of the professional development in Egypt. The subject knowledge enhancement is considered by Egyptian teachers to be the most important outcome gain from training programmes. This is seen to be a result of the teacher-centred approach, which is very common in the country. Because of using this approach, the students, for example, expect the teacher to be competent in their subject knowledge and able to answer any questions or problems they have. Subsequently, when the teacher realises that there is changes and/or new knowledge particularly in relation to the subject knowledge, he/she becomes open-

minded regardless of their experience. This can be interpreted as teachers understand that the subject knowledge (math and science) always changes and develops and some new problems or issues might emerge (e.g. new curricula). In addition, teachers think that unlike educational knowledge, subject knowledge is not mainly gained through everyday practice but rather it is gained though professional development programmes, readings and consulting subject experts and so forth. Subsequently, teachers feel that unawareness and/or misunderstanding of this new subject knowledge might threaten their professional image and reputation. Fadia, a science school inspector (31 years experience), notes that the majority of science teachers in the schools compete to participate in the training courses that provides them with up-to-date subject knowledge and deepens their knowledge of science. This kind of training according to her point of view:

> *"…is very important for teachers because it enables science teachers to master their subject. As a result, teachers can keep their own position and their good image inside classroom."*

Similarly, Ali, a school inspector (24 years experience), reveals the reasons that promote teachers to have training on subject knowledge as he mentions that:

> *"Providing teachers with new subject knowledge enables them to become models for the students and increase the students trust and confidence in their teacher. Because the student usually expect the teacher to give him/her the correct and immediate answer to any question or problem he/she faces."*

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although teachers, as practitioners, are keen to develop their professional expertise, they value their experience which they build through years of working inside classrooms. Accordingly, teachers go to professional development programmes with their development priorities which change according to their position in the profession trajectory (see Berliner, 2001). While, teachers move from novices to experts, the development priorities start to be mainly focused on developing subject knowledge. Subsequently, they believe that while subject knowledge can be gained through different sources e.g. CPD, readings etc., educational knowledge can be mainly gained only through practice. Although it is a fact that practice is an important factor in acquiring educational knowledge, it should not be the only source for it. As a result, an assumption of acquiring educational knowledge almost exclusively through practice might become a problem that faces educational reform, because this practice exists in a specific teaching and learning culture. Therefore, knowledge which is transferred through practice reflects the characteristics of that culture which itself might need reform.

Professional development programmes should be planned on the basis of a balance between the teachers' needs and the reform goals. Accordingly, teachers' experience should be valued and taken into consideration in the planning process by involving them in the planning of CPD programmes. Therefore, continuous mutual collaboration between teachers as practitioners and school inspectors, academics, researchers and policy makers should be encouraged. This collaboration should aim to bridge the gab between practice and theory and between reality and innovative reform plans. This collaboration will enable training experts to talk to teachers from a tangible practical ground that can lead to convincing teachers to change their everyday practice. In

addition, teachers will feel and understand that their experiences are valued by training experts and their professional development needs are considered. Furthermore, teachers should be working as a community during CPD programmes in order to enable them to examine and evaluate their own practice, on the one hand, and to enable them to identify "successful" practice, on the other. This requires a training expert to play different roles such as model, guide and facilitator rather than a dispenser of knowledge.

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A pernicious habit or a nobler way to truth?

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Thinking is the great enemy of perfection. The habit of profound reflection … is the most pernicious of all the habits formed by civilized man. (Conrad 1920)

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest (Confucius).

How does one learn to be a reflective practitioner?

Reflection in distance education should be instrumental in establishing a community of learning; in creating both ownership of learning and a sense of belonging to the university; in creating new knowledge about both the academic subject concerned and how to learn and teach within it.

However such a 'tendency' is not necessarily an innate characteristic – reflection has to be practised and rehearsed in order to be effective. The more it is practised consciously, the better we become at carrying it out and the more likely we are to carry it out sub-consciously as well. What is not often admitted is that it is no easy matter to engage students in meta-cognition. In developing materials to support those involved in the Global Campus at Middlesex University we chose a multi-faceted approach (including induction workshops and Toolkits) in which we could offer support, advice and development to four different groups of stakeholders in the project:

- Tutors
- Students
- Authors and reviewers
- Managers

Within this project we saw reflection as a group purpose which would benefit all members of the learning project. To this end, reflection was part of each of the Toolkits we wrote and featured in the workshops and induction materials as well as being built into the learning experiences of the students.

However, it is difficult to gauge to what extent reflection is undertaken, whether willingly or otherwise. Although students are encouraged to use their Learning Journals throughout their programmes, to date these have not become part of their assessed work. All four Toolkits are structured in work-book fashion and have reflection built into the materials but we do not know to what extent they are used after the initial workshops by authors, tutors and managers. In the case of our students, one recent survey which looked at 53 presentations of a variety of modules, found that 'the learning journal was simply ignored by 90% of the students' (Dafoulas 2005).

The tutors, in most cases, are already employed as academics by our overseas partners. We are asking them to teach through a different mode and in a language which may not be their first language. Reflection may not be part of the natural way in which they work within their culture or part of their preferred learning style. As Macfarlane states:

> Reflective practice has become a modern mantra used to express the responsibility of professionals, including teachers in higher education, to adopt an open attitude and invest effort in the improvement of practice. However, meeting this requirement represents a considerable challenge to many lecturers …. (Macfarlane 2004: 95-96).

The students are often studying post-graduate programmes and are in employment and may also not be used to undertaking reflection as part of their learning. They may not see the value of reflection either as part of their learning about their subject or as a transferable skill. To them it may be just something extra that they are asked to do and it may be seen as dispensable.

The authors are usually busy academics also carrying a heavy teaching load while some are external consultants specially recruited to write just one module. They are often grappling to come to terms with the requirements of preparing distance education materials within our template. To a certain extent they are prepared to reflect on the feedback received from students after a module has run (and they have to deal with feedback from reviewers of the materials) but they are not always willing to build reflection into their everyday practice. This, we hope, will change as a result of an increasing number of staff having undertaken our Post-Graduate Certificate in Higher Education.

The managers are also busy; they are academics with teaching and research responsibilities as well and depending on their involvement in the project they may only be managing one module as part of a larger programme. Those higher up in the organisation, whether at Middlesex University or in our overseas partners, will also have other wider responsibilities. So if we are going to ask members of these groups to undertake systematic reflection we have to be clear in our own minds as to why they should do it and be able to make this rationale very clear to them. We need to be able to answer the question 'What's in it for me?' when they ask it and also encourage those involved to be interested enough to even ask it. In other words, to reflect on the importance of reflection.

Working in difficult circumstances – low resource, difficult terrain. How can we improve?

The Global Campus project was set up in 1999 as a vehicle for delivering e-learning programmes within our University's School of Computing Science. Since then more than 1000 students have studied using its blended e-learning model. Those students were mainly on two master programmes delivered in four different countries overseas following programmes identical to those delivered on campus on the UK. In Global Campus we are providing what the QAA calls 'Learning Supported Locally' in that we are the

> '… providing institution employing persons specifically to undertake certain defined functions for the local support of students following the programme' (QAA 1999)

with tutoring provided by the local institution. The model is based on a mixture of a physical learning package, an on-line learning environment and some face-to-face tutorials.

To a large extent when Global Campus was established we were working in unknown terrain since Middlesex University was only at the beginning of developing its distance provision. In order to facilitate the start we decided to make the best use of our expertise in campus based tuition – offering our most successful courses and the ones which we thought would attract partner institutions. This involved a steep learning curve for all involved – students, authors, tutors and managers particularly the authors who were for the most part already employed by Middlesex University as academics but were not used to authoring distance education materials. The managers, too had little or no experience of distance education/e-learning and was what involved – particularly in terms of time and resourcing.

How does a commitment to reflective practice influence the way we handle everyday issues?

In particular we have placed particular stress on the development of our authors and the use of SCATE – a pedagogical template based on the Dick and Carey Instructional Design Model (1978). SCATE encourages reflection through the interlinking of its five sections – Scope, content, activities, thinking and extra – by the authors. They are encouraged to begin authoring by developing learning outcomes and the activities that go along with them and then linking these to the other sections. The use of the learning journals falls within the section *thinking* as do group online discussions. Earlier modules simply used to mention the journals at the end, asking students to make general comments on their learning. Now they are specifically requested to comment on their learning about specified concepts or after named activities but as already mentioned, they still do not seem to be doing so.

E-learning offers the opportunity to provide learning situations previously only available in face-to-face situations such as small group work and discussions and also to offer new experiences such as peer review of ongoing work. This not only opens up to students the opportunity to develop social skills, including the skill of collaborative working, but also offers them new ways of creating knowledge through what Marton and Booth call 'social constructivism' (Richardson, 1999: 55). We see the learning journals as part of this, but obviously the students do not and my own experience as an online tutor would indicate that they are not unusual in this.

How can quality thinking be stimulated within practitioners in Distance Education?

All stakeholders involved in distance education require support and we have taken a multi-faceted approach to providing this support through the development of a package of four interlinked Toolkits written specifically for the four groups named above. Each of the groups has specific needs which we had to address but in many cases the needs mirrored each other or were linked. All four Toolkits were designed to be interactive and

to model good practice. As well as being used on an individual basis they have been used as the basis for face-to-face workshops. In the past this has been written about as 'the four-pronged approach' but this implies four publications in parallel whereas they are, in reality, interlinked (Haynes et al 2004).

E-learning: a study guide

Students bring with them their own conceptions of both learning and the subject they have chosen to study. The study guide is designed in part to manage their expectations as they learn to navigate through SCATE and through the learning materials; establish relationships with their tutor and with their peer group; develop an understanding of their subject and develop learner autonomy. As well as helping the students manage their expectations, the study guide is designed to assist them in developing both their study skills and their skills with the technology. It is designed to help them to:

- Consider the process of their own learning and therefore develop metacognition
- Critically review their own behaviour or their work or manner of working
- Build new theories
- Engage in personal and self-development
- Make decisions about their learning
- Resolve uncertainties in their thinking about the course content or about their future
- Empower or emancipate themselves as individuals or within the context of their social group

(Adapted from Moon 1999:23)

So despite our best efforts it would seem that we have yet to convince them that this is a worthwhile activity. While we see the value in developing skills for life-long learning, they seem to be taking the short-term view of learning associated with their subject, programme and the related assessment. However, it is possible that they will return to reflecting on their learning at a later date or maybe reflecting but not at the times at which we are building it into their modules.

E-learning: A Tutor Guide

The tutor Toolkit offers interactive advice on facilitating learning online and supporting students as they progress through the module. As discussed, it is supported by workshops in the country of delivery. It aims to build on the existing skills and experience of the tutors and contains many activities to encourage reflection and 'white space' so that it can be used as a note-book. It can be seen as part of the provision of staff development for them in that it addresses their espoused theories as opposed to their theories in use. The way in which we do this is by 'challenging their assumptions' of what it means to be a university teacher and to interact with students in an online learning environment (Eraut, 1997: p45). By learning how to reflect on their practice and make use of those reflections the tutors develop the ability to adapt to any situation they may face in their teaching career – it is learning for life-long teaching.

Again, interactions with tutors from overseas would indicate that they are more concerned with the mechanics of tutoring online and being able to facilitate student learning than they are with reflecting on their own practice. This may not be surprising

since they are mostly new to their role and if reflection is not part of their concept of professional practice they may not see it as a way in which they can support their development.

E-learning: an authoring and reviewing guide

This Toolkit is designed to make explicit sound pedagogical theory in online learning and to encourage the authors to make their materials interactive using a mainly constructivist approach supported by the SCATE template. This provides the underpinning for the advice given to both tutors and students, leading the students into ownership of the module concepts and fostering autonomous, deep learning. Writing distance learning materials is a skilled art and not the easier task of simply reproducing lecture notes that some people may believe it to be. This often comes as a shock to people attempting it for the first time. Authors often experience a steep learning curve or what Ann Barnes terms 'an unlearning curve: that is, they are forced to abandon some frequently very strongly held preconceptions' (Barnes 1998:190).

Apart from the time that must be invested, there is the realisation that existing materials may need considerable re-working, if not re-writing, in order to be pedagogically accessible as distance learning materials, particularly e-learning materials. Ensuring that the materials are interactive and engage the learner is a major challenge. So authors of distance education materials are not just providing subject matter but are structuring a learning experience for the students while also guiding tutors and expanding their role as teacher. It is the author's role to

> '… lead and engage the student in active learning with reflection, application and self-assessment built in to each chunk of learning materials' (Haynes and Anagnostopoulou, 2002: 64).

At the same time we encourage the authors to reflect for themselves on their own practice, concepts and beliefs about distance education, if not education as a whole. If, as Wubbels and Korthagen state, "One has a reflective attitude if one displays a tendency to develop or alter mental structures, thus indicating an orientation towards one's professional growth" (1990:32), then we could claim that we have had some success in encouraging our authors to reflect on their practice. We have seen the construction of the learning materials develop and improve over the years based on feedback from both reviewers of materials and the end-users.

E-learning: a manager's guide

Managers involved in online distance education may be managing at different levels in the organisation from module leader to Dean of the School. In our case, some of them are the managers working for our overseas partners. They will be involved in managing different areas such as:

- Curriculum
- Human resources
- Resources and finance
- Marketing, recruitment and retention
- Computing software and hardware.

In order to facilitate the management of course production the university has its own Guidelines on Distance Education and a Good Practice Guide which takes course developers through the whole process in chronological order and is designed to be a quality assurance mechanism to benefit both students and staff. The Toolkit aims to assist managers in establishing quality management and mechanisms that support continuous improvement.

Managers of online and e-learning are often at the fore front, managing change. They need to have a clear understanding of the forces driving that change, such as widening participation or increasing market share. At the same time they must ensure that they keep firm control of the quality of provision as well. Both sets of managers will need to make hard business decisions about investing in resources, physical space and staff training. For them, reflection is important as a method of learning and developing knowledge about management which they can build on in their careers and share with others.

The managers have not yet attended any specific workshops linked to e-learning so we are as yet unable to judge to what extent they have come to terms with the reflection that we have built into their Toolkit and hopefully, eventually, their practice.

How can reflective practice impact on the learning organisation?

At Middlesex University we believe that reflective practice can enhance the quality of education given to our students and the professional development of our staff. By doing this we also aim to develop a learning approach to the development of distance education/e-learning within an organisation where all members are constantly reflecting on their practice in order to improve. This links directly to our concept of quality in e-learning and, within that concept, the notion of support as a quality issue as exemplified by the Quality Assurance Agency's statement in its guidelines on Distance Learning that

In respect of students taught at a distance, a providing institution should give explicit attention to its responsibility for supporting and promoting autonomous learning and enabling learners to take personal control of their own development. QAA (guideline 4: accessed 20/10/03)

Reflection: the noblest way to wisdom

It was to be hoped that by building in reflection for all parties engaged in the practice of distance education they might all learn wisdom by the noblest method. In taking the four-pronged approach and offering guidance on reflection to all stakeholders in the distance learning project, as well as building it directly into the student learning experience; the onus was on us to underpin student support and organisational learning. We hoped that in this way we could provide a quality educational experience which the students would value and we could build on previous successes in the areas of student retention and achievement. Obviously our next task is to convince the stakeholders in this project that Conrad's cynical view applies only to casual, muddle-headed thinking and that carefully planned and well-structured reflection is, as Confucious asserts, a noble way to wisdom.

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Open learning, its acceptability through innovative evaluation and research in the less developed countries

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Introduction

The very fact that Open Learning and Distance Education (OLDE) is growing fast and that many more countries have adopted this system of education in different forms, specially in the past three decades, proves that OLDE has come to stay. In Asia alone, over 20 Open Universities are functioning, presently serving millions of deprived, but otherwise seriously interested adults.

As desired, and rightly so, OLDE is gaining ground mostly in the developing countries where the need is greater. After introduction of OLDE in large scale, what has surfaced is the question – why are the graduates of Open Universities not acceptable by employers and others in the same way as are those from traditional universities? Are the former not caring for quality or are the curricula of these institutions not appropriately designed, or are even the younger ones among the graduates not serious enough to compete with those from the latter?

Just as two examples, the following cases will reveal lack of proper recognition of degrees through distance education.

a) One female school teacher with a BEd obtained in distance education system from Rajshahi University of Bangladesh (through Bangladesh Institute of DE) was not considered equivalent to BEds from traditional system; she was appointed an Assistant / Junior Teacher at the Bangladesh International School, Riyadh while her colleagues with the same degree from the traditional system were appointed Teacher (with other qualifications and experience remaining the same). This was in 1998.

b) One MS (in Information and Library Sci) from a US university through distance education was not given the same status as those from conventional universities with the same degree. Out of six such professionals in his department, the other five were given one rank senior to him. This was in 1990.

Bangladesh perspective

Through the establishment of Bangladesh Open University in 1992 (that is, about twenty years after the founding of the Open University in UK), open learning has found a new boost. Prior to this, distance education in some form existed since the sixties through Bangladesh Institute of Distance Education (BIDE), basically for degrees in Education for secondary school teachers.

Bangladesh Open University has now registered enrolment of over 400,000 students including those of the Open School and is aimed to expand all levels of education,

knowledge and science by a diversity of means, including the use of communication technology to improve the quality of education. These will also provide opportunities for education to the general public – like working adults, women, school dropouts, and all levels of learners - anytime anywhere. Already, in about ten years, 19,500 learners have graduated from BOU. Highly qualified teachers are now available at BOU. Though most of them have been educated in the conventional education system themselves, their dedication to transform less educated or deprived people in large numbers into a higher educated and skilled workforce within a minimum time towards overall development of the country is like a commitment to nation-building. Efforts are to be made in creating and searching for a pool of educators and specialists with degrees or orientations in the open learning system itself.

The University operates through six academic Schools or Faculties, 10 administrative or supporting divisions, 12 Regional Resource Centres, 80 Local Study Centres, 800 Tutorial Centres spread all over the country. Twenty-one formal programmes and 19 non-formal programmes are active now in this public university. Degrees, Diplomas, Certificates are awarded, also with provision for some non-credit courses as part of continuing education, including trainings in vocational, technical and motivational works.

Evaluation

It has to be explored by all concerned how best and to what extent we could consider evaluation as a means of acceptability in relation to the courses and the graduates who are usually measured through the examination system. It is through regular evaluation, complemented by required research and survey, that quality education or training can be imparted to develop human resources and to build their capacity.

Based on different evaluations, innovative but practical measures have to be adopted, mostly taking into view the local context which varies from place to place, from facilities to facilities. Users of print media, for example, may keep themselves away from involvement in the digital environment. Being internet savvy does not fulfil everything, unless the targeted learners have acquired necessary skill and are blessed with the ICT facilities.

For proper evaluation, adequate research is to be conducted from time to time, based on experiments carried out elsewhere. These must see that appropriate educational technology is diffused in the developing countries too, where feasibility analysis in the initial stage becomes necessary for many newly initiated programmes.

Methods of evaluation that could guarantee quality

Based on elaborate research and survey, all evaluation processes need to be targeted for two main objectives:

- Are the courses properly prepared – in print or audio or video or multi-media?
- Have the designers looked into the problems of the adult learners, most of whom are part-timers here, and otherwise pre-occupied in various professions for their day-to-day living?

In any evaluation, since the learners are mature and supposedly more responsible than those receiving formal education, opinions and comments from some randomly selected learners should be conducted before embarking on new courses and curricula and before undertaking revision of some courses. It is not the writers or authors of instructional materials alone or the researchers themselves who should evaluate, but it should be for the learners also to provide feedback. Research must initiate more quantitative and qualitative analysis of issues and facts and indicate ways to base new methodologies and programmes for implementation in OLDE system.

In Bangladesh,

a) Evaluation of learners on their performance is normally made at the end of the two semesters (January-June and July-December) per year through examinations.
b) Evaluation of courses and curriculum is not held on a regular basis. Occasional reviews by internal and external assessment are carried out once a year or in two years or more.
c) Evaluation of tutors and instructors is basically made through Faculty or through group discussions, questionnaires, and annual confidential reports of staff performance.

In open learning, research and evaluation (R&E) are more vital than in conventional learning as the former has to cover innovative ideas and practices, often with new technology. In the specialized production and distribution of learning materials such as publications, audio-visuals or multi media, expensive revisions often become necessary, based on thorough research and careful evaluation. In failing to do so, quality of open learning as a whole has to suffer.

Research both in the theoretical aspects and in practical situations, as well as in the available literature that has grown over the last four decades and specially in recent years, led to the massive spread of open learning beyond estimate. With the wide application of ICT and online or e-learning through the adoption of computer mediated technology (CMT) in the past few years, it has become all the more easy, fast and efficient in some places to approach otherwise unreachable millions.

However, many recipients in the less developed countries cannot yet benefit adequately for lack of hi-tech facilities that require major initial investment. Very few people there can afford – financially and technically - even personal computers and fewer still can have easy access to the internet. In Bangladesh, for example, learners or registered students in the OLDE system could hope for some facilities only in the limited regional resource centres, and not even in the study centres, not to speak of individual's homes or workplaces. Most of them have to depend heavily on print media and at best on audio and video tapes. Half-an-hour or a little more time of daily broadcast or telecast via national radio and television channels for these open learning programmes cannot be enough for the large number of courses in various disciplines. Tutors and study centres become their other resources.

Both print-based and non-print based delivery technology are followed in Bangladesh, the former mode still being used in greater volume. Out of a total 230 courses offered in 2002, only 20 were by non-print based delivery technology. However, the trend is to make more use of the latter.

Until 2002, course materials produced by the six Schools of BOU totalled 230; these were distributed over a two-terms period (January-June and July-December) through the 12 Regional Resource Centres which in turn have close liaison with 80 Local Study Centres, spread all over the country. The following data shows non-print based delivery technology for distance education in 2002:

Number of Courses offered (and percentage of the total courses):
through audio-cassette …… 20 (= 8.7%)
through videotape ……..10 (= 4.3%)
through television programmes of 40 minutes daily ……..81 (= 35.2%)
through radio programmes of 20 minutes daily .. ……..76 (= 33%)
through computer managed learning (CML) and
computer aided learning (CAL)……22 (=6.5%)
through e-mail list ……16 (= 7%)
through teleconferencing ……..5 (= 2.1%).

The distribution system followed in common is through the postal delivery and private or public transportation means.

Access to major study centres is quite common with a large section of the learners residing in the neighbourhood, not by all though.

Access to the Internet or telecommunication is yet to grow for most of the learners. It may be noted that until 2000, there was no use of e-mail, CAL and teleconferencing. In that first year of such use at BOU, of the 20 courses offered thus, through the use of e-mail was 5.4% (increased to 7% in 2002), through CML / CAL was 6.3% (which increased to 9.6% in 2002), and through teleconferencing was 2.4%.

BOU's adoption of online technology and web-based learning is in progress, flawed often by financial and technical constraints.

Evaluation re-stressed

Supplementary teachers' guides or handbooks together with sample questionnaires for re-assessment of courses and course materials are to be prepared by the open universities, in collaboration with field workers and researchers. These tutors, in turn, may find out from their students their ratings on a particular unit of instruction 'in terms of its interest, perceived relevance or usefulness, level of difficulty, etc.'

Evaluation may also be required to make comparisons between workload, use of course components, and other feedback from students particularly related to their problems 'with key concepts, ideas and relationships'. All these evaluations contribute to the subsequent useful and sustaining revision of the course materials by the writers.

Depending on time, resources (human, financial, technical or infrastructural), tutorial or assignment arrangements, or evaluative information provided by all concerned, periodic evaluation of courses, instructors and learners in a regular way will enable successful implementation of the results of these tests and ultimately improve the quality of open learning and distance education.

To sum up, evaluation of the courses as well as of the tutors and concerned parties must take place 'constantly, thoroughly and effectively' by the students, tutors themselves, and experts. The results of such evaluations should be communicated to the interested groups, reviewed and implemented by the quickest time before new practices, procedures or methods are considered. Researches are to be carried out as a continuous process to gather all relevant and authentic information from evaluations and practices and to pass those on to all concerned for early implementation, ultimately to contribute to the overall improvement of the quality of open learning and distance education.

Preparation of printed materials and their distribution

OLDE systems stress the need for making available high quality, well-produced printed materials and means of effective correspondence. In preparing these, special skills, including evaluation of all activities and programmes at various stages, are to be developed for distance learning.

Again, the best and the most helpful books and reading materials are not easy to find, as books are not always professionally published, although some of the titles are well written. Publishing in the modern and effective way has to be achieved. Some of these publications could be used very well by other traditional institutions, as in the case of those from the UK Open University Press. How soon and how timely the publications could reach the target audience will depend on how modern the distribution system of the university or institution is. Guidebooks, in addition to basic textbooks, are often used for distance education, sometimes separately for learners and vast number of tutors who are located all over the country and many of whom may not have exclusive basic training in open learning or distance education. Sufficient funds – from domestic and external sources - could make it possible to meet infrastructural needs as well as ICT facilities to move to advanced and faster systems.

In the effective delivery of printed materials or paper copies to millions of learners all over a country in the quickest time, other agencies have to extend cooperation. Be it through postal agencies or courier services or transport companies, the finished products have to reach the learners on a regular and timely basis. In distance education, distribution of instruction materials remains an important factor. Course materials, including course outlines, lecture notes in addition to proper books, should be well-formatted to make these suitable for adult distance learners. In the production and printing of course materials and other publications, adequate care is to be taken to make these distance learner-friendly.

It is through the quality and effectiveness of recorded or written materials that the success of the course and its impact on the distance learners and teachers will depend. And, as indicated elsewhere, specially in countries or places where the application of ICT is not yet popular or feasible, these 'printed' or 'published' materials can continue to be used in many places by learners and instructors alike. Evaluation of such instruction materials and the feedback from the recipients for minimum modifications and amendments should be provided at regular intervals.

Course materials at the preparatory stage must be peer reviewed in an objective and critical way, finally to make it acceptable to the authors for revision. Anonymity of these 'impartial' experts should be maintained for proper evaluation or re-assessment of the

course materials that would be used by distance learners often for a considerable period of time. Evaluation can also be by colleagues and some intended students, specially regarding the content, style of writing, accuracy, appropriateness and presentation of the printed materials. All such materials by writers, authors and reviewers should also be professionally handled and processed by educational and academic editors and publishers. High quality publications could also be adopted for courses outside the OLDE system. And that would often become a contribution of OLDE to the development of education as a whole.

Evaluation of such printed materials from users and creators, as well as from reviewers and critics, should be done as frequently as feasible. Research and evaluation can guide on new approaches and new models.

Correspondence courses or face-to-face sessions for Tutors

How is it that in order to save expenses, time and space and other features of the advantages of open learning with everything possible really 'open', we have to arrange frequent face-to-face sessions for Tutors. Would that not be self-defeating?
Could this be encountered as much as possible, by maximizing flexibility and by avoiding the culture of fostering personal relationship through face-to-face contacts unless these become absolutely necessary? We have to accept the bitter truth that traditional mode of education can hardly be substituted by distance learning and that the latter has many limitations and hence cannot match the former in all respects. Therefore, the need becomes greater for further innovation (through application of ICTs or CMCs or through improved 'published' materials or correspondences, etc.), its implementation, and then its evaluation and continuous research to make OLDE acceptable, standard and of high quality. Nothing short of recognition of the Degrees in paper and in practice by both the public and the private sectors will obviate frustrations of the open learners which may grow sooner than later.

Tutors' evaluation or re-assessment or re-testing would again be a continuous process, an essential part towards improvement of quality. The very concept of open learning should not be missed by arranging too frequent and too many face-to-face sessions. On the contrary, efforts are to be made, researched and innovated as to how distance learning systems are to be maximized and to be kept unique from conventional sessions or face-to-face teaching or discussions even for Tutors themselves.

Collaborative programmes

In addition to the numerous non-governmental organizations working in the developing countries, the international organizations like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, etc. should step in with financial and technical help while bodies like the UNESCO, COL, UK OU, IGNOU, etc. should extend academic and expertise support. In their turn, the recipient countries should work harder to implement OLDE to the furthest corners of the country, matching with the concept of virtual universities when ICT facilities would be available in abundance. Alternatively, with the mission of attaining basic education for all, and higher education for the maximum, more Open Schools and Open Universities should be established, some of which should be in the private sector with technical and academic support from appropriate agencies home and abroad. These, in turn, will contribute to the alleviation of poverty through removal of illiteracy, narrowing

of gender gap, and increase in higher skilled human resources. Once these root causes are addressed by education, like OLDE, 'underdeveloped' or 'less developed' countries should rise to 'developing' countries in the true sense.

For the less developed regions, it is suggested that more attention be paid simultaneously to the semi-traditional practices of open and distance learning, such as via printed materials, correspondences, taped audios and videos, radio and television networks until the wide availability of ICT or online facilities providing e-learning, e-conferencing, concept of virtual universities and the like. Evaluation strategies or research measures have to be designed accordingly.

Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the main objectives of open learning is to create opportunities for the target learners to receive education and training at their own pace and convenience. Another is to acquire this in a high quality, to make it compatible with the one received from conventional methods.

In the improvement of quality education to OLDE in the developing countries, such as in Bangladesh and other countries in the region, collaborative learning through partners and alliances will create wider scope. To receive recognition or acceptance of OLDE-qualified learners and their credentials, more involvement of planners and decision-makers would be desired, apart from improving on the quality of education itself, by well-researched courses, thoroughly- evaluated instructors and properly-designed teaching materials.

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Management of Student Support at Study Centres: the case of the Diploma in Primary Education (DPE) by distance mode

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Introduction

When the first cohort of 600 students enrolled on the Diploma in Primary Education (DPE) programme by distance in December 1999 , all the learner support activities including the distribution of learning materials, processing written assignments and tests for marking, returning marked assignments to learners and arranging residential sessions were all centrally done from the Centre for Continuing Education, (CCE), University of Botswana. By December 2000 when the second intake of another 600 students came in, managing learner support services centrally had become a nightmare.

First, sorting the 21,000 assignments, and tests generated by the first cohort for marking, and keeping up- to- date students records was becoming a daunting task for the thin support staff available at the CCE who were also servicing other University part time programmes. Secondly, College coordinators and tutors had to abandon their duties to come to the University regularly to tutor and help with management of the residential sessions. By the beginning of 2001, it was evident that colleges of education had to be more directly involved in the management of the learner support system on the DPE programme by distance mode. Decentralizing learner support to colleges would give learners access to fellow learners, in organized seminars and tutorials, (Thorpe 2001), and enable then to accesses library resources.

This paper focuses on the management of the decentralized learner support services for the DPE programme. It starts by tracing teacher training/upgrading initiatives by distance mode in Botswana since the 1960s to the present and provides the rationale and objectives for launching the DPE by distance mode teacher upgrading programme for serving primary school teachers. It also gives a brief description of the delivery mode, and analyses the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder in the management learner support services for this programme. Finally, the paper addresses the challenges and constraints that the programme has experienced since its inception five years ago.

Teacher Training/Upgrading Initiatives by Distance Mode in Botswana

One of the earliest teacher training programmes by distance mode in Botswana dates back to 1960 when the then Bechuanaland Protectorate and the Rhodesian government in what is currently known as Zimbabwe embarked on a teacher training programme by correspondence studies to elevate academic and professional qualifications of untrained teachers to the Elementary Teachers' Certificate level. By 1965 when this programme came to a close, it had demonstrated the potential of distance education, as a viable alternative for training teachers. Following the success of this programme, the ministry of education launched the Francistown, teacher upgrading experiment, (1968-1973), which upgraded about 700 teachers by 1973 (Jones, 1979).

Since that time, there have been other teacher training initiatives via the distance mode in Botswana. Between 1982-2002, the University of Botswana embarked on a programme to train adult literacy teachers for the Department of Non Formal Education, Ministry of Education, to combat illiteracy, among rural communities and within disadvantaged urban areas. After 20 years, this programme was phased out in 2002, and replaced with the Diploma in Adult Education in accordance with the changing socio-economic needs and staff development requirements of the country. Due to logistical considerations, the learner support services for these two programmes have been provided centrally at the University of Botswana.

Rationale for Launching the DPE programme by Distance Mode

In a bid to improve the standards of education from the grassroots to the tertiary level, the government of Botswana, through Recommendation 100(a) of the Revised National Policy on Education of 1994, requires all primary school teachers to have a diploma as the minimum qualification. Towards this end, policy recommendation 104(b) of the (RNPE) of 1994 requires all existing primary teacher certificate holders to be upgraded to the diploma level, through either full time or part time studies.

The first upgrading initiative, started by enrolling Primary Teacher Certificate (PTC) holders on the existing pre-service conventional teacher training programme offered in the four colleges of primary education. However, these colleges could enroll only 40 of the existing 9000 or more PTC holders per annum. Through simple calculations, it was evident that it would have taken well over 200 years to upgrade the existing PTC holders to the diploma level through the conventional mode. Secondly, even if the capacity in colleges could accommodate larger numbers, the PTC holders who are the backbone of primary education in Botswana could not be released from their duties for prolonged periods without causing adverse repercussions to the education system. In 1996, the Ministry of Education formally requested the CCE to put together a teacher training programme by distance mode for upgrading primary school teachers, (Ramatsui, 1996).

This four year part time diploma programme is the same as its three year pre-service counterpart. Like its pre-service counterpart, distance students are admitted to the programme by the Ministry of Education and registered in colleges of primary education as bona fide students of those colleges. By December 2004, the programme had 2400 learners in four cohorts. The first intake is at different levels of completion, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Completion status for the 1st intake of 600 students by Dec. 2004.

College	Complete	In-complete	Withdrawn (dropouts)	Initial Intake
Lobatse College of Education	51	75	24	**150**
Francistown College of Education	79	55	16	**150**
Serowe College of Education	61	59	30	**150**
Tlokweng College of Education	71	50	29	**150**
TOTALS	**262**	**239**	**99**	**600**

Source: Makobo, C. (Feb. 2005) Interim Report of the status of first cohort of Dec. 1999.

Programme objectives

The objectives of the programme are to:

- Upgrade serving primary school teachers to the diploma level without withdrawing them from their duties;
- Raise the standards and performance of primary school teachers by improving their academic and professional qualifications;
- Improve the quality of education in primary schools by enabling the upgrading teachers to apply the knowledge, skills and techniques acquired in the classroom simultaneously;
- Open a new avenue of career advancement and promotion for primary school teachers by giving them further training;
- Help teachers to develop a small library and other teaching resources for their own use.

Programme Delivery

The mode of delivery is mainly printed modules supported by audio cassette tapes and face to face tutorials. Learners receive study materials prior to residential sessions so that they can read and prepare themselves for tutorials. The content comprises of eleven teaching subjects and two general subjects, a research project and teaching practice. Each of the teaching subjects including Communications Study Skills is divided into four modules except for Education which is divided into eight modules

In the first year of study, students take the first module in each of the eleven teaching subjects, (Maths, Science, English, Setswana, Religious Studies, Social Sciences, Physical Education, Music, Art, design and craft, Agriculture and Home Economics), module one in Communication and Study Skills and modules one and two in Education. Specialisation starts from the second module in the teaching subjects. All students take Communication and Study Skills and Education through out the course. Each module is assessed through two assignments, a test and examination. Students also do a research project starting from their third year of study and submit a Teaching Assignment Portfolio in lieu of teaching practice, in the fourth year.

Responsibilities of stakeholders

In order to oversee, monitor and regulate all the activities of this programme, the collaborators put together an interim Advisory Committee, with membership from various departments within the Ministry of Education, University of Botswana and representation from the Teachers' Union. The Advisory Committee operates under the following terms of reference:

- To monitor the development of the DPE programme by distance mode;
- To determine and plan the involvement of stakeholders in the implementation of the programme and advise on students intake and admission;
- To identify and develop/interpret policy for the distance education programme and make recommendations;
- To review budgets for the programme and recommend them to the ministry of education;

- To identify support services required for the programme and recommend strategies to be put in place;
- To advise the Ministry of Education on areas that need to be investigated to support and promote implementation of the programme;
- To identify other service providers to support the programme;
- To determine whether the programme would be formatively or summatively evaluated.

More specifically the two stakeholders defined their roles as follows.

The Role of the University of Botswana

The University of Botswana is responsible for materials development, production and distribution, recruitment and training of part time writers, editors, tutors and markers, majority of who come from colleges of education. The University is also responsible for organizing and monitoring logistics for residential sessions including the scheduling, supervising the facilitation of the assessment items setting processes and marking of assignments, tests and examination. As the accrediting body, the University also maintains an oversight of quality assurance of this programme.

In the day to day operations the University is required to:

- develop, produce, distribute, and review distance learning materials;
- recruit, train, appoint and supervise all materials development, production and programme delivery staff, which include writers, content reviewers, language editors, tutors and markers, including support staff;
- plan, establish, and manage a comprehensive learner support services system, including regional study centres;
- organise, manage, and supervise learner support activities, including scheduling, monitoring, and supervising face-to-face tutorials and residential sessions;
- establish assessment systems and coordinate, manage and supervise assessment processes, including item setting, administration of assessment, and marking processes and procedures;
- maintain quality of standards by putting together rigorous quality assurance systems for regulating materials development, production and review mechanisms;
- set up, coordinate and monitor learner assessment processes and procedures;
- moderate and validate results of the programme through various quality assurance University committees;
- prepare budgets, and account for expenditure, and payment of all part-time staff;
- Monitor the provision of academic advisement and guidance and counselling support given to learners;
- Provide overall management and administration of the programme teaching/learning system and regional learner support services.

The major set back for the University in materials development and production involved delays in the development of learning materials, where course writers and content reviewers did not deliver as scheduled citing heavy workloads in their places of work. The most affected subjects were maths, science and practical subjects, except for music

where it was initially very difficult to find writers and content editor. This constraint delayed other programmed activities on the programme.

The Role of the Ministry of Education

In addition to financing the materials development, production and distribution processes, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the recruitment, admission and registration of students in colleges of education and financing students support during residential sessions. The Ministry also purchases the required textbooks and other reference materials and places it in strategic reading places using its decentralized network of primary, junior and senior secondary schools. Through its regional network of Education Centers and regional inspectorate offices, the Ministry of Education distributes study materials to newly admitted students before the latter attend the first residential session for orientation to distance education mode of study and introduction to study materials.

The Ministry of Education provides the required resources for a number of reasons:

- First, students are recruited, admitted and registered in Colleges of Primary Education, as bona fide students of these Colleges just like their counterparts on the fulltime programme;
- Academic regulations that govern the pre-service diploma have been adapted to suit the requirements of the distance-taught programme. As a result, DPE distance education students are subject to the same academic regulations, qualifications and awards as the pre -service students;
- The content of the distance taught DPE programme is the same as that for the pre-service programme, except for the delivery mode;
- Residential sessions are held in colleges of education so that learners interface with the lecturers who teach the same courses to fulltime students. Distance learners access laboratory facilities for science and practical subjects just like fulltime students;
- College Academic Boards, which process results of the pre -service diploma are also responsible for considering and processing results for the DPE by distance mode. This process helps to ensure parity of standards;
- College principals are the chief accounting officers for all the activities of the DPE by distance mode programme based at the college;
- Marking of assignments, tests and examinations has been decentralized to colleges of education and is managed by college-based Coordinators and Assistant Coordinators under direct supervision of College Principals;
- At the college level coordinators and their assistants are responsible for compiling and maintaining accurate students' continuous assessment work and examinations supervised by the Centre for Continuing Education CCE.

Duties and Responsibilities of College Coordinators and Assistant Coordinators

Decentralizing the main student support to colleges of education has enabled this programme to maintain parity of standards by benefiting from resources that are already available for the pre-service programme. These colleges have the necessary human, physical and material resources to support practical and project work for subjects such as science, music, physical education, home economics, art, craft and design and agriculture

which are mandatory on this programme. In order not to disrupt primary school programmes during school term, the residential sessions take place during April, August and December school vacations when college lecturers and physical facilities are available. This arrangement is in line with policy recommendation (77) of the RNPE of 1994, which advocates optimum shared use of resources including educational facilities in order to provide out of school education.

During residential sessions, college lecturers provide academic guidance to distance learners by marking and commenting on student's assignments, tests and examinations. These tutors also provide learners with pastoral care by giving guidance and counselling services which is a component part of distance learning, (Reddy and Manjulika, 2002). The college functions are managed and directly supervised by college coordinators. The responsibilities of DPE College based coordinators include:

- Organizing and supervising tutorials and providing academic and individual counselling to learners;
- Supervising tutors attendance and ensuring that domestic staff provide required catering services for students
- Distributing study materials and marked scripts of assignments and tests to learners and keeping up to date records of students assessment work;
- Organizing and supervising the invigilation of tests and examinations;
- Securing the use of physical facilities such as classrooms, laboratories for science and other practical subjects, and ensuring that required equipment such as slide and overhead projectors, pianos and other instruments for music, duplicators, photocopiers and audio/visual playback equipment is available as required;
- preparation and presentation of students' results for consideration and approval by college academic boards as a quality assurance measure in terms of parity of standards between this programme and the pre-service version;
- Liaising with the University of Botswana and other stakeholders on all matters related to the DPE programme.

Upgrading PTC holders via the distance has been advantageous to the teachers and their employer, as noted by Ntloedibe-Kuswani, (2004):

- Large numbers of teachers are enrolled on the programme and by so doing more teachers are reached using the distance mode than is the case through conventional training;
- Teachers continue to serve the nation and learn as they earn;
- Teachers apply the knowledge, skills and techniques they have acquired in the classroom immediately;
- Teachers who are also parents study at home as they take care of their families
- Unlike their counterparts in conventional institutions teachers upgrading through the distance mode are not placed on half salary packages during the training period.

Challenges and Constraints

The biggest challenge, has been in the coordination and harnessing of all the resources required, ranging from tutors, physical facilities and material resources. The college coordinators, who manage the programme on a part time basis, are stressed through out the year since they do not take breaks when their regular students are on vacation.

Supervision of research projects has been a problem since it cannot be completed during the residential session. Some college lecturers supervise up to five research projects due to shortage of tutors. The delay in materials development and production also pushed back the programme completion dates. Finally, and until this year, lack of a memorandum of agreement between the University and the Ministry of Education created problems of accountability.

Conclusion

This programme has demonstrated that given the limited resources, distance education is the alternative way of the future for training and upgrading teachers as they continue to serve the nation of Botswana. Provision of decentralized student support requires shared use of resources and physical facilities that are owned by different institutions. It is also necessary to create well organized management structures that facilitate provision of the required student support, as evidenced by the operations of colleges of education in support of the DPE programme by distance mode.

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Refocusing quality: moving towards 'extreme evaluation'

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This paper is concerned with quality improvement in open and distance learning (ODL). It attempts to bring together a number of different positions – each given a particular articulation recently by colleagues at the University of South Australia - in order that a new perspective on how to approach matters of quality in ODL might be, at least partially, revealed. In responding to them, I am indicating my view that they are strong ideas, but what interests me is whether they can be brought together in some way that usefully directs our practice. My particular perspective is shaped by my role in Australian higher education in a dual mode institution, but the discussion may be of interest to participants in other ODL contexts.

Part of the difficulty in considering quality improvement is that one needs to know who the stakeholders are whose interests are being considered, for conceptions of quality depend on the answer to that question. In general, there would appear to be three broad groups of stakeholders for higher educational services: (1) external entities (government, professional bodies, employers, etc), (2) the university or educational provider (ie the staff who comprise the institution's community and the various decision-making bodies who exercise judgment on behalf of that organization and community), and (3) the students of the programs under consideration. Of course, within these groups there may be significant differences between parties, eg government and professional bodies would see some things very differently, as do many academic staff and the administrators of their universities. Nonetheless, it is the contention of this paper that the interests of each of these main stakeholder groups are so generally different one from the other that the dominance of the perspective of one or another of them in shaping institutional responses to quality may impact deleteriously on the interests of the other(s). I emphasize this because we often discuss quality as though it were a relatively homogenous attribute of educational processes and products with the implication that meeting the imperatives of one stakeholder group automatically means the concerns of others are addressed.

Further, I would want to take the position that all stakeholders have a legitimate right to some element of quality assurance in relation to our ODL programs. To take an alternative position would be, at least, politically naïve. However, the groups I would chose to privilege in this discussion are our students and academic colleagues, for reasons sketched quickly below.

The learning experience of students – and I would take an inclusive rather than exclusive approach to defining this - is the raison d'etre of teaching. This is never more true than in the case of distance education students who, because of their learning milieux, are denied opportunities to obtain ready alternatives to the teaching and learning arrangements provided for them when things go awry. The quality of the student experience is, at base, the primary justification for everything we do as teachers. But there is also a sense in which we pursue quality as teachers out of a form of self-interest. We cannot, I believe, regard ourselves as professionals if we are not concerned about the impact of what we do, the gathering of data about such impact, analysis and reflection on that data, and the

development of strategies for improving our practice. In short, a reflective approach to practice and a commitment to quality improvement are necessary conditions of professionalism.

I want now to elaborate the argument that serving one stakeholder's interests in quality may be counterproductive in meeting those of another.

The first position I want to draw upon has been argued by Denise Bradley (2005), and focuses on the international trend to national audit agencies that monitor the quality of higher education provision. Her thesis is that such agencies have come into being to meet national political agenda more concerned with instituting accountability measures than improving practice. Following Vidovich (2001), she argues that in countries where the autonomy of academic institutions has traditionally been high, governments have sought to exert greater control of higher education and have justified this in terms of serving the national interest in the international market place. Institutional leaders, sometimes coerced through funding pressures, have been complicit in these processes, but have sought to soften the process to emphasise improvement rather than simply accountability. In part, she argues, such complicity occurs because it is difficult (and politically dangerous) to mount a case against quality generally and that involvement in the process affords some chance of influencing the outcome; there is the further point that sometimes external audit pressures allow management to achieve ends that teaching staff may otherwise resist (Bradley, 2005:2-5).

She contends these developments may be counter-productive to the improvement of teaching and learning arrangements, a view shared by many who have researched the improvement of teaching practice (Ramsden, 2003; Biggs, 2001; and Knight and Trowler, 2000). The pressures from external audit agencies

> "mean the institution acts to identify an acceptable institution wide model for 'delivery' of teaching and evaluation of learning; to implement it; to collect comparable data across an often narrow set of indicators about the impact of teaching; and to reward good practice as the institution so defines it….With such an approach the dangers are that we alienate the teachers and encourage them to hide problems and innovate with great caution because innovation by its very nature means a great risk of failure (Bradley, 2005:7)."

Her argument is that we know very little about the impact of external quality audits on student learning and have few grounds for believing they nurture good practice.

Recently, the Australian Universities Quality Agency has increased the attention it pays to transnational education, ie the delivery of programs offshore involving a mix of face-to-face and ODL delivery strategies. Last year, my own university was audited and received a very positive report, but the auditors spent considerably more time visiting offshore delivery points than the home institution. The one issue not addressed was the quality of learning occurring in those overseas situations. Adapting Bradley, the exercise was about quality assurance – the processes for monitoring quality - rather than improving learning.

I think there is a double danger for ODL practitioners – indeed, anyone working in higher education - in that not only do the audits focus on assurance to the detriment of

improvement, but the processes are so demanding that other, more directly useful procedures may be eschewed. In other words, the external audit process not only frustrates improvement by focusing on the wrong things, it consumes through compliance requirements the energies of those who would wish to learn more about the impact of their teaching and improve it.

The second, very different position derives from earlier work I have done involving the impact of technologies upon distance education practice (King, 2000 and 2003). Much of what gave real impetus to the quality of distance education in the last quarter of the previous century was the development of relatively sophisticated learning materials production, administrative and student support systems (usually centrally administered), the products of which in large part became the outward indicators of quality educational provision. One impact of the new technologies is to undermine the need for such systems and to risk a reversion to cottage industry approaches which are typically uncosted, inefficient, unscaleable and impede collegial development. This is a particular risk in dual mode institutions where we are witnessing a move from distance education for some to flexible delivery for all, but it will impact on all ODL providers over time. As a consequence, we could lose a significant contributing element to quality practice in ODL. (I also concede that very large providers, like the Open University of the UK, have a stasis that will act as a buffer against some of these developments.)

In addition, there are grounds for considering that in many educational contexts, technology is not introduced in a manner that affords new approaches to the conceptualisation of teaching and learning or academic work practices; rather the potential of the technology is 'bolted on' to existing practices without reconsideration of their value or alternative ways of working (Twigg, 2004). That is, no attempt is made to embed the innovation that the technology represents to practices overall. To put this another way – and make the connection to the theme of this paper more overtly – quality is considered to derive from technological applications by addition, rather than by reflection and reconceptualisation. At best, such an approach affords a shallow basis for claiming improvement.

There is a further, related consequence of applying new technologies to education and that is they add a layer of complexity to other elements of practice which may itself reduce the capacity to innovate and engage in quality improvement. This suggests there may be a positive dimension to this in that our attention is necessarily directed to other – labour saving - approaches to quality improvement.

The third position also derives from the work of Carol Twigg and has been strongly advocated in internal discussions at the University of South Australia by Ian Reid. In essence, this holds that the traditions of the academy have granted considerable licence to academics' performance while constraining students to a relatively homogenous experience and that, if the quality if student learning is a priority consideration, this situation should be reversed. That is, there is an argument for limiting the options of academics in their distance teaching (and, by extension, on-campus) roles and for extending the possibilities for students to exercise choice, develop a broad range of generic attributes, and assume a greater degree of responsibility for shaping their own educational experience. This affords a greater possibility of learning being a transformative, rather than reproductive, experience. In short, the odds are greater that learning outcomes will be enhanced and the interests of quality provision served.

This constraint on academic activity warrants some elaboration. At present, teaching staff are confronting the challenges of greater accountability and public reporting requirements, considerable pressure to develop their research contribution, a larger and more diverse student body with its attendant teaching problems, the impact of new technologies in the development and delivery of educational services, and, frequently in Australia, requirements that they participate in the marketing and delivery of their programs offshore to offset the decline in public funding of higher education. Increased workload is a common and legitimate cause for complaint. Yet there seems to be little capacity or even willingness to consider the potential of technological developments to reduce workload while maintaining quality. At the University of South Australia, there have been instances of innovative practice – particularly involving assessment and communication between students – but these are exceptions rather than the rule. There have not been the dramatic shifts in activity that have occurred in relation, say, to student support services, where – to provide one example of increased service without additional workload - commonly asked questions have been analysed to provide automated responses to students who enter a key word when searching for assistance. This service is available to students around the clock, rather than constraining them to the conventional opening hours of the institution.

What we have proposed to the University community is that there be a standard set of templates for working on the online platform, each developed to support a particular approach to fostering learning, eg problem-based teaching, clinical experience, group-based activities, resources for courses that are heavily literature-based, and so on. These would constitute the standard resources for teaching online, within a limited range of options, say about eight, from which academics could chose to best support their personal teaching strategy. The corollary of this level of constraint on staff behaviour is that the templates would afford considerable opportunities for students to exercise choice, apply the substantive content in real world situations, develop a broad range of generic attributes in addition to disciplinary expertise, and assume more personal responsibility for managing their own program of learning.

There is another dimension of the use of templates that will be familiar to those with a background in print-based distance teaching, ie of affording a front-ended quality intervention by building elements of instructional design into the template. In this way, the academic - in developing teaching resources - is encouraged to good practice without necessarily being conscious that conventional instructional design techniques are being applied.

I would summarise key points in my discussion as follows.

1. The different stakeholders in ODL have interests in quality that may not be the same and pursuit of the concerns of one may frustrate those of another.

2. The impact of new technologies is undermining the production, administrative and support systems in which much of the quality of distance education was embedded.

3. Technology is sometimes applied to enhance to the student experience by addition rather than reflection and reconceptualisation, which undermines the potential for genuine qualitative improvement.

4. Quality provision for students in an online environment may warrant constraining the freedom of academic staff, but also afford them the opportunity of producing better quality learning outcomes for reduced effort.

But I want to push the argument further, for there seems a case that the following apply.

1. There is little evidence that external quality assurance processes do anything to improve the quality of student learning which should be central to our concerns.

2. We are not using the potential of new technologies to teach more intelligently or to maximize the gains that might be made in terms of quality improvement.

3. Enhancing the quality of learning starts with the professional obligation to understand the impact of what we do as teachers and use that intelligence for improvement.

In short, we need to focus on improving student learning rather than rest with the broader institutional accountability systems, get a better understanding of the impact of what we are doing, and use technology to assist in these processes. We need to adopt another approach to quality improvement that focuses more closely on teaching and learning transactions and more directly engages both teacher and student.

I am going to propose we consider using 'extreme evaluation' to improve our understanding of what students experience in our ODL programs at the point they are engaged with a particular sequence or activity. It is now technically possible with online resources to embed a link at any point in the learning materials that leads to a site which asks students to indicate in an online survey what they value and how they rate their experience. This response can be automatically collated for the whole student cohort. The survey at any point may comprise only one or two questions, but it affords immediate data on the student's experience at the time of engagement. Because each mini-questionnaire takes virtually no time to complete, several opportunities for comment can be included at different points in the materials.

Such evaluation can also be coupled with self-assessment short-answer items, which afford feedback to the students on their level of understanding of the material being covered. The mini-survey at any given point can thus draw both on data about performance as well as perceptions of the student's experience.

This 'extreme evaluation' serves three critical functions:

1. it gathers data at the point a student has just experienced the particular teaching and learning transaction,

2. reflection on this data enables the teacher to make informed judgments about improvements to the course which may be possible for the current cohort, and

3. students can be informed of the changes that will be made to take their concerns into account. This closes the feedback loop and reinforces for students that their input to the quality cycle has impact.

This is presented as just one option available to us, to use the power of new technologies to focus quality improvement more directly on the transactions between student and teacher. In my view it is critical that we acknowledge the constraints of the quality systems that presently monopolise attention within higher education ODL and take steps to assume greater control for monitoring our own interactions with students.

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Preparing Students for Online Learning – the Oscail Experience

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Introduction

Distance education evolved as a major player in the educational landscape in the 1970s, as states increasingly adopted this method as an instrument of economic development. It became widely accepted that distance education could extend access to education, particularly to adults disadvantaged by location, occupation, income, disability, or prior academic achievement, in a cost and pedagogically effective way, as well as increasing the skills and qualifications of the adult population. From the beginning, distance education practitioners pioneered, of necessity, the use of a range of media to provide education to students who were unable to attend on campus. In the early 1990s, distance education became very much the favoured approach to lifelong learning at European Union level. However, by 2000, the term 'distance education' had fallen into disuse in EU documents, being replaced by e-learning. The received wisdom, particularly at European level, was that distance education had been subsumed by the new technologies, and had now been mainstreamed (MacKeogh 2005). Nevertheless, despite the rhetoric and hyperbole surrounding the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for extending access to lifelong learning, the reality is somewhat different. While numerous pilot projects exist to demonstrate the potential of innovative new technologies, less progress has been made in removing the many obstacles to the wider integration and adoption of these technologies for mainstream, sustainable distance education programmes. Among these obstacles are the digital divide which forms a substantial barrier for specific groups of students, low levels of ICT literacy among some adults, especially in the humanities, as well as strong resistance to the use of new technologies. Added to this is the need to identify appropriate pedagogical strategies to make the optimum use of the new technologies.

This paper provides a case study of how Oscail, the Irish National Distance Education Centre has developed its strategy of using technology to improve learning opportunities at a pace which matches the expectations, access, and skills of its students. Since its inception in 1982, Oscail has monitored new technological developments on a continuing basis, while taking account of access to technology among its students. While ownership or access to PCs and Internet are now virtually ubiquitous among Oscail students, other divides are becoming apparent, in terms of knowledge, expertise and attitudes (MacKeogh 2003). The paper briefly outlines the way in which Oscail has developed its technology strategy. We then summarise the outcomes of research on student readiness to learn using technology. This research has identified the need for programmes specifically designed to prepare students for learning in the online world. The paper will conclude with some comments on the issues involved in supporting students in the new e-learning environments.

Use of Technology in Oscail programmes

Oscail[22] was established in 1982 with a national remit to develop and deliver distance education programmes in cooperation with the seven universities and other higher education institutions in Ireland. Its legal status is that of a faculty of Dublin City University. Oscail develops and coordinates undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the humanities, nursing, information technology, and management, with an annual enrolment of over 3,000 adult students. The Bachelor of Arts programme is jointly accredited by six universities, while Dublin City University accredits the other programmes.

Up to the late 1990s, Oscail used 'second generation' distance education technologies in delivering its courses, utilising a mix of correspondence texts, video and audio tapes, some computer based learning and supported by face-to-face tutorials in a distributed network of study centres. This policy was determined by considerations of cost, accessibility and concerns about the pedagogical quality of most of the technologies which have been proposed over the last twenty years. Annual surveys showed that the level of access to technology by students, who are widely dispersed throughout Ireland and abroad, was insufficient to convert Oscail programmes to 'third generation' modes of delivery. To do so would have meant erecting substantial barriers to students and reducing enrolments while possibly not adding significant value to our courses.

Since 1999, with the greater accessibility of virtual learning environments and increased access to PCs and the Internet in the student population, technology has increasingly been used to enhance pedagogy. Oscail introduced its first online postgraduate programme in Internet Systems in 2001; all modules on the BSc in Information Technology were provided with online support in 2003; and all modules on the BA programme were linked with online support in 2005.

In the next phase it is planned to integrate the ICTs in all aspects of Oscail's programmes, administration, pedagogy and assessment. It is hoped that within the next five years, students can enrol online, access course materials and resources, and tutorial support, interact in a collaborative environment with their fellow students, and participate in a range of assessment modes, including peer and self assessment. There are, of course significant challenges in implementing this strategy, including cost, student and tutor access to technology, ICT literacy skills, negative attitudes and fears, not to mention the difficulties of developing high quality and effective pedagogical approaches.

One major factor is the readiness of students to engage with e-learning. Earlier studies have consistently identified expertise as a key factor in creating positive attitudes to technology. In 2000 a survey of Oscail tutors and students found that proficiency varied with the type of technology (Mac Keogh, 2001). Tutors and students rated their skills in word processing, email and the Internet relatively highly, but had little expertise in data manipulation, including spreadsheets. A survey of students carried out in 2002 identified a similar pattern of varying levels of expertise. In particular low levels of expertise in computer conferencing were reported (MacKeogh 2003). With regard to attitudes to using technology, almost one fifth (19.2%) of students opted for traditional forms of ODL, without any technological element, while only 11.6% opted for e-learning (defined

[22] See http://www.oscail.ie

as a mix of written course materials, online materials, online tutorial support and interaction with students and tutors). The majority favoured using ICTs to enhance existing modes of learning, and there was substantial resistance to removing face-to-face and personal contact from the learning experience, even among those who were supportive of technological enhancement.

From extensive research and evaluation of student experiences of, and attitudes towards technology (see for example Fox and MacKeogh 2001, MacKeogh, 2003), Oscail recognised that successful implementation of online learning strategies required student preparedness and skills in e-learning technologies as well as access to the technology. To attain maximum benefit from the potential of e-learning, students need unrestricted access to high-speed Internet connections whenever and wherever they wish to study. Few students experience this optimum scenario. A survey of over 750 students in Ireland and the UK distributed between on-campus and distance education groups, and among different disciplines, found that students are not a homogenous mass of users (MacKeogh, 2003). All students had access to PCs and the Internet in their universities and less than 10% relied solely on the university for access. However, this figure masked a range of disparities with regard to the quality and quantity of access. Most students experienced restrictions with regard to the time or place of access to the technology. In addition, the survey revealed that a significant proportion of students lacked the IT skills needed to fully benefit from e-learning. Respondents also varied in their levels of confidence in using ITs as well as their value on ICTs in general with, as might be expected, students taking technology courses being far more positively disposed to technology than those taking non-technical subjects. Many students were concerned about the potentially negative impact of technology on pedagogy. While less than one fifth of students could be said to be actively resistant to any form of technology in education, just one in ten would welcome a totally online form of education. The majority of students wanted technology to enhance, rather than replace, their current form of learning, whether distance education or on-campus.

Bearing in mind the outcomes of this research, funding from the Irish Higher Education Authority was obtained to develop a series of Student Passport to e-Learning (SPEL) modules. These modules aim to integrate the technological skills required for e-learning with an introduction to the academic content which students will encounter in either the Humanities or Information Technology undergraduate programmes. Pilot versions of the modules were presented between December 2002 and December 2004 (see Lorenzi, MacKeogh and Fox 2004) and following evaluation and further refinements it is intended to extend the SPEL model to other disciplines and teaching formats. An evaluation of the SPEL modules will be presented in the next section, before discussing preliminary outcomes of the 100% roll out of online support for the BA modules.

The SPEL Modules

Oscail undergraduates are required to take an Introductory Module prior to starting credit modules. These modules act as a filtering programme, allowing students to assess their readiness to learn in the distance learning environment. The modules are designed to help students to update or acquire skills for studying at university level; they provide a ‘taster’ of distance education and give students the opportunity to try out the format without committing themselves to a long course; they also give a general introduction to the discipline. In the traditional mode of delivery, these modules use conventional text based

material, supported by face-to-face tutorials. Students complete assignments designed to allow them practise their study skills within a disciplinary context. In contrast, the SPEL modules are presented entirely online over a period of eight weeks, with no face-to-face tutorials. Instead students are led through a carefully designed journey using a detailed roadmap, carrying out specified tasks, and interacting with their tutor and fellow students (initially within the WebCT environment: due to escalating costs of commercially available VLEs, Oscail adopted the open source Moodle environment in 2004). Students read course materials on screen or printed offline, participate in on-line activities, post messages to a discussion area and carry out assessment tasks based on both their readings and on-line activities. Students are assessed on a final portfolio which consists of all the assessment tasks and print-outs of their on-line activities. The portfolio is assessed by the tutor who also moderates the on-line interaction.

The SPEL modules adopt the Task Oriented Online Learning (TOOL) approach pioneered in earlier Oscail experiments and which are described by Seamus Fox in another presentation in this conference (see Fox 2005; also Fox and MacKeogh 2001). Students develop skills in using the online medium through carrying out tasks using email, internet search engines, computer asynchronous conferencing communication, web-based library databases and basic software packages such as Microsoft Word and Excel. The tasks are designed to "accommodate objectives …seen by learners as directly in harmony with their own perceived and stated learning needs" (Breen, 1987: 28) while simultaneously motivating them to engage with the course content and acquiring study skills and e-learning skills. The sixteen tasks required for the Humanities SPEL module are listed in Table 1:

Table 1: SPEL Module Learning Tasks - Humanities

- Maintain a learning log throughout the course using Excel and Word
- Write an introduction to yourself and post it to the discussion forum
- Prepare a study schedule for the module
- Post at least two contributions per week to discussion forums
- Write a weekly reflection on learning experience
- Review websites related to the course content
- Write a film review
- Make short notes on a one of the course units
- Search DCU library catalogue and prepare bibliography for an essay.
- Prepare spider diagram and outline structure for an essay
- Summarise an article accessed through the universities online full-text database
- Comment on another student's film review
- Prepare an answer to exam question
- Prepare a report on a statistical analysis of time spent on different learning activities
- Write essay on 'Learning with Oscail: where to from here?'
- Assemble and submit portfolio for assessment by tutor

Students start with simple tasks such as posting a message to introduce themselves and progress to more complex activities such as searching and reviewing websites, and entering data on their learning experience in an Excel spreadsheet and finally analysing

the learning experience in both quantitative and qualitative terms. The highly structured approach enables students to progress gradually and this helps to ease some of the initial anxiety associated with use of technology, particularly for the Humanities students who tend to have less experience in using ICTs. It was considered essential that exposure to ICT skills should be firmly integrated within a context of developing disciplinary knowledge and generic study skills, rather than through a standalone ECDL type programme.

A metacognitive dimension to the learning experience is added by asking students to keep statistical records of time spent on various activities in their studies, as well writing a reflection diary. This helps students to develop greater self-awareness in terms of time management and learning style. As Monteith and Smith suggest "Learning 'online' in an open-access resource centre, where there is the almost permanent option of crossing the boundaries between the social environment, requires students to adopt greater self-discipline and different study skills from traditional forms of learning" (Monteith and Smith 2001: 123). Reflecting on the learning experience on a daily basis helps students to counterbalance this tendency. According to a humanities student:

> On week one when I printed off the material I was overwhelmed. But now I am glad I did this course, because I have gained loads of knowledge with reference to my computer and of course the course content. This will help me with my future study skills… The daily log was useful as it showed me what I had done that day, and what other areas I should spend more time on. The study schedule was helpful but I had to be very flexible with reference to adapting my study time around my children, husband and other factors which influence my life.

The success of online learning may be attributed to the quality of support provided. The SPEL modules provide four broad categories of support: 1) learner-centred instructional design; 2) tutorial support; 3) peer support; 4) Technical support.

The SPEL modules are designed to provide learner-centred instruction support, bearing in mind Jung's comment that "It is instructional design not technology that is at the centre of quality distance education" (Jung 2000: 1) as well as Laurillard's suggestion that students in an e-learning environment may need mediated access to information (Laurillard, 1996). The written course materials include a workbook, providing a detailed description of weekly tasks; a self instructional study skills handbook, covering topics such as writing skills, note taking, assessment preparation etc; and a discipline specific course text introducing concepts in the humanities or IT. All materials can be downloaded from the Moodle environment as PDF or HTML files. The texts are written in standard distance education self instructional style with SAQs, activities and self-tests. The course materials serve as the foundation for the on-line activities. For example, the Study Skills unit on information gathering and evaluation is linked with an on-line task requiring the student to log on to the web to search for three websites related to a specific topic (for example, identity) and evaluate their quality and usefulness. The activity therefore links the skill (information gathering) with the course content (identity) with the technical knowledge (how to access and evaluate a website). The integrated approach ensures that there is a parallel progression in, skill, content understanding and technical skill acquisition.

A tutor is allocated to groups of approximately twenty students. The tutor keeps the discussions structured and focused. They interact with students in the general discussion area or by personal email where appropriate. While tutors vary in their approach, the nature of the discipline is also of significance in determining the form of the interaction. In the pilot presentations, humanities tutors tended to use messages to direct and structure general discussion, leaving room for extensive peer interaction, while IT tutors tended to reply to students on a one-to-one basis in the general discussion area with substantially less interaction between students. The nature of humanities leads to more opportunities for discussion, and students can sometimes post long discursive contributions; the opposite tends to be the case with the more technical disciplines, where the opportunity for discussion is more limited.

Virtual learning environments offer great potential for removing one of the main disadvantages of distance education, isolation from peers, and from the opportunity for social interaction and dialogue. One student wrote that she was "going to miss this little community", another added that she was going "to miss the discussion very much", one student felt that "reading other people contributions gave [him] confidence to carry on". The establishment of a community of scholars is one of the positive outcomes of the structured approach adopted by the SPEL model.

Interactions on the pilot modules were analysed using Salmon's five step online teaching and learning framework (Salmon 2000, 2002).

Table 2: Student Interactions on SPEL Module Discussion Forums

Type of interaction	Humanities	IT
Offering moral support and social interaction	28%	50%
Technical advice	11%	7.5%
Sharing information	12%	13%
Knowledge construction	12%	0%
Other	31%	28%

From the figures in Table 2 it can be seen that the majority of messages related to providing moral support to peers, which is particularly important at this early stage of study. Another key activity is sharing information on course content, useful web addresses etc. The level of knowledge construction is relatively low, however this is probably to be expected given the nature of the course. In constructing knowledge, students interact with course content and with each other in a critical, and creative fashion (Salmon 2000). In the SPEL modules, humanities students were more likely to move to this stage. The discursive nature of the humanities might have facilitated a greater level of interactivity which might have led to greater ease in interacting with each other at a more analytical level.

It is hoped that students progressing to credit modules with similar task oriented design will be more open to participating in higher order learning activities.

The technical support element of the modules included an online step-by-step guide to using WebCT (and more recently Moodle) using non-technical language. Students are given a personal email address, as well as access to Moodle. Technical advice is provided

by a helpdesk accessible by email or telephone. In addition, technical support was offered by peers or tutors.

Transfer to Credit Modules

The completion rate for students of the SPEL modules has been in the order of 50% for humanities students and 70% of IT students to date. This compares favourably with the completion rates of the Introductory modules which have been delivered in the traditional text with face-to-face tutorial support format. Of the SPEL students who started credit modules in 2004, 68% completed their studies, compared with 60% of those who had come through the standard introductory module format. While completion rates are subject to a wide range of influences, it is reasonable to suggest that the SPEL modules may have contributed to enhancing students' confidence in their skills and ability to meet deadlines. Further research is being carried out on student performance in credit modules.

Online support for Credit Modules

In line with Oscail's strategy of introducing online support to enhance the student learning experience, all thirty modules in the BA programme were provided with a website on the Moodle learning environment in April 2005. While other programmes in Oscail are using the Scheduled Online Instruction (SOI) or TOOL approaches, the approach to learning support in this instance has been deliberately open and unstructured, with a view to seeing how students interact with the facility and to assessing student needs. Each course website includes PDF versions of the course materials (also provided in printed form issued by post). There are links to resources including the library and online databases; tutorial timetables; assignments; past examination papers. This resource is updated and added to on a continuing basis. There are asynchronous discussion forums where students can set their own agenda, and discuss whatever issues they wish. There is also a synchronous chat facility. For 2005, no online tutorial support is to be provided, but tutors can post resources to the course website, and interact with their students if they wish.

Of major interest in Oscail is the question 'if we build it will they come?'. Preliminary analysis of activity appears to agree with the relatively negative scenario described by Zemsky and Massey in their analysis of e-learning in the US (Zemsky and Massey, 2004). Four weeks after the start up, just five out of 80 tutors had requested access to the student sites. Just 9.3% of students had logged on within the first week; by the end of the fourth week, just 34.6% of students had logged on, bearing out perhaps, earlier research evidence of low levels of interest in technology supported learning among Oscail humanities students.

A website for tutors was also set up on Moodle, following a training session at the beginning of term. Again, use of the website has been less than enthusiastic with just 50% having logged on within the first four weeks. To date, the major use of the sites has been to download resources. Just 242 contributions to the discussion forums were made in the first four weeks, in seventeen modules, with no contributions in thirteen modules. Interactions mainly relate to assignments, seeking advice on approaches, and feedback on results. It is perhaps of relevance to note that of the most active module, Twentieth Century Literature (with 74 contributions), half of the contributors are graduates of the 2003 SPEL module. It would appear that evidence from other programmes (see for

example, Fox 2005) which show that students tend not to interact where there is no reward in the form of credits for doing so, is being borne out in the case of the Humanities programme. The outcomes of the first year of online support for the humanities modules will be thoroughly evaluated at the end of the first year with a view to increasing the level of usage of the facilities.

Summary

The key message which Oscail has taken on board in implementing its e-learning strategy is the necessity to ensure that students are ready to learn with new technologies. It cannot be assumed that everyone is fully equipped with the necessary learning and studying techniques to succeed in traditional education. When technology intervenes, it can become either a barrier or a passport to learning. The skills for e-learning must include familiarity with the major ICT tools, including word processing, spreadsheets, Internet search engines, browsers, online databases, email and computer conferencing, as well as the ability to adapt these to specific learning contexts in the different disciplines. ICT skills cannot be learned in isolation from the disciplines in which they are exercised and different approaches are required for different disciplines. However, regardless of discipline, the development of preparatory courses for students to equip them with the skills for e-learning is essential if maximum benefit is to be gained from investment in the new technologies.

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Can writing skills be taught at a distance?

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe an attempt to introduce the facilitation of writing skills into a distance education module on Open and Distance Learning at the University of South Africa (Unisa). Many South African learners have not been socialised into academic writing. While there are modules and courses that learners can take to develop the necessary skills these are generally 'add-on' and require additional enrolments on the part of the learner. We felt that there was a need to incorporate writing skills facilitation in a number of modules of the BA in ODL. The success of the facilitation proves that there is a need that can be met by different types of learner support in distance education.

Whenever a new course or module is planned and developed there are many questions that need to be asked. We need to estimate who the target audience of the course will be and what their needs will be. Should in-course learner support be included in the text? How much of such support will be necessary and appropriate? At what level should the support be aimed? Is it possible to determine answers to all these questions in the development phase?

When we planned and started developing the BA in ODL at the University of South Africa (Unisa), we imagined that students enrolling for the course would be under-qualified workers in ODL institutions: probably administrators, clerical staff and so on. We had had many requests for a formal, graduate course from this sector of learners who had completed or were studying a certificate for distance education practitioners. It was, therefore, with these people in mind that the course was developed. We imagined that our first-year learners would be typical of the general first-year learner profile of Unisa, namely that they would not have insufficient academic literacy skills and would not have English as their primary language.

This assumption derives from my own research (Mitchell 2000) and that of Pretorius (2002) in which we found that many learners have not been adequately prepared for tertiary education. They have not acquired the necessary academic literacy skills to enable them to read the prescribed learning material and to write academically acceptable essays. We have experienced that many learners have problems analysing questions, structuring essays, linking sentences and ideas and presenting logical arguments in academically sound English.

I acknowledge that in order for distance education institutions to meet the needs of learners it is essential that they should offer relevant support. I agree with Tait (2003) when he says that the primary aim of student support is to assist learners to learn successfully. I also believe that it is important to encourage the feelings of confidence and self-esteem that success can engender. In order to realize feelings of success and achievement learners at tertiary level need to learn the important skills of reading and writing academic text within a particular discipline. However, this does not come

naturally to most people and it takes a long time for learners to acquire these skills through trial and error only. In fact, there is strong motivation based on findings of educators like Vygotsky (1978, 1987), Bruner (1986, 1996) and Cummins (1984, 2002) that learners need to be taught academic skills in order to reach their potential. In other words in order for learners to learn to read academic literature and write academically acceptable texts, they need to be taught to use appropriate academic language within a specialised academic discourse, usually in response to specified problems.

The question we asked ourselves as developers of a new programme was how can the teaching of reading and writing be addressed at a distance?

At Unisa there are courses and even formal modules that teach language skills. These are usually add-on or adjunct, interventions like *Language for Lawyers* and *English for Science Access* that teach general English language. There are no formal courses that concentrate specifically on reading and writing in an academic context. Recently, the Unisa Reading and Writing centres have been established at learning centres throughout the country. There is also a Unisa Virtual Writing Centre (UVWC) that provides writing guidance online. However, both have limitations. They are adjunct or 'stand–alone' initiatives that do not cater for learners who live far from the learning centres, live in other countries, or do not have access to the internet. The answer seems to be to integrate reading and writing support into the learning design of modules, especially at first- and second-year levels.

The aim of this paper is to describe an attempt to integrate reading and writing guidance into a module of the newly established BA in ODL and to establish whether this support has been useful in any way. In order to do this I will describe the writing component of one module and report on the reactions of learners to this in-course support and the assignments they submitted in order to reflect on whether the support has been appropriate and successful. The process was informed by the theory of guided didactic conversation of Holmberg (1989) that focuses on creating learning materials that are similar to conversations in a face-to-face situation. It was also informed by Keegan's theory (1992) of reintegration of the learning process through interactions reminiscent of face-to-face teaching and learning.

Introducing writing skills facilitation as an integrated element of learning materials

The writing team that I coordinated felt that it was important to offer our learners as much in-text support in academic literacy as we could. With this in mind support in reading and writing is included throughout the Introduction to ODL module (ODL101-F). There is advice on how to read academic text and activities that focus on brain storming, summary writing, note-taking, and paragraph writing included in the text. The last unit of the module is a deliberate empowerment tool as it brings together all the writing guidance suggested in the rest of the module and focuses on the writing of an argumentative essay. Learners are taken through the writing process, from analysing an academic question to deciding on an opinion or stance in response to the problem, planning the essay, writing the introduction and developing the argument. The argumentative essay is first explained and the concept of argument in this context is clarified. A 'practice essay' is introduced to learners, after which the topic is analysed with questions such as: What is the problem? Whose problem is it? What is my opinion? Through the practice essay learners are shown how to brainstorm, group and select

information, structure a paragraph and write an essay. The value of review is explained and a checklist is provided to help the self-assessment process.

The learner support was included based on our assumptions of what the needs of the learners would be. However, we could not be sure that we were offering appropriate support, especially as the target group was ODL practitioners. Also, my research and that of Lilli Pretorius had focused on South African learners and so we could not be sure that it applied to learners from other southern African countries. We needed, therefore, to find out whether the learners had used the guidance provided in the text and had done the activities and also what they thought of the support offered. In order to find out whether the guidance had helped them to achieve success in their essay writing, we needed to assess their work in a particular way.

The learner group of 2005

The BA in ODL was developed in 2004 and delivered for the first time in 2005. As the first enrolment is very small, all the learners were used as part of the present research. The group is very diverse which resulted in a wide range of findings.

There are 13 learners enrolled for the course, 8 females and 5 males; all are South African. They range in age from 20 to 57, most are married with children, and they are from different race groups. Very significantly for the purposes of this study, these learners represent six of South Africa's eleven official languages, viz English, Afrikaans, Setswana, Xitsonga, Venda, isiZulu.

The qualifications held by the group are also diverse and not in keeping with our original estimate. Most of the learners already have education-related qualifications. There is a Doctor of Education and a Master of Education (specialising in ODL). Then there are four learners with diplomas in education, four with diplomas or certificates in Adult Basic Education (ABET) and one with general non-formal education-related certificates. Of the two learners who do not have education qualifications, one has a diploma in legal studies and one has just completed her schooling. Most have access to computers but only five have easy access to the internet, while one has no computer skills at all.

Most of these learners are employed in some sort of training or teaching situation. The reasons for enrolling for the course are largely work-related because their institutions are moving into DE or because they see this as a way to extend their opportunities in the education job market.

The above seems to indicate that the enrolled learners do not fit the profile that we had in mind when we developed the module. There was the possibility that we had missed the target and that the in-text learner support was of little or no use to the learners. It was necessary, therefore, to assess the success of our efforts.

Using assignments to provide learner support in writing

The first tutor-marked assignment is a biographical essay written in response to elements of a learner profile. As this included personal responses the grading was done on the basis of the completeness of the response in relation to the profile headings and not on the information provided. When the assignments were marked, individual comments

were made on the writing style as well as the content of the responses and suggestions for improvement were made.

The second tutor-marked assignment included the writing of an argumentative essay. Additional learner support was provided by means of a telephone interview and the assessment of the essay. The telephone interviews enabled me to make acquaintance with the learners and to start developing a relationship with them.

I managed to telephone eight of the learners. I asked them whether they had done all the activities in the module and if they had used the guidance in the last unit when they had done their assignment. I also asked whether they had found the unit easy to follow and useful. The overwhelming response was that it was useful and that even though they might have been taught the process in previous studies, it helped to refresh their memories or to teach them new ways to focus their writing. Two learners said they did not use the guidance. Understandably, the woman with the doctorate said that she was familiar with the process and that she actually taught writing in her profession. The other learner who said that she had not used the guidance said she had been taught the process at school. Nevertheless, she had used the checklist to review her work.

The six learners who used the unit said that they found it useful. One learner said that she had taken some time to get into the process as she is used to starting from the content and arranging what she has read to fit into her interpretation of the problem. Being encouraged to voice her own opinions was new to her. Another leaner said that she had a tendency to stray off the point and that the process had helped her to keep focus, while another said that using the unit to structure her essay had 'opened her mind' and helped her to keep her writing relevant to the topic. She said that as she went through the process and wrote the essay it was as if a light had gone on and she could understand the work contained in the whole module much better.

I also asked learners which aspect of the unit they found the most useful. The overwhelming response to this was the checklist as they said it had helped them to quality assure their own writing. When asked if they had been able to use the skills in other assignments and university projects all said it had not been necessary as the other essays that they needed to write were due only later in the year. Most said that they were sure that they would refer back to the unit when the time came. An interesting answer that came from three learners who are involved with training was that they had used the process in their work and facilitation situations. They had adapted the information to suit their own circumstances and were using it to teach their learners to write better.

The essays were assessed according to a set of criteria that had been sent to the learners in a tutorial letter that explained the assignment. Generally speaking, the assessment showed evidence of more careful planning than in the first tutor-marked assignment. The structure and relevance of the second assignment showed an improvement on the first assignment. Problems often agreed with comments made during telephone interviews. For example, one learner said that the guidance had helped her keep focus because she had a habit of going off the topic. In her first assignment she had written ten pages about her history, growing up in a rural area instead of giving information about her present situation. In the second assignment, she did go off the topic again. She told me in the interview that the subject of the problems facing education in Africa had fascinated her so that she had spent days talking to neighbours from different parts of Africa. Her essay

was evidence of this interest, but compared with her first essay there was evidence of planning and structure. The learner who said that a light had gone on produced an essay that showed both insight and ability. Surprisingly, the learner who had said that she was familiar with the process and did not need to use the guidance provided produced a superficial overview that was disappointing.

The grades awarded to the essays were based on four categories, namely structure, appropriateness of language, argument and content. The grades ranged from 55% to 90%. I found this very encouraging because it means that if this group who have a reasonable level of education, and who are mostly trainers, found the support provided useful, then learners who do not have this background will probably benefit from it even more. While it is not possible to prove inconclusively that the writing support offered in the unit was responsible for learner success, sufficient evidence was collected to show that integrating learner support in academic writing can help learners achieve a certain degree of success, thereby adding to their feelings of self esteem.

Reflection

When I reflect on the results of my enquiry, I conclude that the integration of academic literacy skills in the Introduction to ODL module is successful. I say this firstly because the learners seemed to find the module readable and interesting, and secondly because there was an improvement in the structure, language and overall achievement between the first and second assignments. I realised that most learners actually do fit into the profile that we envisaged when we decided on the support that we would include in the text, even though at face value it seemed as if they did not. The fact that only five learners have easy access to the internet strengthened our resolve to encourage the inclusion of in-text learner support, as learner access to advanced technology cannot be presumed. The essay assignment proved to be challenging to most learners. The process of researching, reflecting and writing in order to complete their assignments allowed learners to gain knowledge and skills that went beyond the module content and the actual assignment. The fact that some learners had used what they had learned in their work contexts showed that they had been encouraged to think beyond the narrow framework of the module. I concluded too that it is feasible to include writing tuition at a distance.

The next intake of learners in this course will probably be more representative of the target group; hopefully some will be from other southern African countries who will provide us with more information. We can assume that they will benefit from the integrated learner support that has been incorporated into the Introduction to ODL.

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Management and administration of the BA ODL: a reflective exercise

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Background

This paper reflects on a Southern African regional collaboration initiative to conceptualise, design and develop a degree programme in open and distance learning. The reflection is by two representatives from the University of South Africa, Institute of Continuing Education (UNISA-ICE) who have directly participated in the different stages of the programme development process. UNISA-ICE manages the conceptualisation, development and delivery of the programme. UNISA-ICE also plays the advocacy role and management of relationships between academic and operational areas, as well as between the institution and the key stakeholders of the BA ODL at institutional, national and regional levels.

The BA with specialisation in open and distance learning (BA ODL) was introduced at the University of South Africa in 2005. It was developed as a result of the recommendations of the evaluation of the Certificate for Distance Education Practitioners (CDEP), a collaborative introductory course for training practitioners on basic principles and approaches to ODL, which UNISA has been offering since 1997. The CDEP partners are South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED), the developers of the CDEP learning materials; UNISA, the provider of the course; member institutions of the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) who enrol their staff on the CDEP and provide 25% sponsorship for registration fees and COL that provides 75% sponsorship to DEASA member institutions for the balance of the fees. The CDEP evaluation recommended the development of an advanced course for successful CDEP participants and the BA ODL is addressing that recommendation.

A quick literature scan on *reflective practice* in ODL indicates that this skill has been discussed and researched mainly in terms of teaching and learning. Material exists in abundance to address the question of 'how do we develop reflective thinking among trainee practitioners' or 'how do we develop reflective thinking among our learners as a study skill'. It seems like very limited literature exists on reflective practice for ODL programme development and delivery. The work that seems to come closest to that approach is a collection of case studies on collaboration in ODL that is edited by Moran and Mugridge (1993). Drawing from that background, this paper is a deliberate reflection process, an analysis of the programme development and the management thereof to date. It forms part of developing an ongoing *critical self-awareness* by the authors of this paper which should ultimately form part of the case study evaluation of the BA ODL. Reflective practice is in this instance conceptually treated as what Bolton (2001:4) describes as a 'process of learning and developing through examining own

practice'. Authors of this papers aim to go beyond that and fulfil part of the UNISA-ICE drive for collaborative work through sharing with other collaboration partners what UNISA-ICE has learned through being part of the conceptualisation, design and development of the BA ODL as well as administering and managing that process. It is hoped that helpful feedback will be received from other colleagues in the ODL field for incorporation into the programme development process.

The development of the BA ODL is explored in this paper by using Willis' (1999) three reflection modes: contextual, dispositional and experiential reflection. *Contextual reflection* examines forces like policies, location, timing, Africanisation of curriculum and the move towards collaborative programme and curriculum development. These are some of the key contextual forces that have influenced as well as shaped the development of the BA ODL and continue to do so to date. *Dispositional factors* include preferences and values that influence the process of reflection. In this paper dispositional factors or values, perceptions, characteristics, perceptions and influence of key stakeholders on the direction that the programme is taking are briefly explored. The authors are also looking back or reflecting on the experience of management and administration of the programme, planning and curriculum development activities as experienced by UNISA-ICE. This experiential reflection excludes the materials development processes which are covered in another paper presented at this conference.

This paper, therefore, reflects on the different aspects of management of the design and development of the BA ODL. The theoretical framework that informs the structure of this reflection process is contextual, dispositional and experiential.

Contextual reflection

In terms of *contextual reflection*, it is worth noting that Southern African institutional and national policies support collaborative work and the concept of African Renaissance and programmes that promote a unified SADC. However, for some this is merely politically correct rhetoric brought about by regional pressure to collaborate; most practices do not facilitate collaborative programmes of the BA ODL kind. Regulatory frameworks for programme development, resource allocation, accreditation etc are institutional and /or national rather than regional in outlook. Regional programme planning is difficult because of the absence of supportive structures.

In the case of UNISA for example, a collaboration Unit has been in existence since 1998. The unit was set up after repeated illicit use of the institutional study materials by some private institutions who were either charging to coach UNISA students in preparation for the examinations or for teaching students doing courses that were similar to UNISA's but offered by competing providers. The main functions that are performed by the Unisa collaboration unit tend to be administrative and technical, including finalising collaboration contracts between the UNISA and other institutions. Funding of regional collaborative ventures of the BA ODL is not among the Unit's functions.

In addition, the Institution is in the process of finalising the 2015 strategic plan. The vision for this strategic plan is "Towards the African University in the service of humanity". Two points are made on its mission that supports regional collaboration:

- Accessibility to all learners, specifically those on the African continent, and the marginalised, by way of barrier-free environment, while responding to the needs of the global market;
- Meeting the needs of the global competitive society by nurturing collaborative relationships with stakeholders and other partners.
  (*staff online home>unisa2015: strategic planning >agenda for transformation*)

Clearly, these two examples demonstrate institutional commitment to collaborative work. However, in practice there are no sufficient resources or support structures that are readily provisioned for international collaboration of the BA ODL kind. As a result, the BA ODL, financial assistance had to be sought elsewhere. It is through close collaboration with COL that it has been possible for DEASA representatives from five Southern African countries to meet and jointly plan the curriculum. The writers of the BA ODL come from institutions within five countries of Southern Africa; Botswana, Namibia, Seychelles, Zimbabwe and South Africa. The agreed curriculum has been translated according to the requirements of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and presented for approval by both the Department of Education and the Council on Higher Education.

The lack of accommodation for regional needs and demands by the National education policies was demonstrated by the Department of Education's reluctance to approve the request by SADC countries for a degree with multiple-exit points covering a certificate, diploma and degree at the end of first, second and forth year respectively. Part of the rationale for this request was for students to be able to leave with a qualification, should they need to, for any specific reasons that are common to adult learners. The reason for a four-year degree was to address the South African specific anomaly of the honours which is done for a year after a three-year degree and is generally a prerequisite for registering at masters' level. A large number of employees from the BA ODL collaboration team are either currently registered or hold a qualification from UNISA, especially the CDEP. It was therefore important for UNISA-ICE to ensure that as much of these partners' requirements as possible was incorporated in the design and development of the BA ODL. However, with limited and/or one department focused budgets, the accommodation of regionally articulated degree needs and financing regional activities like collaborative materials development workshops and reviews is a great challenge. This difficulty, in the case of the BA ODL, was addressed through COL's support for regional workshops and the commitment of the participating organisations to release their staff without charge. Two one-day curriculum development regional meetings and two ten-day materials development workshops were organised. The workshops were used to agree on content, house-rules etc and to develop unit outlines. Writers then produced first drafts for reviewing by internal UNISA staff and international ODL specialists.

The BA ODL collaboration has tended to have strong pooling of predominantly Southern African resources for planning and development of learning materials. The writers of the BA ODL come from institutions within five countries of Southern Africa; Botswana, Namibia, Seychelles, Zimbabwe and South Africa. This has encouraged the inclusion of wider African examples in the materials. But institutional (UNISA) and national (South African) regulatory frameworks have weighted control strongly in favour of UNISA and/or South Africa against regional demands. This is particularly the case with programme accreditation.

However, the BA ODL receives a lot of support from COL and the Southern African region mainly because the team approach that is being used is in line with article 7 of the *SADC Protocol on education and training* (1997). Among commitments made by representatives of members states who signed this document were to recommend to universities and other tertiary institutions in their countries that they:

- reserve at least 5% of admission for students from SADC nations other than their own;
- treat students from SADC countries as home students for purposes of fees and accommodation;
- cooperate in the design of academic programmes where appropriate, in particular programmes which are jointly taught;
- collaborate in the production of teaching and learning material, such as textbooks and computer software in order to achieve economies of scale and to support the move toward harmonising academic and professional programmes in the Region as necessary

The BA ODL collaborative approach to programme design and development is also compatible with the three priority areas that are identified in COL' three year plans (2003-2006). Thus fundraising for the programme has been much easier than it would have been if one institution was developing the same programme single-handedly.

Clearly there is no denying the reality of political pressures for Africanisation of the curriculum and the unification of Africa towards self-determination. All of this has to be done in keeping with developing educational programmes that meet the global stipulations for quality and levels of competitiveness. It is important for the team managing the development of the BA ODL to ensure that the end product does not become yet another short-term replication or reproduction of a similar programme existing elsewhere whether within or outside Africa. Therefore, the initiative is not merely about accessing funding that is available for programme development. The Programme is also not merely about reacting to the socio-political climate in the region or at global level for that matter.

Other collaboration purposes are simultaneously being served through this approach to programme design and development. For example, a repository of experience and expertise is developing not only to benefit UNISA as the central provider of the BA ODL, but also for other participating SADC members to use as a case study, point of reference and a resource pool to draw from when developing other similar programmes. The diversity in levels of ODL expertise and knowledge among team members means that while the programme is being developed, the participating individuals are sharing and developing deeper knowledge in the field of ODL. Seemingly there is irreversible economic recession manifesting itself in education and staff development. Part effect of that is shortage of scholarships for practitioners and other educationalists to continue enrolling in large numbers at overseas ODL programmes as has been traditionally the case. Therefore it has become urgent for the region to develop ODL programmes that in addition to being affordable to the majority of regional partners are also relevant to the regional needs and realities.

In the planning and materials development processes pooling was possible for two reasons. The CDEP experience had nurtured collaboration in the region and raised

expectations on the potential for the partnership to take collaboration to other levels like regional curriculum and materials development. None of the Southern African ODL institutions, including UNISA, has adequate expertise to single-handedly write the materials for all the modules required for the three years of the BA ODL. But without the support of an external agency like COL, who partly financed the regional consultation and materials development workshops, the extent of the collaboration might not have been as wide.

As the accrediting institution, UNISA-ICE, has adopted a central provider model of collaboration (London/IEC C2 BD Unit 14:42) by contracting ODL specialists from other institutions in the SADC region and other internal departments to write the learning materials. Currently UNISA retains programme delivery and support of learners. In the later stages of the programme learner support might be offered in partnership with learning centres and higher education institutions that are in countries where the BA ODL learners exist. This has been the case with the CDEP and other UNISA programmes where significant numbers of learners exist outside South Africa and a need has been identified. The single institution accreditation of the BA ODL means that the regulatory frameworks of UNISA and South Africa are currently the only ones operational. To counter-balance this situation, UNISA-ICE keeps members of the Distance Education Association of Southern Africa (DEASA) updated on the process through progress reports at the bi-annual meetings. In addition, a need for more regular cross-boarder meetings is being discussed.

Dispositional reflection

Dispositional reflection as a concept is abstract and originates from the psychology field. It is discussed in this paper briefly as a prelude to conceptual definition of dispositional reflection which forms part of the theoretical framework for this paper.
In psychology dispositions are broadly defined as personality traits and fall under the umbrella of what psychologists refer to as psychophysical structures. One of the key leaders in this area was Gordon Allport who used personal dispositions and traits as synonyms or interchangeably. Put simply, personal dispositions are linked to the level of frequency to which an individual is likely to act or react towards a given situation given factors like their attitudes, values and prior exposure to situations of a similar nature. For example, it can be assumed that physicians will perceive illness in terms of their medical background i.e. as a physical disorder. This assumption does not exclude the influence of the environment on a person's dispositional factors.

Hillier (2002; 10), in her discussion of dispositional reflection, affirms this argument when she asserts that it is a person's orientation and/or views which influence their action. Thus dispositional reflection is personal reflection on feelings and attitudes.

Following from that logic the predispositions of authors of this paper to ODL and teaching are part of the reflective practice. It is possible that at this stage of paper presentation the authors' preferences, aspirations, feelings and personal reactions to programme development to date can be safely deduced by the members of the audience. This is a luxury that reflective practice provides practitioners with – the luxury to openly explore the subjective and objective than consolidate for revision or redesigning. This is not to devalue the important role of epistemology in ODL but to acknowledge that both systems of knowledge are equally important in determining the way forward. This

approach becomes specifically valid if it is acknowledged that the authors' preferences, aspirations, feelings and personal reactions to the programme affects how the programme is managed and coordinated.

The authors' view is that ODL is a crucial tool for development in the continent because of its potential for massification of education which in turn may help to address the high levels of illiteracy in the continent. Previously, institutions in Africa had mainly trained ODL practitioners overseas or imported ODL programmes from West European contacts. Contextual relevance of these programmes has in some instances been questionable. In addition, they are expensive and raise serious questions about accessibility of formal education for the poor masses in the continent. Authors thus clearly see the regional need for home grown ODL programmes but for that to happen there needs to be a supply of appropriately trained professionals who can facilitate the processes to world class standard and with minimal exclusion of qualifying individuals. However, this is a massive task that cannot be implemented by individual education institutions in isolation. The BA ODL is viewed by the authors as a crucial part of the process towards addressing that need in the continent although initially it is implemented at regional level.

To that effect, the views of authors of this paper are informed and supported by a lot of contextual factors that were addressed earlier in this paper as well as their attitudes and values on strategies that could be implemented by the ODL community in the region in order to address the existing realities in the continent.

Experiential reflection

According to Hillier (ibid: 10) Willis describes experiential reflection as looking back on the experience and analysing what the experience was like. Experiential knowledge in this context refers to the hands on process of administering and managing the BA ODL as well as being one of the partners that directly participate in different stages of the process. An attempt is made to explore what actually happened in comparison to what was originally planned or what the people doing the reflection had thought was happening during the planning and implementation stage, the actual reality as it has been experienced as the process unfolds.

The UNISA-ICE team took the leadership role for this project with clear awareness that it was going to be the first of its kind for UNISA and most probably for the majority of representatives from partner institutions. Thus a certain level of resistance within UNISA regionally was expected. Strategies were devised and are often used to address these tensions. Also, the team was aware of several similar projects in other continents that have failed but there are also case studies indicating success.

The majority of the people who are directly participating in the different stages of this collaboration process are internationally known ODL practitioners that UNISA - ICE had worked with in the past in other similar but maybe less demanding collaboration contexts. This was considered as one of the strengths. As a result the level of resistance, support and coaxing that the UNISA-ICE often have to engage in, in order to achieve the end product is proving to be a challenge. Looking back, time constraints have always been the difficulty when drawing time plans for different stages in the programme development process. However, with each stage it is turning out that some key partners in the project tend to underestimate the amount of time that their respective roles require

of them. Thus the UNISA-ICE team in its leading role often find itself having to step in most of the time either to save the situation directly or negotiate for other partners to save the situation. Only three individuals (including the programme manager) in this collaborative process come directly from UNISA-ICE. In addition, the rest of the partners are willing to step in voluntarily but in some cases they are willing to help on condition that there is financial compensation for what they do. This is because none of the participants are working for the BA ODL full-time; all participants are doing the BA ODL work over and above their full-time employment elsewhere.

The UNISA-ICE team is also faced with the challenge of being neutral and serving all collaboration partners equally. This includes loyalty to UNISA as the provider of the programme and the employer for the UNISA-ICE team while simultaneously being fair and loyal to regional structures and their interests as part of this collaboration process. Consideration has to be also given to COL as the external funder.

The UNISA-ICE team is leading this collaboration process with much awareness that interdependence and globalisation trends can never obliterate individuality of collaborating institutions/countries and that of their representatives in the collaborative process. As the accrediting institution, UNISA risks being perceived as the dominant partner in this collaboration initiative. At the same time, since UNISA-ICE is leading the process, there is also a risk of other partners developing entitlement tendencies and demanding more than what the provider is capable of bringing into the collaboration process. For example, ICE-UNISA has managed to obtain funding for accommodation and meals of participants in programme design and development workshops. Workshop participants also receive minimal incidentals for participating. However, there have been situations where some participants question why they do not receive travel insurance.

Another example, member organisations identified staff that will be part of the materials development team. UNISA-ICE then invited the identified people to the materials development workshops. These individuals develop the materials and they have to meet the set deadlines and produce materials according to agreed content and formats. Writers are paid for first draft and final draft according to UNISA rates for the units they have written. The main benefit for the organisations participating in the BA ODL is capacity building in the development of degree level materials through international team approaches. An acknowledgement of individual staff members' contributions is included in the materials. However, there have been instances where some participants' employers question these benefits as individual rather than organisational. This is happening bearing in mind that most participants do the BA ODL work over and above their full-time work. Thus an unforeseen situation is unfolding where some institutions change their representation with each stage of programme development. Reasons range from the original person having moved elsewhere in the organisation, others take time off work to study as part of their staff or personal development process, or the original person may feel that they are no longer coping with the scheduling pressures that the BA ODL imposes on the participants. The new replacements that partner institutions send are not necessarily that knowledgeable in collaborative programme development. This is particularly the case if a partner institution sees the need to remain part of the process but do not have an appropriately knowledgeable representative to send through. Often this calls for revision of time plans in order to orientate and support the new team member. Fortunately instances like these have been few and far between.

Most of the challenges relate to programme ownership because success of the initiative depends on different partners releasing their staff members for participating in different stages of the programme development processes. Prior arrangements had been formalised before implementation with partner institutions. However, in certain instances change of hands in departmental heads and institutional restructuring means going through the process of explaining the arrangement and negotiating the release of same staff members for programme work more than once.

One might conclude that UNISA-ICE is often managing attitudes, perceptions and misconceptions about joint programme development that some managers of programme representatives hold. The reason is partly that most partner institutions have not reached a stage of defining staff release parameters/policies for joint programme development. Thus commitment to the initiative and perceived value might exist at institutional level but often shortage of staff among participating organisations and/or petty jealousies complicate management of the implementation process. There are cases where individuals from institutions are participating without support or much understanding from their institutions or line management due to individually perceived value for the programme which might clash with institutional and or departmental policies on participating in collaborative programme development. These matters affect efficiency of individuals in meeting stipulated deadlines, the quality of individual inputs and often result in the programme management team having to engage in lengthy process of negotiations and renegotiations. However, a strong regional team of programme developers is unfolding in the mist of these complicated and multi-faceted factors.

In addition, most of the original goals and objectives for this project are being fulfilled, particularly the pooling of ODL expertise that exist in the region towards upgrading the CDEP while simultaneously ensuring regional and international credibility.

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Quality Issues in Managed Learning Environments and Language Learning: American Perspectives on Irish Pre-service Teachers

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Introduction

This study addresses quality issues associated with online learning and language awareness from the perspective of pre-service teachers in Ireland as seen from an American viewpoint. The empirical basis for our investigation is the triangulated responses of the teachers to their experiences in Ireland and the reality of similar situations and the available literature in the United States. The core intention of the study is to explore, and discuss the extent to which the significant quality issue of 'critical thinking' and collaborative learning may be said to have developed throughout the online learning process. From a perspective of 'critical thinking' as a matter of change taking place through participation in the online learning process this paper attempts to assess the learning value of the processes that emerged from the viewpoint of, both designers as tutors and pre-service teachers as students.

The overall educational challenge of today's knowledge society is the enhancement of learning through ICT or IICT (Invisible Information Communication Technology). It requires creativity as well as innovation and change in educational thinking to identify educational paradigms, which allow for learning processes to unfold in virtual contexts in ways that truly provide quality in processes of learning (Sorensen & Ó Murchú, 2005).

> "Learning for learning's sake isn't enough. . . . We may learn things that constrict our vision and warp our judgment. What we must reach for is a conception of perpetual self-discovery, perpetual reshaping to realize one's goals, to realize one's best self, to be the person one could be." Gardner (1983)

As we enter the 21st Century, the concept 'critical thinking' has become more and more highly valued as a student outcome not only in academic environments, but also in professional settings. Successful global economies, and employers anticipate people who can think critically; teachers nurture students who can cogitate critically; many schools' curricula envision for fostering critical thinkers, and society itself demands citizens who can think critically. Critical thinking has been considered "integral to business and economic success in our global economy, necessary for responsible democratic citizenship, and a vital part of professional practice in a wide variety of occupations" (Facione, 2000). The mastery content knowledge is no longer satisfactory in itself; we are expected to be reflective, think creatively, solve problems, and transform our learning so as to communicate clearly. This is not to say that knowledge is not important. Effective critical thinking and problem solving actually depend upon relevant knowledge and previous experience (McKeachie, 1999; Facione, 1998). However, knowledge

acquisition ought not to be an end in itself. The ultimate goal should be to develop the ability to incorporate facts and concepts in our problem solving and evaluative thinking in a transformative manner (Ó Murchú, 2005).

We know that as humans we think and, as some assert, we are natural problem solvers (McKeachie, 1999); therefore, we have the capability to develop skills that would allow us to think critically. So why is it that we are not automatically able to think critically? Richard Paul (2000) says that "... much of our thinking, left to itself, is biased, distorted, partial, uninformed or down-right prejudiced." The good news is that we can, as educators, do something about it and teach our students to improve their thinking. As John Dewey (1916) stated: "Merely to leave everything to nature was, after all, but to negate the very idea of education; it was to trust to the accidents of circumstance."

The Nature of Critical Thinking 1

John Dewey defined the nature of reflective thought as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends" (1933, p.9). Critical thinking is generally agreed to include the evaluation of the worth, accuracy, or authenticity of various propositions, leading to a supportable decision or direction for action.

With all due respect to Dewey, the authors believe it important to also point out that the concept of 'critical thinking' has been interpreted in a variety of ways in the available literature. Moreover, there is no "official" definition of critical thinking and, in fact, there seem to be as many and varied definitions of critical thinking as there are definitions of thinking and quality. We therefore find the definition below from Scriven and Paul (1997) to be a comprehensive, inclusive and meaningful description of what a process of thinking critically involves in this study.

> Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness. It entails the examination of those structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning: purpose, problem, or question-at-issue, assumptions, concepts, empirical grounding; reasoning leading to conclusions, implication and consequences, objections from alternative viewpoints, and frame of reference. Critical thinking - in being responsive to variable subject matter, issues, and purposes - is incorporated in a family of interwoven modes of thinking, among them: scientific thinking, mathematical thinking, historical thinking, anthropological thinking, economic thinking, moral thinking, and philosophical thinking.

Research Study Design

A core group of 200 pre-service teachers in Ireland participated in a major longitudinal study which spanned the two years of their post-Graduate Diploma in Primary/Elementary Education (GDiPE). Each participant had already attained, as a

matter of necessary qualification, a primary degree whilst attending a traditional, on-campus university, and had also achieved a minimum of honours standard in their Gaelic Irish Leaving Certificate examination[23].In 2003, The Minister for Education and Science initiated, in collaboration with Hibernia College, the first ever E-Learning GDiPE on the Island or Ireland. Traditionally, all teacher education programmes were delivered in a traditional face-to-face University campus. Employing a mixed-mode and triangulated methodology, the participants perceptions of their real-time, synchronous and a-synchronous experiences both as Gaelic language teachers in classrooms and virtual learners in an MLE (Managed Learning Environment), were assessed both with the effectiveness and quality of language awareness and communicative abilities of the teachers and their actual experiences in the MLE. A small portion of the results of the three quantitative questionnaires, which were administered, triangulated with the qualitative interviews and video and audio evidence of their classroom practicum and reflections are correlated in this paper to assess and compare quality issues associated with 'critical thinking' and 'collaborative learning' as aforementioned.

Distance Education Dialogue Challenges

The online setting holds potential for vibrant interaction and rich dialogue. Unfortunately, online educational experiences can become quite wooden and lifeless at times, like a 'boring' traditional classroom.

> "When you watch students slogging through textbooks, memorising lists, being lectured at, and working on isolated skills, you begin to realise that nothing bears a greater responsibility for undermining educational excellence than the continued dominance of traditional instruction"(Strickland & Strickland, 1998).

Distance educators and their students can become disillusioned with the teaching and learning process when it lacks a dynamic interactive character. The authors believe that part of the problem involves having a rigid learning environment that fails to acknowledge that learning must be context sensitive. Scott Gray (1999, paragraph 7) offers insights into the nature of online interactions:

Good – even great – online teaching will not be –will never be built- because you can not build interaction. You enter into it, like a warm bath (shades of McLuhan) like a familiar suit, like a comfortable home. The online materials are only the tools and components of online instruction hammers and screwdrivers and saws and doorframes and kitchen cupboards and furnaces and wall-to-wall carpeting. They do not – cannot - constitute a home. The pausing, the pacing, the pushing, the pulling, the selection, maybe of this movie, that online resource project, such-and –such project – all of these occur in a dynamic fashion in the classroom, and indeed even to a large degree in online learning. Great teaching adapts and flows. The more personalized, the more context-sensitive such adaptations become, the more full the educational experience becomes, the more like a home, the less like a pile of tools (Gray, 1999).

Peters (1998) believes distance education is often delivered within the context of an industrial organizational paradigm. He voices concerns that distance education institutions use tightly structured courses with lectures and instructional activities that

[23] The Leaving Certificate is the final examination for all Irish second-level students before entering University and the results determine the student's access to various courses.

foster passive students learning patterns. “Students should not be the objects but the subjects of the teaching process” (Peters, 1998, p. 98). Contemporary distance education schools are striving to have the most effective educational programs, which encourage a dynamic combination of flexibility, individualization, and personally and professionally challenging experiences. As distance education schools grow in popularity, distance educators and their learners are raising important instructional questions about the quality of these computer mediated educational programmes. Educators are wondering whether the online format will provide adequate opportunities for genuine dialogue and social interaction that are vital elements in the learning process (Shearer, 2003).

One of this study’s participants related their positive experience when stating that “the virtual campus was exciting, as you never knew what jewel of technology was going to pop-up next as the tutor opened doors all over the world to explain and encourage collaboration and discussion.” This comment highlights the international dimension of online learning which has positive implications for sharing knowledge and skills.

The value of having a caring and reflective learning environment was affirmed by another participant, “I really believe that this course has shown me the importance of sharing everyone’s ideas equally, as shared-reflection leads to deeper understanding.” Other participants considered the online environment a rich one that offered multiple opportunities to learn from Power Point slides, debate and research issues and interact with other colleagues. A further comment related that; “E-learning is much more open to multiple opportunities to research and interact and learn.” Another participant noted that “There was never a night that did not feel good and so interesting. I could surf away and yet feel free to share and reflect. No one drove me to learn. I directed myself and felt so much a part of something wonderful and exciting. I heard, I saw, I listened, I shared, I thought, I reflected, I collaborated and I was equal in the online family. Daithi called it a community of familial practice. I call it a family of trusting thinkers, not afraid to think out loud or in silence but always welcome to be listened to.”

It is interesting to observe pre-teachers who claim to be student-centred in their educational philosophy but actually are quite controlling in their classes. The research study revealed that even though 97% of the pre-service teachers fully and openly embraced the ‘innovations’ and ‘possibilities’ of the online environment, 20% of the them were unwilling to change and use an online delivery platform to teach the Gaelic language to their students. This stated resistance to change could reflect that they were threatened by the online setting which has an open ended quality, causing some individuals to strive for security through greater control. As another participant noted; “ without the books to follow, and without the written words of the (Gaelic) language before me, I felt at times afraid to embrace the natural flow of communicative language and wanted to revert to the old ways of chalk-and-talk and books. The way I was taught Gaelic in school, and this worked for me”. The issues of contentment, familiarity and control in the educational setting are necessary for some educators, but again, 80% of the study participants demonstrated a total willingness to make changes in their teaching styles and perceived roles in the classroom. One study participant made a candid observation stating; “I now know that my perceived role as a teacher – the centre of the classroom- is not really feasible anymore as the kids I teach are also teachers in their own right and should be encouraged to think for themselves and innovate.”
Collison et al (2000, p. 49) shares eight facilitator tasks, which encourage relevant online work and interaction:

1. Leading introductory, community-building activities
2. Providing virtual 'hand holding' to the digitally challenged
3. Acknowledging the diversity of participants' backgrounds and interests
4. Infusing personality with tone, graphics and humor
5. Maintaining a nurturing pace of responding
6. Keeping up with a pace set
7. Organizing posts and discussion threads
8. Balancing private email and public discussion.

The eight tasks reveal the need for instructors to take a comprehensive view of interaction by making it a major objective within their curriculum plans. Students want intellectually and emotionally engaging dialogues which have connections to their current and future professions. Garrison (2003, 1997) offers a sophisticated paradigm that classifies self-directed learning into three categories: self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation. These three elements acknowledge the importance of recognizing the need for students to become less dependent upon their instructors to acquire skills and knowledge. Teachers must offer appropriate guidance and a class structure that not only gives student instructional activities, but also encourage personal responsibility and accountability for meeting course learning objectives.

It should be recognized that distance education degree programmes are not for all students. One author has observed that some students at the University of Phoenix (UOP) have related stories of being frustrated in their online classes. The students decided to switch to conventional face-to-face classes because they missed the physical, inter-personal presence and interaction of teachers and students. This naturally raises the questions concerning the characteristics of a successful online student? The literature points to three key characteristics:

- good work ethic,
- ability to work collaboratively and
- the ability to think reflectively.

Enrollment officials and administrators must work together to insure they help prospective students assess whether they can effectively participate in online classes (Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

Nature of Critical Thinking 2

Our research project explored the intellectual dimensions of computer-mediated education. Study participants appreciated the flexibility of working in the discussion format, which gave them the freedom to participate and reflect on topics before sharing with their classmates and instructor.

Participant 033 "I felt like I was part of everyone's learning. Like a family of thinkers on the net. It was a great feeling of confidence".

Participant 106 "there was a constant active exchange of ideas and thoughts. Never a dull moment for the grey cells to rest."

Participant 25 “I always felt that it was up to me to set the goals and direct my own learning but I never felt alone in my work. The group were always there for me, anytime any place, the joy of exchange and thinking together.”

Participant 127 “We were able to think creatively, try to solve problems, and make decisions about the teaching and methodologies and other plans as one team. It was alive and fun.”

Veteran teachers will admit that integrating critical thinking instruction into their classes is a most daunting task. Teachers who wish to enhance the teaching and learning process realize that fostering critical thinking skills will require extra work to effectively communicate complex ideas to their students. Bullen’s research (1998) reveals that a student’s ability to demonstrate critical thinking skills during online discussions is influenced by four major factors:

- cognitive maturity
- teaching style of instructor
- student’s prior learning experiences
- degree of understanding the critical thinking process

The list of factors reveals that students will vary in their understanding of critical thinking skills and cognitive abilities. Therefore, teachers will need to develop a set of strategies that will help them meet a diversity of student needs.
One study participant commented on the intellectual climate, Participant 35 “The design of the HELMS[24] environment encouraged us to think outside the box. We worked together to solve problems and to find ways of expanding the linguistic environment of the Gaelic language. The web and the design attracted us to a honey pot of possibilities. It was ever changing and seriously challenging in a fun way, but I was never alone, or so I knew anyway!”

Conclusion

> Education in its deepest sense and at whatever age it takes place, concerns the opening of identities – exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state. (Wenger, 1998).

Although appearing to be in the realm of philosophy or literature studies, critical thinking now emphasizes the mental attitudes or "dispositions" and the application of reasoning to everyday situations.

Critical thinking across the disciplines share common features and again were reaffirmed in our study.

1. Critical thinking is a learnable skill with teachers and participants serving as resources.
2. Problems, questions, and language issues serve as the source of motivation for the learner.

[24] HELMS is the MLE employed by Hibernia College, Ireland to deliver its Interwise, online modules and lessons.

3. Courses are assignment-centred rather than text or lecture oriented.
4. Goals, methods, and evaluation emphasize using content rather than simply acquiring it.
5. Students need to formulate and justify their ideas in writing.
6. Students collaborate to learn and enhance their thinking and language skills (adapted and enhanced from Meyers, 1985).

These straightforward ideas were easily applicable to the online setting. Instructors must refocus their thinking away from individual mastery of the language resources and the product of competency. The focus should be instead on teaching the process of information and language awareness and discovery within the learner's own contextual meaning as a pre-service teacher. Will the sought after information solve the problem, will it lead to communicative, collaborative language awareness and learning, and the self-construction of knowledge? These should be the leading objectives as we practice and mentor the goals of "communicative language awareness and usage" in an on online MLE.

This investigation highlights the fact that online, higher education is an evolving entity that challenges both students and tutors to reflect on their respective roles and responsibilities. Students must develop their self-directed learning skills and adapt their communication habits to be effective in the online environment. Moreover, educators play a vital instructional role in promoting consistent and relevant interaction and collaboration between students and with their tutors. Affective responses have a major impact on the quality of communication and interaction within an online class. Garrison & Anderson (2003) argues for classifying interactions under a broader category called social presence which includes three categories: affective, open communication and cohesive communication. What is social presence? According to Meyer (2002), it refers to “the degree to which a person is perceived as real in an on-line conversation” (p. 59). Therefore, social presence is part of a larger and complex set of interactions involving learner control and communication factors (Mortera-Gutierrez, 2002).

“Today’s manipulative attitude towards standards is in part a product of disappointment with the experience of reform in education, culture and social policy” (Furedi, 2004, p. 17). Online education is not immune from negative social trends which can undermine the teaching and learning process. Contemporary instructors play a vital role in shaping the intellectual depth of their online communities by helping their students become reflective and self-directed, critical learners.

Our research shows that overall the GDiPE pre-service teachers had a very positive impression and experienced in the online MLE. The core intention of the study was to explore, and discuss the extent to which the significant quality issue of ‘critical thinking’ and collaborative learning may be said to have developed throughout the online learning process, and their responses undoubtedly showed the collaborative and communicative reality of their Gaelic language experiences throughout the eighteen months. Moreover 100% of the participants indicated that their communicative Gaelic language and collaborative experiences had ‘improved’ and ‘benefited’ from the GDiPE online. From a perspective of ‘critical thinking’ as a matter of change taking place through participation in the online learning process, their responses again demonstrated the learning value of the progression that emerged as the existence of meaningful, responsible and innovative exchanges were again and again reiterated in their responses. Finally the authors contend

that the prior academic and social interactional experiences and maturity of the participants were very significant contributing factors in the participants' affirmations of collaborative and communicative language learning and emergence of a sometimes 'unspoken' realization and existence of 'critical thinking' skills as confirmed and outlined in the literature of both Collison et al (2000, p. 49) and Bullen's research (1998), we also contend that a further comparative study with 'first-time' online students not possessing the prior knowledge and experience of this GdiPE group would be of further addition to the international literature in this whole area.

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Reflective Practice: Development of Teacher Reflective Practitioners in Kenya

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Introduction

The Kenya Government received financial and technical support from the Department for International Development (DfID) of the United Kingdom to enhance primary education through the Strengthening of Primary Education Project (SPRED). The programme has been ongoing since 1998. One of the components of the SPRED programme was the School-based Teacher Development (SbTD).

The SbTD programme targeted all public primary schools in Kenya (about 18,000). In each public primary school, three teachers were targeted-one each for English, Mathematics and Science. A total of 54,000 teachers were therefore initially targeted to undertake the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programme. Four modules were developed such that each teacher studied the core module and one of the subject modules. One theme running through the entire programme was the development of teacher reflective practitioners. The modules and the other support documents such as the handbooks and the diaries incorporated reflective practice development. This paper highlights the development of reflective practitioners among Kenyan primary school teachers.

Background

Reflective Practice is an important aspect in the teaching-learning process. Through reflective practice, teachers are able to challenge their ideas about teaching and learning. As teachers reflect, they are able to stretch their thoughts and enquiry further and in the process improve on their teaching approaches and hence enhance the learning of their students.

For a long time in Kenya, teacher reflection on teaching and learning had not been emphasised as a concept. No systematic effort had been made to incorporate it in the teacher's daily routine till 1998 when the Strengthening of Primary Education II Project (SPRED II, later SPRED III) was initiated. During the design, development and implementation of the School-based Teacher Development (SbTD) component of the SPRED III project, reflective practice and the development of reflective practitioners was the core theme. The distance learning materials and the support documents thus produced had to emphasize this core theme consistently. This paper reports on the SbTD component and hence it will focus on the theme: **How one learns to be a reflective practitioner: The Kenyan experience**.

ODL Material developed for SbTD

The SbTD component of the SPRED programme was developed by Education Practitioners such as Inspectors of Schools, Teacher Trainers and Education Management Trainers. There were four modules namely: The **Core module** which focused on the principles of good primary practice, the **English module** which emphasised the key English language teaching and learning principles and the **Mathematics module** that emphasised the teaching and learning approaches in Mathematics. Finally there was the **Science module** that focused on the teaching and learning of Science. The writers were supported by Open and Distance Learning (ODL) experts as consultants in the development of the exemplary learning materials.

Reflection Approaches

The 54,000 teachers initially targeted for the SbTD programme (3 teachers in each public primary school-for English, Science, and Mathematics) had to undertake a five-month distance learning programme. The programme had a number of support mechanisms put in place. The following aspects were central to the programme.

TAC Tutor Training and Teacher Induction Course

The Teachers' Advisory Centre Tutors (TAC Tutors) who are based in Education Zones and therefore the closest officers to the teachers in schools were trained as the key support cadre for the teachers. The role of the TAC tutors is quality development at the zonal level. On average an educational zone in Kenya comprises 20 primary schools. The SbTD component was designed such that the TAC tutors would support the Key Resource Teachers (KRTs) in the two-day induction course, the school visits for teaching observation, and marking of the Tutor Marked Assignments (TMA). The TAC tutors were particularly trained to become reflective practitioners themselves so that they would provide the key support to teachers to enable them to practice reflective teaching. The TAC Tutors therefore had to establish their own reflection diaries in which they logged in the key aspects and findings as they provided the support to KRTs.

The TAC tutors were trained for a two-week period by the Component Steering Committee Members who were the designers of the programme as well as writers of the modules. The training focused on empowering the TAC tutors on the support they were to provide to the KRTs. During the two-day induction the KRTs were introduced to Distance Learning approaches, provided with the study materials (modules and teacher support handbooks) and informed about the administrative structures that were put in place for the programme.

Module-specific Reflection Aspects

a) Intext Questions, Activities and Classroom Activities

The four modules were developed with three key activity-based approaches incorporated. The three were In-text questions, Activities and Classroom Activities. The **Intext questions** were simple inbuilt questions that did not require the KRT to write down the responses. These were questions to enhance the teachers' reflective capability by requiring them to pause for a moment and think about a certain aspect of their teaching

practice. An example of an intext question is: ***Think about the positive and negative assumptions you have about your pupils.***

The **activities** were developed from the intext questions and extended so that the KRTs would respond to them on their own either at home or in school as they reflected on their teaching. An example of a classroom activity:

- The activity provides examples of what the teacher considers to be the academic strengths of three learners in one column and what the teacher likes about the same learners in another column.
- The teacher is then asked to complete the same for all the learners in class as a way of developing positive thinking about the learners.

The **classroom activities** were a further development from the activities and these ones were to be tackled in class with the involvement of the learners. The KRTs therefore had to incorporate the classroom activities in their lesson plans. An example of a classroom activity:

- A teacher is asked to invite a colleague to observe him/her teach a lesson.
- The teacher-observer should focus on the introduction, the lesson structure, suitability of resources used, pupils' involvement in the lesson, and the achievement of objectives.
- After the lesson, the two teachers discuss the comments arising as a result of the observation.

b) Learner group work, teacher collaboration and Self Help Groups (SHG)

The teachers were provided with guidelines and opportunities to collaborate with each other both at school level and at the zonal level. The school-based teacher collaboration took the form of discussions and reflections on the teaching and learning process, joint planning and team teaching as well as colleague classroom observation. At the zonal level, KRT Self Help Groups (SHGs) were formed such that the teachers would meet on designated days once a month to collaborate and discuss their progress and findings and hence help each other in the reflective practice. The KRT Self Help Group concept can be compared to the Maine School Leadership Network in which it is reported that the Colleague-Critic Teams (CCT) were more like "fellow travellers and critical friend listeners and supporters" who provided a kind of companionship and more sets of eyes and ears to reflect on participants' progress and provided counsel on next steps (Donaldson, Bowe, Mackenzie and Marnik, 2004).

The KRTs were required to come up with their own agenda for the meetings and invite the TAC tutors if they wished. They would then take a record of their deliberations for future reference.

Reflection diary

One important aspect of the SbTD programme was the reflection diary. The reflection diary was required to enhance teacher reflection by enabling them continue with the "self-dialogue" on their teaching and their learners' learning. The KRTs therefore logged in the reflection diary the happenings in their teaching and their learners' learning so that

they would further reflect on the issues and situations even after the lessons. They were hence supposed to ask themselves questions such as:

- Did I achieve what I set out to do?
- Did the pupils understand the lesson, or did I confuse them?
- What should I change next time?
- What else could I do to help them understand?

Course handbook, Tutor handbook, and Administration handbook

Course handbook, Tutor's handbook and administration handbook were developed as a means of providing on-going support to the KRT, the tutors and the administrators such as head teachers and District Education Officers. In case there were any frustrations or problems, then they would easily fall back to the handbooks for support. The course handbook particularly provided the TMA questions such that the teacher had them from the beginning of the programme. The Tutor's handbook on the other hand provided further support in the marking including the guidelines for the marking.

Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs)

Tutor Marked Assignments were designed to enhance teacher reflection in the sense that they were not academic-oriented but rather practice based. In other words, the answers to the TMAs emphasised what the KRTs did and what else they should have done and how they would approach the same aspects next time. The TMAs were reflection reports of the teachers' teaching. There were three TMAs done over the five month duration of the programme. One TMA was done with the focus on the core module while two TMAs focused on the subject specific module. The TMAs were marked by the TAC tutors and it was expected that no two TMA responses from two different teachers could be the same as each classroom and lesson presents its unique challenges and each teacher is unique and hence handles the challenges differently. It was hence very possible to identify the KRTs who had not paused to think about the intext questions, those who had not done the activities and classroom activities as they were all interrelated and a development from one to the other.

An example of a TMA question:

- Unit 1 of the Core Module is about becoming a reflective teacher, that is, one that thinks about his/her teaching and the children's learning.
- Describe two Classroom Activities, or lessons that you have carried out and their significance, in terms of your teaching and, your learners' learning.
- The significance should be in relation to topics explored in the following units: Unit 2-Communication in the Classroom; Unit 3-Collaborative Learning; Unit 4-Children's Learning.
- Be clear about which aspects of your teaching the units made you think about. Show how reading the study text helped your thinking.
- Also consider the implications for your future teaching.

Tutor visits

TAC tutor visits to schools was a requirement for the SbTD programme for the sake of observation during classroom teaching so that the tutors could identify the areas the teachers needed to be supported to improve and incorporate the principles of good primary practice. The implementation of this phase of the SbTD took a professional collaborative form and not the "unfriendly" school inspection approach. The TAC tutor therefore had to discuss with the KRTs when he/she would visit their schools and hence the teachers prepared for the visits. The TAC tutors would then discuss their findings with the KRTs and help them improve in their teaching and reflections.

Monitoring and Evaluation Findings

Monitoring and evaluation was an ongoing part of the SbTD throughout its implementation. From the writing of the modules, to the school teaching and marking aspects, the project co-ordination team and the component steering committee were involved in monitoring and evaluation at different levels. The Provincial and District Education Office members of staff continue to do monitoring of the programme as it is still on-going in many areas especially those areas with many schools. Some of the findings that have been recorded are as follows:

- Not all the initially targeted number of 54,000 KRTs was covered because some schools were small and hence could not raise three KRTs. However, about 47,000 KRTs representing 96 % of the KRTs who enrolled have successfully completed the programme to date.
- There were some cases of natural attrition especially through death of some enrolled KRTs. The retirement concern had been taken care of through the criteria that specified that KRTs must have at least 5 years before retirement.
- There are reports of a marked change in the attitudes towards teaching by the KRTs. This is reflected through the responses teachers give to visiting monitors such as:

  "SbTD has helped me in my personal life, my relationships and the way I interact with pupils and other people".

  "SbTD has helped me professionally. I now reflect… when I taught the pupils I realised there was a problem of understanding".

  "I am more receptive to the learners and I give them a chance to express themselves…. I now take time for self-assessment".

- The envisaged lead by the KRTs in professional development at the schools by working through Subject Panels has not really taken root across the country. There are isolated cases of success in this area, however, there is need to make follow-ups on the best way the SbTD can be implemented to have an impact on the other teachers in the schools.

Development of other modules-Swahili and Guidance and Counselling

As a result of the success of the SbTD in the three core subjects of English, Mathematics and Science, the government of Kenya in collaboration with the World Bank and the

DfID extended the funding to develop two modules-one for Swahili language and one for guidance and counselling as well as the development of audio and audio visual materials to further support head teachers and KRTs especially in the implementation of teaching reforms as a result of the Free Primary Education (FPE) Policy. The modules and audio/video tapes are still being developed and the reflective practice theme is a key factor in the materials being developed.

Way Forward

There is need to incorporate the concept of reflective practice in an Information Communication Technology (ICT) environment. The teachers should be empowered to continue reflecting through the use of email messages, listserv and bulletin boards in a community of learning setting. It has been argued that one promising solution to overcome the teachers' isolation in their work is by use of an electronic discussion board, a type of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) (Nicholson and Bond, 2003).

The report on the Maine School Leadership Network (MSLN), intimates that the programme combines individual coaching, reflection on practice and a community of learners' network to support the efforts of principals and teacher leaders to develop effective and sustainable leadership for Maine schools. The authors report that their experience with the MSLN indicates vast potential of a school-based model of learning that focuses on learning from leadership work itself, supported by a network of other learners. Such a model according to them encourages leaders to take the risks necessary to extend their skills and enhance their effectiveness (Donaldson, Bowe, Mackenzie and Marnik, 2004).

Some scholars (Windschitl and Sahl, 2002 citing Stein and Brown, 1997) indicate that recent scholarship on teacher learning has shifted the focus from teachers as isolated individuals to the groups and communities in which teachers participate. Teachers thinking, in this view is social in nature and distributed across individuals. They argue that attention is thus redirected from the individual to the various groups and settings in which learning occurs hence learning becomes situated in the fields of interaction among individuals.

The use of New Information Communication Technologies (NICTs) and Community Networks will enhance teacher reflective practice as the teachers will be able to exchange views and ideas on how to tackle certain topics in the various subjects and how to involve the learners in the teaching of that particular topic. This kind of investment will require substantial sums of money for providing the infrastructure, the hardware and training the teachers on use of New Information Communication Technologies.

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The care and feeding of online facilitators and distance tutors

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Prologue

Speaking to over 300 distance educators, a presenter outlines his institution's strategies for supporting online learners. The institution offers over 400 online courses to more than 6000 students, on a continuous intake basis. He highlights the expectation that all 150 tutors will return marked assignments to learners within two days of receipt. No one in the audience questions the implications of this expectation for tutors, or asks how tutors manage the need to be on call and ready to respond to an average of 40 learners within 48 hours, 365 days a year.

In her latest book, *No Time: Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life*, Heather Menzies points out that the electronic communications systems that keep us online and on call 24 hours a day create a disconnectedness from our own individual realities, fragmenting human interaction and depleting our capacity for meaningful dialogue based on our experience.

Introduction

Online facilitators and distance tutors have the challenge of creating meaningful learning relationships with people whom they may never see in person, using many of the same communications technologies that crowd the learners' work lives. At the same time as they are helping learners to meet their goals, facilitators and tutors are also accountable to the educational provider for maintaining standards and ensuring the academic credibility of the programmes they offer.

As the topic of learner support gains more attention in the field of open and distance learning, (Lentell 2003, Mills, 2003, Tait, 2004, Tait and Mills 2003), it should also highlight the needs of those who provide much of the learner support; facilitators and tutors of online and distance learning. This article will explore why and how providers of online and distance learning can support tutors and facilitators in their efforts to sustain learners and create a context of connectedness and competence. After considering an example of effective support for facilitators/tutors, the article outlines key areas where tutors and facilitators need support and the benefits of meeting these needs.

Why this issue deserves attention

Some distance learning organisations, notably the UK Open University, have always relied on tutors who are not full-time staff members of the university, and are often employed elsewhere. As open and distance learning expands, more organisations and institutions contract with part-time facilitators and tutors who are themselves at a distance from the provider, and who, like the learners, are often juggling multiple commitments to part-time work, family and community. This is the case in formal and non-formal education and in staff development within organisations.

The facilitator/tutor role is also expanding, because of changes in open and distance learning. Increasingly, as open and distance learners compile a portfolio of courses from a number of institutions, learners may not have much connection with any one provider, relying more on the facilitator or tutor for guidance about planning a learning program and information on institutional issues and requirements. [25]

As well, as more open and distance learning programs are offered internationally, facilitators and tutors must be able to respond to increasingly diverse learners and learner needs, and to cultures and contexts that are not familiar to them. Participants may face extremely challenging work and life situations, conduct their studies using their second or third language, and apply their learning in circumstances not anticipated by course planners or facilitators.

Tutors and facilitators need access to organisational resources and reliable policy guidance in order to address these situations. At the same time, from their direct contact with learners, facilitators and tutors can convey the learners' reality to the educational provider, and prompt the provider to respond appropriately to situations that require some flexibility and/or a reconsideration of policies and procedures.

Contract tutors and facilitators are hired for their expertise in their subject and in open and distance learning, but they may not be familiar with the organisational culture, policies and values that shape the learning context, and can affect how facilitators and tutors relate to learners. Without support from the provider, facilitators and tutors can feel the same distance deficit as learners do without support from their tutor or facilitator. Connectedness is as important for facilitators and tutors as it is for learners.

The idea for this article emerged out of discussions among three of us involved in a distance learning program within a UN organisation; two of us as contract facilitators and one as the program coordinator within the organisation. The course, provided to staff members working and learning in challenging situations, has successfully enabled participants to develop their own skills in providing and coordinating staff development for their colleagues. As a result, more staff will have access to learning opportunities and the organisation is better able to achieve its goal of accessible, decentralised staff learning.

The UNHCR's[26] Facilitation of Learning Programme (FOLP) illustrates many of the issues that need both organisational as well as facilitator support. These include logistical challenges, personal crises, technical problems, and balancing work/life demands with learning. Our experience also demonstrates the difference that organisational support makes for both facilitators and learners.

[25] The field of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has close links to open and distance learning because it explores ways of articulating and accrediting learning achieved through a variety of routes. Elena Michelson, Angie Wong and the late Michael Young are among the proponents of both PLAR and open distance and flexible learning.

[26] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Background to UNHCR and FOLP

UNHCR's mandate is to provide protection and support for refugees, ensuring they have the basic necessities of life and that their rights as refugees under the 1951 Convention are protected. UNHCR has about 6,000 staff in more than 116 countries, working with about 17 million refugees worldwide. The following quote from its Learning Policy explains the challenge of staff development:

> *How do 6,000 staff in more than 200 different locations, all with different learning preferences, a heavy work schedule and a wide range of learning needs effectively enhance their competencies?(UNHCR 2004)*

The answer is a decentralised model of provision, so that staff in any office in any location have access to learning opportunities. In turn, this means that each location needs staff with skills in planning and facilitating learning, a role that staff often assume in addition to their other responsibilities. FOLP was developed to help staff develop the facilitation skills they need for these roles and responsibilities.

FOLP is offered as a paced distance and face-to-face course to groups of about 15 to 20 people, and a typical group could include:

- a learning coordinator in a small office in a remote area, who handles this role in addition to other administrative or training responsibilities;
- a protection officer responsible for familiarising staff, NGOs and government officials with refugee rights;
- IT staff, who train others and serve as technical support;
- staff who work in partnership with NGOs and support projects that involve training.

Although FOLP participants have regular access to email and a structured work environment, as UNHCR staff they face day-to-day challenges; demanding workloads, rapidly changing priorities, urgent assignments to other locations, security alerts, loss of communications and emergency situations. In addition, many have family responsibilities, caring for children and/or parents. Most are operating in their second or third language, and all have to deal with the intricacies inherent in an international organisation.

FOLP, first developed in 2001 and revised in 2004, is a 20-week distance course that enables participants to work with course materials and with colleagues to plan, design, and implement learning activities relevant to their own contexts and appropriate to their level of expertise and experience. Participants work collaboratively with each other and systematically with the course resources to proceed through each stage of planning and facilitating learning, including needs assessment, provision and evaluation. Participants are able to apply course activities to their work role, take part in email discussions, and work on individual and group course projects throughout the course. At week 12, participants meet for a four-day face-to-face session, when they can share their course projects, practise facilitation skills, and further develop cooperative learning.

The FOLP facilitator:

- creates a supportive atmosphere for learning by encouraging online discussion, providing feedback and support on individual and group projects;

- promotes collaborative learning and development of collaboration skills;
- helps learners to participate at their level of competence. The course is flexible enough to accommodate the needs of those with different levels of facilitation skills and experience, and facilitators can help participants to identify how they can best use the opportunity.

Issues that arise in FOLP

FOLP is a paced course, which means that everyone must be at roughly the same place at the same time to enable meaningful discussion and allow groups to work together on projects. However, pacing presents challenges, especially when participants have limited time for learning, face pressing commitments for work or emergency situations, or sometimes lack sufficient support from colleagues or supervisors.

In a context that is geared to action and to practical applications, people are not always attuned to the need to take a step back, assess needs and plan learning. Participants sometimes feel they must develop a solution or product before they have given themselves time for reflection and analysis about what is needed or appropriate.

Participants also need to apply their learning to practice, and sometimes, access to opportunities to practice may be difficult to negotiate in their work context.

Working across international time zones means that participants and the facilitator can be up to 18 hours apart depending on their locations, resulting in communication delays and emails composed in early morning or late-night hours, when people are not always at their best.

How facilitators can help

Facilitators help participants address some of these challenges by:

- providing encouragement, through individual and group contact, and suggesting strategies for resolving issues;
- sustaining participants as they rethink their assumptions about the learning process, and assuring them that they are developing skills and improving their ability to respond appropriately to a range of learning needs;
- helping to bring common issues out for general discussion,
- problem solving, suggesting strategies that enable participants to sustain their course and work commitments;
- providing clear feedback in a way that responds to the particular circumstances of an individual or group;
- conveying and demonstrating adult learning principles, so that participants feel more confident in moving away from didactic to participatory approaches;
- recognising the time commitment that participants invest in the course, and occasionally reminding everyone about the effect of time zone delays.

Strategies participants developed

Participants have demonstrated resourcefulness in dealing with many of these challenges. Groups often give each other permission to “check-in and check-out”; to participate

when they can, notify others they'll be busy on assignment or out of email contact, provide an informal handover to others in their small group so they can carry on a task during the person's absence, and then catch up after they return. By doing this, they draw on their own work experience, and on strategies they've developed for maintaining continuity with frequent staff rotations and short-term field assignments.

Participants apply ideas from FOLP to their day-to-day practice while they're in the course, and report on learning sessions they have facilitated, their reflections on the experience, and how their new learning has changed their approach and operating assumptions. Participants also share ideas and materials from FOLP with colleagues in their own workplaces, so they can make the principles of FOLP more transparent to others.

Where facilitators are limited

As external consultants, facilitators are not in a position to address internal organisational issues. For example, in situations where participants are struggling with an extra workload and the course demands, facilitators cannot discuss participants' work commitments with supervisors. Also, facilitators may not be familiar with an individual's work context or personal challenges that may be affecting their learning.

Support from the course coordinator

The course coordinator provides support to both the facilitators and the learners by addressing many of the issues that involve organisational dynamics. Her role has involved informal discussions with learners and their supervisors, consultations with facilitators and the organisation to develop appropriate responses to difficult situations, following up with logistical or financial problems, and developing guidelines that clarify expectations of participants and facilitators. As facilitators, we can attest to the value of support from someone within the organisation who is familiar with the organisational culture and can contribute her judgement and knowledge in guiding the course operation and in handling unexpected situations.

Broader aspects of support for facilitators and tutors

The UNCHR FOLP course is one example of how facilitators and organisational staff can work together for the benefit of learners in quite challenging situations. To explore the issue from a range of perspectives, during the 2005 conference of the Canadian Association for Distance Education, the author invited distance educators in a group session to consider four fictitious case studies illustrating situations in which both the facilitator and the learners needed support. The cases included:

- a distance learner facing personal difficulties, whose learning group believes she is at risk;
- a small group who cannot agree on an approach to their major course project,
- a learner who seems to be guilty of plagiarism, and
- international learners who cannot get technical support they need to re-establish access to a web-based course.

In the situation of a learner in crisis, group members indicated that facilitators need a clear definition of their responsibilities that identifies what issues the facilitator is and is not expected to handle, and information about resources the facilitator can recommend to learners. One participant also recommended encouraging facilitators to develop and use their interpersonal skills so they can respond with compassion to learners in crisis.

To address problems in learner group dynamics, session participants felt that facilitators need information about accepted practice and how similar situations have been handled in previous courses. Also, facilitators need to know about learners' backgrounds and biographies that may help explain conflict situations. Facilitators who are new to the course may need briefing about helping groups develop problem solving skills.

The group suggested that facilitators need organisational information and support when dealing with suspected plagiarism, such as a clear organisational policy on plagiarism that is provided to both learners and facilitators. Plagiarism would be less likely with changes to the course design, so that learners were required to provide a piece of work at different stages of development, rather than just the finished assignment. Other course facilitators can be helpful in sharing experiences about similar situations and providing support and suggestions.

In the situation in which participants could not get technical support, the group felt that the facilitator should be the first point of contact when there are technical problems, but the facilitator should advise the course coordinator immediately about lack of technical support, and the course coordinator should follow up. The facilitator may also be able to encourage learners to provide some measure of technical support for each other.

Key areas of support

We can identify several key areas in which facilitators and tutors need support, and the kinds of support they need. Generally, facilitators and tutors need information, communication, and moral support. Facilitators and tutors use their range of personal attributes, affective and cognitive, when supporting learners, and also need support that corresponds to these different levels of human interaction.

These are some key support needs:

- Access to information relevant to the course operation and management. Tutors and facilitators need to know enough about the organisation's processes and structures, including the kind of informal knowledge about "how things work around here" – so that they can understand operating guidelines and convey these to learners. This should include clear policies about key issues, such as assessment and plagiarism, details of academic regulations, and information about resources available for learners, such as counselling or skills development.
- Background information about how the course has operated, and other tutor/facilitators' experiences with it. This is especially important the first time that a facilitator or tutor offers the course, but this cumulative knowledge and experience is helpful for everyone, as it enables tutors or facilitators to place a particular learning situation in perspective and make judgements based on broader experience.

- Opportunities to communicate issues and concerns to someone in the organisation who can respond appropriately; ie, by recommending a course of action for the tutor or facilitator, making a decision, investigating the situation further, or referring the question for a policy decision.
- Opportunities to share their insights based on first hand experience with learners and the course with organisational staff, who can take these insights into account in planning changes to courses or provision methods.
- Recognition of the value of the facilitator or tutor's contribution to the learning process, for example, by sharing positive feedback from learners and others.
- Establishing realistic workloads and timelines for tutors/facilitators to respond to learners, so that they are able to provide thoughtful and thorough feedback to learners.

Strategies for providing support

Many of the strategies for providing support to facilitators and tutors are remarkably simple, and they benefit learners, facilitators/tutors, and the learning provider.

Our collective experience confirms the value of having a course coordinator; a staff member in the organisation who is familiar with the course, the organisation, the learners' needs and the facilitators and tutors. A course coordinator typically can make decisions about routine questions and issues, and is in a position to consult with other decision makers about difficult or complex issues, or policy questions that are new to the organisation. With a course coordinator as liaison, facilitators and tutors can convey their experience and observations about the learners to the organisation.

It is also enormously helpful to have a process that enables facilitators and tutors to support each other and collectively identify issues that they encounter in their work. For example, regular email discussions among tutors of Writing Effectively courses offered through the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) enable tutors to share their tutoring techniques, exchange ideas about challenging situations, and clarify a broad range of issues about learner needs. The course coordinator's participation in the discussion sustains the link between tutors and COL. Discussions are usually scheduled once during the course period and tend to be focused and manageable because they have a defined duration of about four days.

In other situations, tutors often form informal discussion groups to share ideas: including a course coordinator in the discussion helps to maintain continuity and communication.

If learners may need technical support, it is essential to have a good level of communication between facilitators/tutors and the technical support person, and a clear understanding of both technical and individual expectations. Facilitators or tutors are often the first to know about technical problems that learners encounter, and can help learners to identify the specific technical problem to the technical support person. The facilitators/tutors' awareness of the learners' context and technical resources should be recognised and taken into account when choosing systems and software.

Benefits to the organisation

Providing "care and feeding" for facilitators and tutors benefits the educational provider as much as it benefits learners, tutors and facilitators.

Sustaining a close link with tutors/facilitators enables the organisation to remain close to the learners, so the organisation can respond more quickly and appropriately to issues. This can improve retention rates, and, in turn, increase the demand for their courses and programs. Facilitators and tutors often find out about other topics or subjects that learners want to study, and can help the organisation recognise opportunities to expand their offerings. In staff development situations, facilitators and tutors can sometimes recognise specific learning needs and suggest strategies to encourage increased participation in learning programmes.

Tutors' and facilitators' advocacy for manageable, accessible technology can help the organisation to respond with appropriate software that is workable for all learners, and avoid excluding prospective learners due to overly demanding technology requirements.

Keeping in touch with tutors and facilitators helps to ensure continuity of concern, as David Sewart has termed the need for close connections between all elements of distance education provision, including tutoring, counselling and advising. Tutors and facilitators who feel they have a meaningful role in this endeavour are more likely to find satisfaction in their work and continue in it, so that the organisation benefits from their cumulative experience.

Tutors and facilitators can contribute valuable input to evaluation of courses and services provided to learners, based on their observations and informal feedback from learners. They are in a good position to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of a course and to identify recurring issues that learners encounter in their dealings with the organisation.

Conclusion

In summary, facilitators/tutors need:

- organisational support to help them deal with issues that affect the learning context; individual learners' personal and work situations and group dynamics among learners;
- background information that helps them deal with issues related to organisational policy and values;
- ongoing dialogue with organisation staff about policy and procedural issues, technical support, and potential improvements to course design and provision.

For many years, open and distance learning has championed the value of meeting learners' needs, and of the centrality of the tutor or facilitators' role in responding to learner needs, but has not often acknowledged the facilitators/tutors' needs for support to carry out this role. As facilitators and tutors take on expanded roles in sustaining online and distance learners over increasingly greater geographical, social and cultural distances, it is time to recognise the importance of organisational support in helping facilitators and tutors to remain competent and connected.

Note: This article has used the UNCHR FOLP as one example, but it is also based on other experiences of the author and of colleagues Kathleen Anderson and Carolynn Oleniuk, including tutoring Writing Effectively for WHO and UNHCR (a program operated by Commonwealth of Learning), and facilitating graduate and senior undergraduate adult education courses and Certificate in Adult and Continuing Education (CACE) courses. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not represent policies of UNHCR or Commonwealth of Learning.

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What am I doing here? An example of reflection-in-action

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Introduction

This paper derives from my experience of moderating two Open University online courses, T183 "Design and the Web", and TT280 "Web Basics: Design, Development and Management". I have now moderated several presentations of each, working in both cases with a team of online colleagues.

This paper is the result of an informal reflective process based mostly on dealing with issues as they arise within course presentations and debating these issues with colleagues to arrive at practical solutions.

The structure of each course is fixed by the course team, and directed during presentation by the course team leader, but the practical working out of the way things happen is up to the moderators, as well as the students. Given that the moderators develop a style of team working, combining individual availability and strengths, the process could be described as a collaborative reflection-in-action. The online environment shapes this process to some extent: the easy availability of colleagues via asynchronous communication means that ideas and light bulb moments need not be forgotten or crafted before being presented for colleagues' reactions.

My various reflections over the last few presentations have crystallised into an attempt to define more closely what function we are actually fulfilling as moderators, in particular how much teaching is involved in the moderating role, and what kind of learning environment we are creating.

The two courses belong to different suites - T183 is part of the Relevant Knowledge suite, and TT280 the Certificate in Web Applications Development – but the structure is similar. The students receive the course materials in paper, electronic and online form; they have no tutor; they have access to online conferences, using FirstClass conferencing software, with no obligation to use them; they are assessed by mid course computer marked assignments (CMAs) and an End Of Course Assessment (ECA). There is no feedback mechanism during the course except for CMA marks, and informal opportunities provided by the conferences.

The job description

The main features are as follows:

general support
responding to queries
advising on support services
upholding code of conduct

organising, summarising, archiving messages
course specific support
logging in regularly
dealing flexibly with diverse range of experience and knowledge
responding to queries, providing advice and guidance
producing FAQs (readily available answers to Frequently Asked Questions)
responding to queries on CMAs and ECA.

Like most job descriptions it doesn't really capture the essence of the job. While most of the technical and support elements are there, it doesn't mention the actual role, where we find ourselves in a halfway house between teaching and just moderating. When I say "just" moderating, I don't mean to belittle the skill and flexibility required of a conference moderator. But it seems to me that there's a lot more to it in the Relevant Knowledge and Web Applications conferences than moderating in the normal sense of the word. (For a reminder of how skilful moderators have to be, look at The University of Minnesota's (2002) guide.) But we are not by any means tutors in the normal sense of the word either.

Teaching

It seems fairly clear to me that we're not teaching as such. There is a variety of things that we don't do - among them being:

- assessing students
- giving formal feedback on work - though we often make informal comments
- devising tutorial activities - though on TT280 we do take turns at devising and running tutorial style activities
- chasing students - this is linked to the fact that, as the course progresses we have no idea of the attrition rate, which I shall return to later

On the other hand, we are taking the initiative more than the job description suggests. We don't just respond to what the students ask or present. We plan our interventions quite thoroughly, particularly with the tutorials and the FAQs. We can predict, after the experience of some presentations, where the students are going to find difficulties, and we create ways of helping them through those impasses. This is particularly so with the tutorials where we try to mould the agenda to take students through areas which will either avoid potholes or will stretch their thinking further than it would otherwise have gone. We also take opportunities when we respond to students' queries either to do some weaving or to move the student beyond their original point, thus potentially benefitting both them and all the other readers.

Conference participation and student purpose

A key feature is that conference participation is not mandatory. Nobody needs to look into the conferences in order to pass the course. It is possible to pass well without ever going near FirstClass, so all our activities have to be constructed in the knowledge that nobody actually needs us.

This brings us to the issue of what the students are there for. We do not know in detail what students want when they sign up for either T183 or TT280. Motivation may be the same or different for other courses in both suites. My feeling is that those who sign up

are looking for specific skills. They don't expect to do anything "meta" at all, such as reflecting on what they are doing. I found Bateson's "learning as transcendence" model useful when considering this. It is illustrated in Sorensen's (1999) paper and, better, in Montuori's (1993) paper on knowledge and learning.

This has a bearing on the students' attitude to learning, and to their motivation to take on personal challenges. We have seen comments from students when we have discussed learning, who say that they are not interested in learning as such, they just want to know how to code web pages. They clearly do not see the course as being about learning, and they certainly don't see it as something that might change the way they do things. They just want the skills. These attitudes have been expressed by students who use the conferences, and I assume that they are replicated to some (possibly large) degree among those who choose not to find the conferences. (There is more in the next section on the subject of choice in the context of conferencing.) They see the skills as being external to their personality, and any issues about how they learn, how they reflect and how they might improve their learning skills are seen as unconnected with their desire to incorporate certain skills.

I think, however, that students do more than they think they do when they engage in these courses. They are in fact exercising a variety of learning skills, and, if they make it to the conferences, they can exercise quite a range and depth. They definitely do get beyond Bateson's first stage.

So what actually happens in the conferences? I haven't done anything that I would call respectable research. I haven't even added up numbers, but my impression is as follows:

- there is a great deal of question and answer. Quite often, even at early stages, answers are provided by other students. Quite often the answer is in the form "Look at FAQ x".
- there is some notifying of ideas, resources and solutions. "I found this out and thought you might be interested." This tends to increase slightly as the course progresses.
- there is quite a bit of expression of puzzlement, despair, satisfaction, elation, etc, which elicits an appropriate amount of helpful and supportive comment from other students.
- there is some collaborative work, which seems to me to be entirely appropriate at this level of activity. I will say more later on the meaning of the word "collaborative" and why it is appropriate.
- as the course progresses, there is a growing amount of sharing of results and invitations to critique. This is particularly so in TT280 where sharing of designs is encouraged (though sharing of reports is not).

Another way of conceptualising this is Gilly Salmon's (2004) five stage model, which can be found at her e-moderating page. In a nutshell, the five stages are:

i. access and motivation
ii. online socialisation
iii. information exchange
iv. knowledge construction
v. development

I note that the authors of Herding Cats (Cox et al, 2000) found that the original tutor groups in T171 (the Open University's level 1 course "You, Your Computer and the Internet") habitually achieved only stages ii or iii. (One of the issues noted was the tutors' capacity to do it, so I assume that with increasing experience on T171 higher stages were achieved at least some of the time.) I was surprised on examining the model to find that all five stages can easily apply to what happens in our conferences - not all the time and not for all students, but they are definitely there. This led to some more thinking about what is actually happening, and some musing about the nature of the environment we have created.

The first thing to note here is that collaborative work is appropriate. Students are not just learning skills in a mechanical fashion. Coding, which might appear to be no more than a rote learning "do this to get that, do this to get that", is not as simple as many people assume. Even a very simple case - "I want to put this image and that much text in the middle column of a three column layout" - has a variety of possible solutions both from the design and the technical point of view, and the problem for the student is to decide which one best meets their objective. In order to do that, the student then has to think about what their objective was, and how they decided on that objective, and the student may well be drawn (quite possibly without full awareness) into reflection on what it is that they are actually doing. On both T183 and TT280 we see students bringing issues like this to the conferences, trying out ideas and solutions suggested by other students, arguing the pros and cons, etc. In which case, I suggest, the courses are working. But that raises more questions about what is actually going on and how we in our moderating role can best support it.

Collaboration vs co-operation

First I need to clear the decks of some conceptualisation problems. A lot of people use the terms collaboration and co-operation interchangeably to mean any one of a spectrum of activities that involve people working together to achieve either group or individual goals. Other writers carefully distinguish them in a variety of ways. The commonest is to see co-operation as when people work together to achieve individual goals, and collaboration for when people are achieving a group goal. But there are other ways of differentiating. One of the most fruitful, I think, is Ted Panitz's distinction, which is more philosophical than goal oriented in its basis. It can be found in chapter 2 of Ted's Co-operative Learning e-book, and it is as follows:

"Collaboration is a philosophy of interaction and personal lifestyle where individuals are responsible for their actions, including learning and respect [for] the abilities and contributions of their peers. Cooperation is a structure of interaction designed to facilitate the accomplishment of a specific end product or goal through people working together in groups." (Panitz, no date)

He sees teachers maintaining control in co-operative situations, deciding on timing, feeding in chosen material etc, whereas in collaboration groups assume almost complete responsibility for answering the question. The key issue for him is clearly how much responsibility students are taking for their own learning, and the key issue for us is the number of students who come into the courses expecting to be taught rather than to learn, thus probably not even reaching the co-operative level, let alone the collaborative. Panitz has more to say linking collaboration to constructivist pedagogy (in chapter 2 again):

"The underlying premise for both collaborative and cooperative learning is founded in constructivist theory. Knowledge is discovered by students and transformed into concepts students can relate to. It is then reconstructed and expanded through new learning experiences. Learning consists of active participation by the student versus passive acceptance of information presented by an expert lecturer. Learning comes about through transactions and dialogue among students and between faculty and students, in a social setting. Students learn to understand and appreciate different perspectives through a dialogue with their peers. A dialogue with the teacher helps students learn the vocabulary and social structures which govern the groups students wish to join, such as historian, mathematician, writer, actor, etc." (Panitz, no date)

The bulk of our students work completely alone. This does not necessarily mean that they are working at a low level. One of the magical discoveries of distance education is how a student can interact with a book or a web page. Even isolation can still be a social setting. But by the same token a student in a group, or in a conference can avoid being inspired or stimulated by what is going on around them. They can fail to connect, either unwittingly or deliberately. If they have made a choice, so be it. If they have not but are still seeking more than they have got, then clearly it is our role and our duty to help them. I use the word collaborative in practice here to describe some of what goes on in our conferences, referring more to an attitude of mind of the student than to specific practices.

Community?

Let us return momentarily to what students actually do in the conferences. Some arrive with a question to which they want an answer, nothing more. Some want brief support or guidance, and again no more than that. Some want to deal with knottier problems or with bigger issues, and we clearly try to provide for those as well. So the question arises what is the best way for us to provide for all these needs. We tend to think of it most readily in terms of providing some sort of community, which is an idea I'd like to examine in a bit more detail. The term is easy to use because it covers such a wide variety of forms and has so many meanings. If anything its use in cyberspace has become even looser than it was in physical space; it can be used to describe a number of people loosely connected in a particular cyberplace at a variety of different times. I think this is connected with the body of evidence which suggests that people can form a sense of community more easily in computer mediated communication than in face to face communication, the rationale being that fewer senses are picking up cues and meaning, and therefore it is easier to present what one wants to present and keep hidden what one does not want to present. But that of itself should sound a warning. Less investment is required in order to get in, and therefore less commitment is called for.

But if the word "community" is to have any substance to it, it has a variety of implications. It implies that people get to know each other to some degree, that there are rules about the way things are done, that people have some mutual interests, and that there are obligations as well as rights - in other words there is some form of commitment to the community. Selznick, quoted in Schwier (2002) identifies history, identity, mutuality, plurality, autonomy, participation and integration as key elements of a community, and Schwier then adds more elements for virtual learning communities. Porterfield (2001) encapsulates the problem of meaning perfectly by quoting a variety of

loose definitions of the term "online learning community" e.g. An online community may simply be a gathering place where people meet and converse on a regular basis, in other words, it is totally casual with almost non-existent boundaries, but then he goes on to discuss the elements of online communities in terms of respect, trust, commitment, engagement, involvement, etc.

These issues make me wary of using the term "community" to describe what we create in our conferences. The contract we make with our students makes it clear that there is no obligation - the conferences are free to use, but no commitment is required. Secondly, if you have a real community, you also have a real barrier. There is a boundary or a threshold which those outside the community have to negotiate to gain entrance. Now, in fact, there are barriers, and one specific barrier is the barrier of numbers. The large majority of our students do not use the conferences. Many of them have made the choice not to, which is fair enough. But there will also be many - I have no idea how many - who do not use the conferences because by the time they get there, they are put off by the volume of messages, and the apparent intimacy of those already participating. I don't propose to deal with this problem here, merely to note that it is a problem, and one that we should be thinking about. But I suggest that that is a problem largely of numbers not of the nature of the conferences. I used the phrase "apparent intimacy" deliberately.

Jones (1999) has some interesting things to say about what he calls communities of practice. In view of what I've said above, I think he's probably not talking about communities, at least not all the time, but anyway - he says, among other things:

- communities with a clear identity of what they are about are more successful
- a critical mass of members is needed to develop a rich knowledge base
- members of larger communities often don’t feel integrally involved in the community
- members of smaller, focused communities are active participants because the goals of the community are tailored to their needs
- a community is successful when people perceive value in the knowledge sharing performed by the community
- support structures such as information centres, knowledge champions, and leadership add value
- communities are successful when they are aligned with the way people think about the subject area

Now if you align those descriptions with what happens in our conferences, we do pretty well. But I would suggest we're doing it without emphasising the two characteristics I identified above, that is, we're not demanding any kind of commitment, and we're not creating membership boundaries. (Though I recognise, as I've already said, that there are other boundaries.) I think it's important to maintain this distinction because if we continue to use the word "community" loosely, we may find ourselves unintentionally validating the ideas of commitment and boundary, which we don't want to do. Environment?

So where does that leave me?

In a nutshell:

- we have conferences which are open access. We encourage students to take part but we don't expect them to
- we intend the conferences to be welcoming to any registered student at any point
- at different times and places we cover the full spectrum of learning styles from the occasional beaker and vessel right up to full blown collaborative work
- we encourage students to reflect on their learning, but we don't expect them to
- we encourage students to think in terms of moving on from the end of the current course

We do a lot of other things, but I won't list them all. To encapsulate them in a different way, there are, I think, three key elements:

- We moderate in the technical sense of the word - answering questions, pointing to resources, setting tone, dealing with queries, complaints etc.
- We teach, to a limited extent. In helping students to understand a problem, rather than just giving them the answer; in helping students to understand and reflect on what they are actually doing, to distinguish the wood from the trees; in helping students to form plans and strategies; and so on.
- We create an environment - for want of a better phrase at the moment, let me call it a "learning environment" - not a "community" with boundaries, but a series of spaces in which registered students are welcome to engage at whatever level they choose.

The most important part of it, to my way of thinking, is that creation of the learning environment. Everything else follows from the characteristics of the environment we create. The most important factors in the environment are that it is welcoming (all the way through the course), that it is flexible and that it is efficient. Given that the third factor can often work against the first two, it calls for careful work by the moderators to achieve all three aims. I think the combination of FAQs, Teach conference, general conferences, and willing moderators does the job pretty well (for those who actually get into the conferences). It needs to improve and will constantly improve, and react to changing conditions, provided the moderators keep up the work of collaborative reflection which has been a feature of their interaction over the presentations to date.

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Reflections on the materials development process of the BA ODL programme – are there lessons to be learnt for Unisa?

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Introduction

This paper takes a reflective look at the development process of the BA in ODL programme at Unisa. Its aim is twofold. Firstly, the paper aims to describe the results of reflection about two particular aspects of the materials design and development process, viz. the use of the team approach and the review components of the process. Secondly, it considers how these aspects can contribute to making a difference in the materials development process at Unisa.

The aim of this paper is to report on part of the process that was followed in the development of the first-year modules of the BA in ODL at the University of South Africa (Unisa). We report on how the notion of working in teams was interpreted by the group responsible for the development and the review process we followed. We also reflect on the lessons we learned and consider how processes followed at Unisa can be informed by our experiences. The view we take is based on the experiences and reflection of the coordinators of writing teams involved with the planning and developing of learning materials for the first-year modules of the BA in ODL.

A brief background to Unisa

The University of South Africa (Unisa) is the largest distance education (DE) institution in Africa as it serves approximately 190 000 students. The majority are from South Africa, but there are about 10 000 from the rest of Africa and other continents. In 2003 the three major DE institutions for higher education in South Africa namely Unisa, the Technikon South Africa (TSA) and Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) merged to form a new entity dedicated to ODL for higher education. The name Unisa was retained.

A few years before this, in 1998, Otto Peters (1998:162) compared Unisa to a 19th century correspondence college. Although his assessment recognised the fact that the institution had attempted to upgrade its practice and delivery in 1995, he was critical of the low value placed on structured DE courses, the lack of integrated support for students and the dominance of texts over other available media and technologies. In the last ten years or so, new ways of teaching and learning have begun to be understood, national quality criteria have been established and the importance of systematic course design and

development have begun to be appreciated. One significant outcome of these developments has been a university Tuition Policy that includes the following principles:

- A team approach to course design and development as an integral principle;
- Integrated learner support;
- Quality assurance mechanisms to ensure adherence to national and international quality standards of distance education (Unisa 1998).

These principles were adopted into the Tuition Policy of the new Unisa. While it is mandatory, the team approach has not been implemented in any coherent and structured way at Unisa and learner support remains fragmented. The quality of learning and teaching in materials has improved to some extent in limited projects where there has been a willingness of academic departments to collaborate with dedicated support departments such as the Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development (ICLD). However, the Unisa system still follows an extremely industrialised and production-oriented approach in which the actual development of the learning package is only one part of the process, and not its focus.

The BA in ODL programme

When it was decided to develop a new programme in open and distance learning at Unisa, the team responsible committed themselves to designing and developing a programme that would be in line with national and international good practice. Our interpretation of the team approach differed considerably from that which is usually followed at Unisa. Our focus was on the writing and development of the learning packages rather than on the production system. We wanted to practise what we planned to preach and we wanted to put into practice the three principles quoted above from the Tuition Policy. More importantly, our vision and commitment to actively contribute to ODL expertise and skills-building in southern Africa and beyond, necessitated learning materials of the highest possible quality.

To this end the following strategic decisions were made about the process:

- The design and development of the BA in ODL would be a collaborative, team endeavour;
- ODL specialists from our collaborators in the southern African region would be recruited as writers in order to draw on as much experience as possible and offer students as many authentic contexts as possible;
- Formative quality assurance mechanisms would take the form of critical review of drafts by a variety of stakeholders, including team members themselves;
- The programme would be produced and delivered by Unisa, but the collaborating partners - the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the Distance Education Association of South Africa (DEASA) and its participating members - would remain visible and active.

The team

In order to make the course development as collaborative as possible, writing teams were established for each of the five modules. Each team comprised writers from different departments in Unisa as well as institutions from southern African countries (Botswana,

Namibia, Zimbabwe and Mauritius). With the financial help of COL the teams were able to get together at break-away workshops at a conference facility outside Pretoria.

The BA in ODL team consisted of:

- The management team comprising a team leader & programme coordinator;
- Five module teams, each with a coordinator and two or three writers. Coordinators also acted as writers, administrators, reviewers and designers;
- Reviewers both internal (within Unisa) and external (international specialists);
- Editors and layout artists who are part of Unisa's system but who did not interact directly with the writing teams.

The process

The writers' workshops that took place at the beginning of the process were regarded as a crucial planning intervention for both the curriculum and course design. The outcomes of the first workshop were to finalise course outlines and work allocation, and to commence the writing and peer review process.

The review process followed in the development of the BA in ODL was more rigorous than in most other Unisa programmes. The first round of peer review took place at the workshop when outlines and first drafts were reviewed within writing teams and between groups. Once the workshop was over and team members were working independently, they reviewed one another's unit drafts and commented electronically. When the team was satisfied, the final units were submitted for review by internal reviewers. Once the modules had been revised according to these reviews, the drafts were submitted for external review by international ODL specialists. When the drafts had been finalised, they were submitted to the Unisa production system, in the course of which the materials were (language) edited, the layout design was implemented and the printing and storage was completed.

Reflections

Our reflection of the process, the final product and the reaction from learners allows us to conclude that the approach used by the BA in ODL team was very successful. The opinion of learners was that the materials are of good quality, are easy to follow and provide necessary support. Their performance in their first assignments for the modules supported this contention.

The approach was also very useful in terms of capacity building for the team members. Based on workshop evaluations and interviews with both writers and coordinators, a distinct benefit of the process was: increased skills in terms of the writing of materials, working in groups, and dealing with criticism. The initial workshop gave team members an idea of what the process would demand of them. Even at this early stage some people learned that they would not be able to work in this way. However, most team members perceived the intense group work as being rewarding, if difficult. They agreed that working together in teams as we had, had led to the enrichment of their perspectives and an incorporation of alternative views and insights. This brings to mind the thoughts of McLaren and da Silva, (1993:100) as well as Freire (1993:68-76; 1998:81, 103) that working together in teams or groups facilitates dialogue among participants. Whereas

monologue involves vertical power relations between people, dialogue is the encounter between humans called together to construct and reconstruct their world. Dialogue cannot occur between those who want to dominate others or those who have been silenced. In the BA in ODL every attempt was made to maintain communication channels based on such dialogue.

The general consensus within the team was that both the team interaction and review process contributed to the quality of the product as well as to our own practice and learning. It was clear from our reflections that interacting critically in a team can present a difficult learning process. It was acknowledged that it was a rewarding and professionally enriching activity. However, it was not without problems.

Rigorous review of learning materials is commonly regarded as an essential formative quality assurance mechanism within the materials development process. But, as we have mentioned before, the process of review we followed is seldom practised at Unisa and as a result there are no mechanisms to facilitate it. The process did seem to be cumbersome and time consuming, especially when external writers and reviewers had to deal with less than adequate electronic mailing systems.

Then there was what we have coined *paradigm intolerance.* We use this term to describe a situation where one individual dismisses the framework of thinking of another as being 'outmoded' or ideologically unacceptable. In our team interaction, this intolerance sometimes led to disputes and feelings of inadequacy.

Another team problem regarded the staking of intellectual territory. The accountability of writers to implement the suggestions of the reviewers was not explicitly stated from the outset and some writers objected to comments made by reviewers, refusing to make recommended changes. This added to the coordinators' load as the revision fell to them, resulting in antagonism from the errant writers. Sometimes it meant that sections or even units had to be completely rewritten. When this happened, ownership and recognition came into question. Could a coordinator who had provided new original ideas, done additional research, written extensively and designed activities, share the credit for the unit? Whose intellectual property was the unit? When the writer was not available or prepared to bring about the suggested changes, was the coordinator overstepping the bounds of his/her task by so doing?

The constitution of the writing teams was a factor that caused a dilemma regarding status for some coordinators. Most of the writers are senior academics, heads of departments and directors of sections, while the coordinators were not. The power-play that ensued led to some writers resenting the leadership of someone whom they regarded as their junior.

Some of these problems solved themselves through the persistent culture of constructive criticism maintained in the teams. This is in keeping with Schön's description (987:326) of the best case scenario: where collaborative reflexive practice is valued and encouraged, practitioners and teachers learn to reflect on their own tacit theories, the methods and strategies they use, and other processes guiding their own reflection-in-action. However, there were some problems that were not solved and this resulted in certain people leaving the teams and the whole project.

From the module coordinators' point of view, the major problem in terms of the team approach that we followed was without a doubt the load of work that they had taken on. The roles and responsibilities of module coordinators were initially described as:

- learning development (developing module outlines; supporting writers with unit frameworks; ensuring active learning; assisting with developing audio scripts and coordinating audio development);
- keeping the programme coordinator informed about problems and progress;
- reviewing all units for quality assurance purposes;
- ensuring coherence and cross-referencing within modules and to other modules;
- researching and finding resources to be used by the team;
- chasing deadlines;
- facilitating team meetings & discussions;
- keeping record of drafts, review comments, as well as other administrative tasks as required;
- liaising with other players in the Unisa system.

In addition, module coordinators had writing loads greater than or equal to that of writers. In practice, all these responsibilities proved to be arduous. There were times when coordinators had to take over the responsibilities of the writers and rewrite entire units in addition to their own, since 'ensuring coherence and cross-referencing within modules', or as one coordinator put it 'finding and writing the story line', meant researching, re-arranging, re-writing, adding content, designing additional activities and so on.

The reasons for the overload can be attributed to various factors. Firstly, the timelines for the design and development was completely and unacceptably unrealistic. The planning, writing, reviewing, revision, editing and printing had to be completed in seven months as compared with the international benchmark of a minimum of 18 months (Freeman, 2005). Unfortunately, this underestimation of the time it takes to achieve quality can be regarded as part of the ODL culture in southern Africa. At Unisa academics often allocate as little as 3 months in which to develop a module.

Secondly, all team members completed their work on the BA in ODL programme on a part-time basis. They all had their normal work commitments to contend with, often in managerial positions. In addition to this, most module team coordinators had to deal with the problems associated with corresponding at great distances. It was impossible to get some teams together to discuss problems and find solutions and as a result miscommunication and misunderstandings occurred.

In the third place, role definition and clarification was tacitly understood, rather than spelled out. This problem emerged at various times merely as 'symptoms', and it was only upon reflection that we could identify that the cause of the symptoms was a lack of clarity concerning role definition. However, when attempts were made to clarify roles, the workload was simply confirmed rather than made lighter. In addition, internal Unisa politics exacerbated the situation. While the BA in ODL is situated in one department (the Institute for Continuing Education), four of the five coordinators work in another (ICLD). Amongst the coordinators' colleagues the programme was perceived by some as an innovative project that had fallen into the laps of a selected few. The resulting lack of collegial support and understanding added to the sense of frustration experienced by the

coordinators. Lastly, coordinators had no administrative support for time-consuming tasks such as typing, record keeping, photocopying, running errands and so on.

The result of the heavy workload was frustration and exhaustion, as one coordinator put it: 'Workload? What can I say? God help us'. But worse – at the time of writing this paper, two of the coordinators have dropped out of the team. This means that when the third-year modules are written the coordinating functions for two modules will have to be reassigned.

Lessons for Unisa

The experiences, triumphs and tribulations as described above hold rich learning opportunities for the BA in ODL teams as well as for Unisa. Having a tuition policy that espouses the team approach is laudable, but it is of little use if it is not followed in the writing and revision of all learning packages. Planning is of utmost importance, especially as regards the inclusion of learner support. Lack of coherent planning can lead to fragmentation and a lack of quality. The writing of quality learning materials is time consuming, and in the Unisa context, often thankless. Promotions and compensation are not determined by the quality of the learning materials produced. Rewards of some sort can become an incentive to academics to take the time to channel their creative energies into producing learning materials that comply with DE good practice. In terms of implementing the team approach vigorously and coherently, the focus should be on learning opportunities provided rather that a production system. Conditions that are conducive to creative writing are essential.

Unisa would also do well to recognise potential problems within teams that could negatively affect productivity. Pre-empting these would include:

Clarifying the roles of all team members;
Planning on all levels to eliminate fragmentation and overlapping, and to ensure the smooth execution of the project;
Providing guidelines and support to facilitate and maintain a culture of constructive criticism;
Investigating learner support possibilities from the beginning if the process;
Emphasising collaborative planning and development of courses;
Recommending clear guidelines about intellectual property;
Ensuring that the locus of control is shared between academics and learning developers in order to facilitate the fusion of discipline specialisation and sound learning principles in an ODL situation;
Setting clear guidelines concerning ownership and accountability for the writing and the ultimate recognition for work done;
Changing the production time frames to facilitate the writing and developing of learning materials.

Conclusion

The process followed in the development of the first-year modules of the BA in ODL was unique in the Unisa context. The experiences that we, as coordinators of writing teams, had were difficult yet enriching. We hope that we will be able to use our

experiences to convince academics and administrators of the benefits of working in well-defined, well-planned and well-managed teams.

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‘Reflection or Deflection?
– what’s the evidence that we learn from evidence?’

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Introduction

“Whilst a great deal of institutional research has been carried out in the field of distance education it is my impression that a great proportion of it has little visible impact. On optimistic days I would argue that this is not important – a programme of institutional research indicates a reflective institution that is committed to self-improvement and the complexities of management decision-making means that effects of such research are hard to discern. On more pessimistic days it seems that institutional research is a useful means for managers to delay making decisions, or a treasure trove of conflicting data that can be used selectively to justify any decisions they want to take for other reasons.” Woodley (1999).

Institutions can have many beliefs about themselves – not least that they are learning organisations who reflect on their experience and evidence and change as a result of that reflection. The reality can be different as the quote above suggests. Reflection can lead to the decision that change is not necessary. Or it may be concluded that that change is desirable but not possible in current circumstances, or not a priority or simply an idealistic impossibility. Or pressures for change from junior staff may simply be ignored by university senior management.

These conclusions are hardly new; Frances Cornford’s monograph ‘Microcosmographica Academica’ (1908), written here in Cambridge, is now nearly a hundred years old but as John Kay, ex-director of the Said Business School at Oxford University notes “its guidance to the young academic politician is as pertinent today as ever” (Times Higher Education Supplement 24 November 2000). Kay (who resigned from his directorship in protest at the processes of the university) quotes for example Cornford’s Principle of the Dangerous Precedent “Every public action that is not customary is either wrong, or if it right, is a dangerous precedent. It follows that nothing should be done for the first time”.

Of course whilst such strictures might apply to older universities newer more modern distance education institutions are quite different in their attitudes to change – or are they? This paper will argue that they can be as resistant to change as any more established organisation even if those resistances are expressed in different ways. Suggestions for change are seldom bluntly opposed -instead they are deflected in various different ways. This thesis will be illustrated in this paper by examining a series of case studies taken from the UKOU’s history of student support. The paper is partly in the nature of autobiography: Roth (2002) argues that autobiography is a legitimate sociological method and I would suggest that the autobiographical study of distance education has a similar legitimacy particularly when the subject of the research is within the autobiographer’s own institution. As Hannabus (2000) notes ‘The reflexive elements of autobiography can make for more self-aware research, above all when the researchers are researching organisations situations and groups of which they themselves are a part’.

These case studies are therefore unashamedly autobiographical and should be read with that in mind. There will always be two sides to every argument.

Case study 1 - Proactive support for students

Contact between students and the institution can be initiated by students to which the institution responds with 'reactive' contact or it can be initiated by the institution – proactive contact. That distinction in 1977 was first drawn in 1977 when using evidence from a survey of students I argued that students wanted 'interventionist' rather than 'surgery style' counselling from their OU counsellor – that is they wanted the counsellor to take the initiative to contact them rather than have to initiate contact themselves (Simpson, 1974). However without further evidence of the need for proactive contact apart from student preference and given the cost of such activity this cause was not supported by university management. Indeed if anything the debate went the other way. New technology made it easy to measure the University's response to contact from students using phone call and email monitoring systems, allowing it to lay down appropriate response times. The ability to do this emphasised the priority of reactive contact. As noted many times "what gets measured gets done" (Personnel Today, 18 Feb 03), sometimes at the expense of things that are not so easy to measure.

This is not to say that the value of proactive contact was denied – it was maintained that it was someone else's job to do it – in this case the job of OU Associate Lecturers. However such staff were neither paid for nor required to report on such contact and no evaluations were undertaken of whether they undertook it or what the results were. Thus the first deflection of change uses the rule 'change may be a good idea but it's someone else's responsibility'.

This situation did not change until more work was carried out in the late 90's. It became possible to demonstrate that proactive support could have a small but significant positive effect on student retention. This was not a new finding – there had been evidence from other distance education organisations from the early 80's (Simpson, 2003), but that had been subject to the second deflection of change – the 'not invented here' syndrome. It was also possible to show that a substantial proportion of OU Associate Lecturers (around 30%) were not proactively supporting students. More importantly it was shown that there was a positive cost-benefit from such activity – that money invested in proactive contact could produce a positive return on that investment from increased government grant and savings on recruitment. The addition of money into the argument produced a very positive result and for the first time since the mid 70's a systematic programme of proactive contact is being built into UKOU Student Service policy, nearly 30 years after it was first suggested. Thus a counter-offensive for overcoming deflection might be to show that money can be made or saved by an innovation.

Case study 2 - Enhancing external student support

In her book on student support McGivney (1996) noted that support for students from families and friends appeared to be highly valued. Research conducted in the UKOU subsequently suggested that this could be even truer for distance education and that families and friends support was for many students the most important kind of support

they received. However suggestions to set up a website for families and friends of students with a text on how to help 'their' student better were ignored.

Where arguments were given they appeared to centre around the suggestion that such a site was of such low priority that it was in effect of zero priority – a variation perhaps of Cornford's 'Principle of Unripe Time' ("People should not do at the present moment what they think right at that moment, because the moment at which they think it right has not yet arrived''). Interestingly a text version of the proposed website was copied by distance education institutions in Australia, New Zealand and Germany and a web version published by the ill-fated UKeU. But – and perhaps as a confirmation of the 'not invented here syndrome' such publications failed to break back unto the UKOU system.

No progress was made until the author happened to be at a graduation ceremony where the guest speaker was the Pro Vice Chancellor for New Technology who made a speech praising the families and friends of the students present for their support. Seizing the day this author sent an email direct to her suggesting that such a site was set up. She issued an order that that should be the case. It was another three years before it finally appeared but without her edict it was clear that nothing would have ever been done. Thus a counter-offensive for the zero-priority argument is to 'carpe diem' – seize the day and take opportunities to reach senior management when they present themselves.

Case study 3 - Developing course choice materials

From very early times in the UKOU it was believed that course choice was a factor in student retention. This was of course also true of conventional higher education institutions (Yorke, 1999) but in open learning systems course choice seemed even more likely to be critical to subsequent student progress. Evidence suggested that most new students were choosing courses on the basis of brochure descriptions without looking for further advice and that once having made a decision were unlikely to change despite contacts from course choice advisers (Johnson, 2002). It was also clear that students valued would like further information on a course before their decision point. In particular they wished to see course material and hear the opinions of students who'd taken the course. Regional staff therefore developed a series of 'Taster Packs' which contained course material and (most popularly) specimen assignments. They also developed a 'Course Views' website where students could leave reviews of the courses they'd taken for the benefit of future students.

Efforts to mainstream these materials were however constantly frustrated by the indifference of senior management in the student services area of the OU. Again this may be a variation on the 'not invented here' syndrome – a belief that junior staff in an institution are not capable of generating worthwhile ideas because they cannot see the full picture or have the experience of senior staff. In addition there were clearly influences of the 'survivalist' school of student support which believes that the rule for course choice should be 'caveat emptor' - 'let the buyer beware' - and that students who did not survive the test of making a good course choice or who did not seek advice were most likely those destined to fail anyway. This attitude may underlie a great deal of ambivalence towards student support (Johnston et al, 2004).

In this case the counter-strategy appeared to be to keep the ideas alive by networking amongst other junior members of staff who could see the value of such materials because

they were in daily contact with students. However this was opposed by some senior staff on the grounds that such activity should be only be allowed if it was university-wide, an example perhaps of Cornford's 'Conservative-Liberal' argument that 'the present measure would block the way for a more sweeping reform'. In the event when new senior management replaced the previous there were rapid changes put in train and both types of materials were quickly mainstreamed – www.open.ac.uk/coursereviews.

Case study 4. Assessment collation analysis

Most courses in the UKOU are assessed by a combination of the grades gained in continuous assessment into an overall continuous assessment score which is then collated with the final exam grade. The combination of grades for the overall continuous assessment score can be complex: individual assignments can be differentially weighted, have thresholds or be formative (not counted for assessment). But there are further complications in the collation with exam scores. The overall continuous assessment score is averaged with the exam score and that average substituted for one or two of the lowest continuous assessment grades. The overall continuous assessment score is then recalculated using this new grade and a student must score more than 40% on each of the components.

The aim of this 'substitution' as it is called, is to permit students some flexibility is the submission of assignments and allow for the inevitable crises that can affect study. A student could safely miss an assignment without it wrecking their chances of passing: on the other hand since every assignment would contribute to their overall continuous assessment score there was still an incentive to submit every assignment.

I apologise for going into this level of detail but it is necessary to understand that story that follows. Some time after this system was introduced it became clear to student advisers that many students didn't understand how it worked. It was nevertheless felt that this was a price worth paying for the flexibility it gave students and in general the advice was to do your best and use the substitution as a safety net.

However in 1997 a UKOU student developed on his own initiative a piece of software which allowed students to input their grades and which then calculated the effect of the substitution automatically. Thus students could easily see exactly what assignment grades they needed to pass a course. The student whimsically called the software 'Marx' www.marx/marxonline.co.uk and made it freely available on the Web. This seemed a useful step forward so the author sent a copy of the URL to the UKOU Exams Office. Here it was met with outright opposition in the form of accusations (unfounded) of inaccuracy and representations were made to a high level to prevent its promulgation. This appeared to be a combination of 'not invented here' syndrome combined with the perception that it was a trespass on the territory and expertise of an area which held exclusive rights in the field.

Such a combination is very difficult to deal with and the dissemination of the programme proceeded by stealth. It first became clear to student advisers that this was a useful way of helping students and it was soon in unofficial use all round the university. Sporadically the Exams office undertook campaigns against it and a status quo was achieved with student advisers using it against the advice and often knowledge of senior management. Unexpected allies were found in the campaign to propagate the

programme to students when I was allowed to write articles featuring it in the University newspaper 'Sesame' which had taken a decision to move from features about students to a policy of active student learning support. As a previous student the editor could see the value of the software.

However the stalemate continued until there was renewed interest in student retention in the University. It became possible to demonstrate that quite a large number of students who were withdrawing in the middle of their courses had achieved enough on continuous assessment to pass their course by just passing their exam. Giving such students the name 'the Needless Fails' meant the problem could be summarised in a 'soundbite' which became widely used amongst student-facing staff. Again it became possible to put a price on the Needless Fails problem, as in the UK each student who sits an exam attracts a government grant to the institution so that needless fails represented a clear financial loss. But even with the weight of evidence and opinion it was still necessary to wait for a change in senior management before the problem was acknowledged and the exams office ordered to produce some software of its own, (which at the point of writing has still not been delivered).

Conclusions - the role of the partisan guerrilla

These examples of the difficulties of institutional change are clearly one-sided. Nevertheless I think they illustrate an important element in the 'reflection' debate. It is not enough to assume that reflection will always win the day without a little guerrilla activity. There will always be arguments such as Cornford's 'Principles of Unripe Time and Dangerous Precedent', and the 'Conservative-Liberal' argument which will be used against change. Pinchot (1990) suggested 'Ten commandments for Entrepreneurs' for people attempting change institutions. The most famous of these are:

1. Remember it is easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission.

2. Keep the best interests of the company and its customers in mind, especially when you have to bend the rules or circumvent the bureaucracy.

3. Come to work each day willing to be fired.

The latter instruction may be a little strong for most educators so here are a few suggestions for anyone who wants to be a 'partisan guerrilla' in open and distance education:

1. Find allies
2. Do your research.
3. If you can find ways of showing that there is money involved, all the better.
4. Be prepared to go to the top. Success rates may be low but change can be very quick this way if it happens.
5. Hold your ground if you're certain of it. But sometime it's best to make sure that the ground you're holding is temporarily invisible – in other words subversion may sometimes be better than full-frontal charges.
6. Understand the central paradox of student success – the 'survivalist tendency' in student support in all of us.
7. Be prepared to wait for a change in management.

Finally there is one last possibility – that the partisan guerrilla might sometimes be wrong. In which case I commend the words of a former Chairman of Imperial Chemical Industries, "If you get everything right, you're not trying hard enough".

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Developing the Architecture of Online Learning Communities: Designing the Walls of the Learning Space

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Introduction

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts.
(Shakespeare)

The overall educational challenge of today's knowledge society is the enhancement of learning through ICT. It requires creativity as well as innovation and change in educational thinking to identify educational paradigms, which allow for learning processes to unfold in networked contexts in ways that truly provide quality in processes of learning (Bates, 1999; Collis, 1996; Koschmann, 2002; Collis, 2001). Consequently, the complex task of generating pedagogic learning architectures conducive to learning in networked environments is becoming increasingly more important (Sorensen, 2004).

Taking the various research findings and insights into account (Mason, 1993; Sorensen, 1993; Harasim et al., 1995; Koschmann, 1996; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1996; Mason, 1998; Bates, 1999; Harasim, 1999; Salmon, 2000; Collins, Mulholland and Watt, 2001; Collis, 2001; Sorensen & Takle, 2002; Sorensen, 2004; Sorensen & Takle, 2004; Ó Murchu, 2005), the challenge of creating pedagogic-didactic designs of good quality must inevitably depart from a design perspective on learning as a social matter and aim at establishing learning designs, which allow for unpredicted, spontaneous, democratic, meaningful, encultured, soulful, responsible, and interactive student-motivated processes of collaboration and knowledge building (Ó Murchú, 2005).

Meaningful and Soulful Learning

To the ancient Greeks the root word for "soul" is the same as the word for "alive", and to them the soul was what made living things alive. Plato considered the soul, as a separate entity from the living body, to be the "essence" of a person that reasons, decides and acts. In early Hebrew thought, "soul" represented the life force. However, over time it began to be seen as something independent of the physical being. According to the Hebrew bible, when God created Adam, he "breathed" into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. The Hebrew word for "breath" is often used to mean "spirit" and "inspiration". "Soulful learning" is therefore defined as being the essence of breathing life into transformative reflection, which comes from the inside–out.

Learning for learning's sake isn't enough....We may learn things that constrict our vision and warp our judgment. What we must reach for is a conception of perpetual self-discovery, perpetual reshaping to realize one's goals, to realize one's best self, to be the person one could be.
(Gardner, 1983)

The concept of "meaningful learning" may be defined from several perspectives. From the theoretical perspective of existential learning as presented by Colaizzi (1978), "meaningful learning" is first of all authentic learning. In the model below, we further describe and expand upon the related attributes of "meaningful learning" (Bhattacharya, 2002):

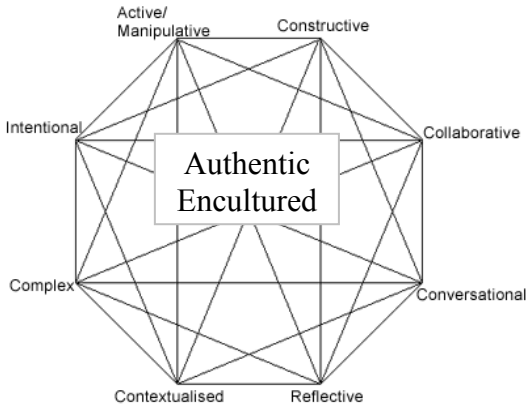

Figure 3: Attributes of meaningful, soulful Learning (Bhattacharya, 2002)

Meaningful, soulful learning, a central characteristic of the play envisioned to unfold at the stage of an MMD networked learning architecture (see figure 1), is envisioned to mobilize, in the learner, the latent divinity that has always existed indigenous to the human race. The ultimate goal of any learning design is to bring out this potential as the authentically motivating force in complex learning trajectories, characterized by freedom to explore and by self-directed and responsible learning actions leading to transformative reflectivity.

Capturing the Walls of the Learning Architecture: The MMD model

If we pool the two design philosophies and considerations of the two master courses investigated earlier, both of which apparently produced pedagogical features and techniques that stimulated the development of online COPs (Ó Murchú & Sorensen, 2003; Sorensen & Ó Murchú, 2004), we may end up with a model (MMD) (inspired by Sorensen & Takle, 2003), as shown in below (figure 1).

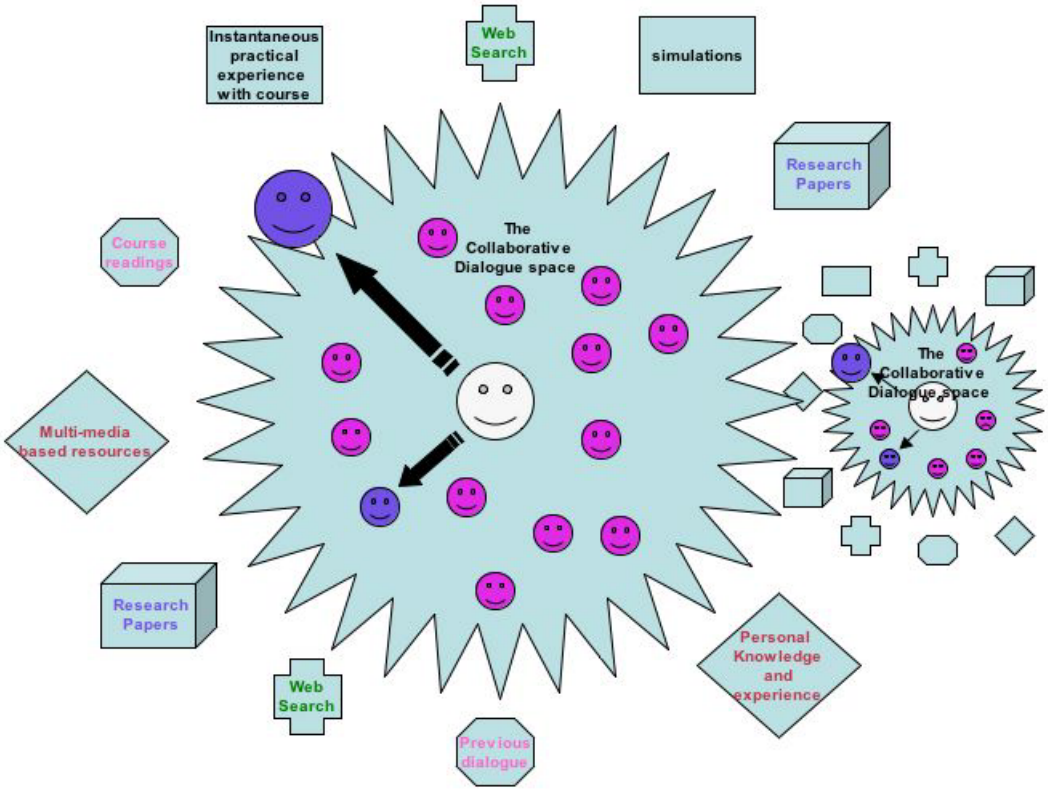

*Figure 1: **M**odel of **M**erged **D**esign (MMD)*

The MMD model, combining the design features of the two courses and forming one learning stage - we expect to constitute an even stronger learning architecture for potentially stimulating the kind of "scripts" for performing networked "plays of learning", which will enhance networked learning through true online COPs.

A Collaborative Dialogue Space

The collaborative dialogue space is the structuring centre of the teaching/learning process – the basic feature of the learning architecture offered by the MMD model.

> (...) it is in the meanings we are able to negotiate through learning that we invest ourselves, and it is those meanings that are the source of the energy required for learning.
> (Wenger 1998, pp. 266)

The collaborative dialogue space is where "the play of learning" comes into existence through a tapestry of dialogue. It is where the strongest collaborative energy of a learning group manifests itself in the "Now", the instant of shared dynamic dialogue and strongest energy between participants:

> Nothing ever happened in the past; it happened in the Now. Nothing will ever happen in the future; it will happen in the Now. What you think of as the past is a memory trace, stored in the mind, of a former Now. When you remember the past, you reactivate a memory trace – and you do so now. The future is an imagined Now, a projection of the mind. When the future comes, it comes as the

> Now. When you think about the future, you do it now. Past and future obviously have no reality of their own. Just as the moon has no light of its own, but can only reflect the light of the sun, so are past and future only pale reflections of the light, power, and reality of the eternal present. Their reality is "borrowed" from the Now. (Tolle, pp. 41-42)

The dialogic 'Now' is the melting pot for the forming of an shared learning endeavour between participants, opening up the possibility in the learning space for the unfolding of an actual democratic interaction between learners, in which each perspective thrown into the discussion - in principle - has the potential of pushing the learning process, individually and collectively, through collaborative knowledge building (CKB) and of initiating change. Examples of student perceptions and comments illustrating the power of the CKB process are:

> I felt like I was part of everyone's learning. Like a family of thinkers on the net. It was a great feeling of confidence.
> (Student comment)

> There was a constant active exchange of ideas and thoughts. Never a dull moment for the grey cells to rest.
> (Student comment)

The learning process induced by the MMD learning architecture is *democratic* in the sense that it evolves, not according to authoritative powers (teacher authority) but according to the democratic principle of equality (everybody has a voice). It is the quality of the argument – the competence of the speaker – which manifests itself most profoundly on the road to change.

The collaborative dialogue space of the MMD model represents the scene of the learning process characterized by shared and negotiated knowledge building between participants in the *power of the Now*. The play of learning may unfold according to a higher or lower degree of prediction and formalization – as responses to tighter or looser scripts, allowing improvisation of the actors) - depending on the actual learning context and its specific conditions with respect to organisation, target group, etc. The power of the Now also extends to the dimension of *social presence*, as illustrated by a student comment:

> I always felt that it was up to me to set the goals and direct my own learning but I never felt alone in my work. The group were always there for me, anytime any place, the joy of exchange and thinking together.
> (Student comment)

A Wide Resource Concept

The MMD architecture operates with a multimodal and very wide and diverse concept of resources. These may be of any kind of nature, ranging from traditional literature and readings of research papers, pieces of software, personal/mutual experience and expert knowledge, to "meta-resources" like e.g. previous dialogue and other plays of learning (figure 1). This wide resource concept adds to the openness of the model. Minimizing the determination of the script (the predicted) of the play of learning, it leaves the actors with a freedom to establish ownership, to improvise and thereby influence – in self-motivated

meaningfulness - the CKB process. In principle, any type of resource, which enhances the CKB process, may be pulled into the discussion by the participants.

The open and diverse resource concept of the MMD architecture allows a continuum of possibilities in terms of being dependent or not being dependent on de-contextualized knowledge; a balance between narrow instructional structure and pedagogical authority (tight scripting) that may lead to students reproducing, and an open stage where the teacher steps aside and leave students to construct knowledge (loose scripting), influence their learning process and take ownership – to broaden the scope of coverage without loosing the depth of local engagement (the need to be detached from practice versus the need to be connected to it).

The MMD architecture offering and employing the energy of the Now in the CKB process, denies that dialogue and negotiation processes leading to learning are of a reproductive - and potentially alienating - nature. Elements of requests of "reproduction" appear in the MMD learning stage – not in the process of the Now, but belonging to the concept of "resources" in the shape of smaller elements of training. Processes of "reproduction" assuming a view on learning as "transfer" are needed in various learning situations, but only as resource elements in a larger learning process tied together, with the energy of the Now, in a CKB process. The MMD learning stage, with its central emphasis of the CKB play as the ultimate learning process, invites new forms of identity building and negotiability, based fundamentally on the principle of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in which participants are expected to contribute their own views, knowledge and competence to the CKB process, creating meaningful forms of membership and empowering forms of ownership of meaning. This also means opening up for new trajectories of participation. As a consequence, new opportunities and scopes for building identities of participation become possible continuously throughout the CKB process of negotiation.

Reflection, Meta-Learning and Identity

The MMD architecture is relying heavily on the dimension of reflection and meta-reflection. A dimension, which is vital, not only for the building of identity - it is also, according to Bateson (1976), an essential element in the very constitution of a learning process, in the shape of reflective movements between meta-communicative levels.

The reflective and meta-reflective aspects of the MMD model manifest themselves in a variety of ways. A prime emphasis on collaboration and dialogue, and on the dialogic process and methodology in learning, stimulates a style of learning, which implies a meta-reflective practice of democratic methods and techniques of negotiation. A student commented as follows:

> I was always thinking beyond the written facts as my friends and I exchanged ideas and responses. Everyone's responses were treated equally and with respect and at all times I was challenged to participate and reflect not just as a student but as a person of importance, whose ideas mattered.
> (Student comment)

More precisely, this is implemented in the networked learning architecture using a structure of fora for the collaborative dialogue, a metafora-structure for the meta-

discussions of the collaborative dialogue, and so forth. Such meta-reflective communicative practice unfolding in a meta-forum for the collaborative dialogue space is demonstrated extensively in the student dialogues.

The Ethos underlying the model contains a wish to stimulate learning processes and produce global citizens that are able to further, practice and enhance collaborative learning across diversities of different kinds (geographical, cultural, political. etc.). These are typically learning processes that are based on non-authoritarian and democratic values, where a critical listening to the opinion of others' in taking a stand is a vital meta-learning element – also referred to as "deutero-learning" (Bateson, 1976) denoting learning about how to learn (i.e. learning about one self and learning). The online collaborative, dialogic request and emphasis of the MMD model stimulates such reflective meta-learning – or self-inspection and awareness at different reflective levels - on the basis of the characteristic dimension of distance, which is an inherent valuable characteristic of a networked stage inviting a duality of dialogic and reflective thinking independently of time and space (Sorensen, 2004). This is a vital feature of the MMD model, as educational reification somehow inserts what could be named an extra artificial level or stage between practices and learners (Sorensen, 2004).

Teacher-Student Roles

Learning, with or without teachers, takes place everywhere and at all times. Meaningful learning must be centred, motivated and give meaning to the individual learner at the existential level, if he or she is to truly learn, especially from the perspective of a meta-learning evolving towards the level of meaningful learning.

The learning architecture of the MMD model implies a supple and dynamic approach in terms of designing/scripting teacher-students roles. It works from the principle that the greater the emphasis on participants' experiences, ownership, authenticity of true motivation, genuineness, non-authoritarian teaching/learning, etc. in an envisioned pedagogical design, the more the teacher moves away from being the deliverer of content (storyteller) and the most important and centrally placed actor in the play to becoming 1) a peripheral meta-figure preparing the stage for its play of learning from the edges of the learning process, and 2) a participant like others in the learning process and project (figure 2). In the same way as the learners become the central players, the teacher moves away from the centre and leaves the collaborative learning stage to the learners to take ownership and initiative in what to each of them will represent as an authentic and meaningful learning endeavour *en route* to an existential, genuine identity. The following comments from students indicate the time of such change of teacher roles:

> I was afraid at first of being without a teacher in a classroom but realized that I got so much more as I also met many teachers and fellow students in an equal classroom
> <Student comment>
>
> I now know that my perceived role as a teacher – the centre of the classroom- is not really feasible anymore as the kids I teach are also teachers in their own right and should be encouraged to think for themselves and innovate.
> <Student comment>

Moving out of the centre of the learning process, the role of the teacher changes and becomes more of a designer/script writer who delivers the pedagogical architecture for the 'learning play' before it starts, and then – throughout the play – acts as a participant, learning and facilitating in the networked COPs - through the various "movements between meta-communicative levels" of the networked CKB dialogue.
In summary, the teacher (as the designer) holds the key to innovation. His/her envisioned self-perception in the design of a learning architecture seems one crucial consideration in the design of an online learning architecture. The MMD model envisions the teacher/designer "on the side" of the CKB process and supports a non-authoritarian teaching methodology aiming at equality between teachers and student in terms of knowledge power relationships.

Conclusion and Future Perspectives

Our aim for this paper was to construct a generalized dialogic learning architecture for design of networked collaborative learning for adult learners. We constructed the MMD model through applying a meta-optic on our previous research findings from two comparable online courses from two different master programmes, analysing to what extent the two courses had developed into networked communities of practice (COPs). Working from the hypothesis that an enhanced and empowered model for design of networked learning COPs might be established by pooling together the different features of the two design philosophies and principles, we came up with the MMD model. We discussed and qualified – theoretically and through illustrating comments from students – some of the specific features and potentials of the learning architecture that it implies: The power of the Now as the stage on which presence is strong, learning happens and shared insight is collaboratively constructed; the wide resource concept enabling learners to establish ownership and authenticity; the possibility of reflective meta-learning stimulating awareness and creation of identities through retrospection of past dialogue; the teacher-student roles bringing the learners in the centre of the stage and the teacher to what we may call a "meta-periphery" of the learning process; and, finally, the emphasis on soulful learning as an inherent dimension of the MMD architecture.

The most obvious and immediate challenge ahead is to implement the MMD architecture in a variety of learning contexts within networked adult education and to explore its power and potential - and its potential limitations - as a pedagogic design framework. But, irrespective of how many obstacles may appear along the road, we firmly believe that the MMD design model is on the correct architectural path to pursue in preparing the Global grounds for a type of networked learning, which fruitfully unfolds in the 'Now', while promoting democratic steps on a world stage of meaningful, authentic, responsible, holistic and soulful learning.

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Assessment: the key driving Force to promote academic teaching in Open Learning

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The evaluation of distance education is one of the essential aspects of education assessment. It plays an important role in the promotion of distance education and open learning and guarantees the quality of education as well as the development of distance education and teaching. At present, open learning and distance education in China are just starting to grow. The government has been taking the assessment of distance education as an important measure to push pilot projects, distance education colleges and universities to promote self-reform and development.

On one hand, The China Central Radio and TV University (hereafter referred to as simply CCRTVU), the biggest distance education and teaching system covering the whole country, has to drive the assessment of courses and teaching methods, such as the assessment of the design of teaching method for college courses, the assessment on the quality and application of the teaching medium for the course, the assessment of the courses which have been developed in a unified form at national level and the courses adopted by local RTVUs, the assessment of the academic activities of online courses etc; on the other hand, CCRTVU has to perform academic assessment of the entire distance education system. For the latter, in the recent decade, CCRTVU has made a nation wide assessment three times. The academic assessments which have been conducted were large scale and involved many participants, including 44 provincial RTVUs, more than 900 municipal RTVUs, over 1,900 RTVUs at county levels as well as 20,000 study centers.

To be more specific, the first assessment was made from Sept, 1997-March 1999. In this assessment, the academic assessment index was divided into four aspects and five levels: teaching process, teaching management, teaching conditions, and teaching results. The local governments and educational administrative departments where the RTVUs were located, participated in the assessment and experienced the three stages: self-assessment, re-assessment and verification.

The second assessment happened from August 2001-December 2002, which was organized by The Ministry of Education（hereafter referred to as simply MOE). It was a mid-term assessment for the project "The Reform of the Training Mode of expertise in CCRTVU and Pilot Site for Open Education". The second assessment was designed as an assessment of process after the project started.

The third assessment is just in progress, which is a summary assessment on the above mentioned open education pilot projects. It is expected to be completed from August 2004 to Oct 2006. All of the three assessments have greatly promoted the academic work in distance education and open learning, and made the RTVU education become an important part of national higher education. (The registered students of RTVUs make up 10%of the total enrolled students in colleges and universities in the whole country).

Assessment is a method, a way and a means rather than a purpose. Its main function is to promote the development of distance education. The process by which the assessees receive internal and external assessment and make self-assessment is just a course of self-improvement and being perfect while education work is being carried out. The large amount of data and information which have been collected during assessment will serve as the educational basis for further improving teaching work. Here I would like to take the second assessment as an example to analyze the great impact of assessment on distance education.

The mid-term assessment for the open learning education pilot projects in CCRTVU was conducted under the leadership of the Higher Education Department of MOE. 95 specialists from conventional universities, adult education colleges, relevant departments of MOE and RTVUs, participated in field trips and assessment. 44 provincial RTVUs, 374 branch schools were involved in this assessment. 1,020 seminars were held with tutors, educational administrative staff, technicians, and students separately. Questionnaires were sent out and 13,313 effective questionnaires were collected back, among which 6,986 copies were from students.

In the assessment index system, there were 8 first level indexes: pilot working method and position, staff development, the applicable modern distance education teaching facilities and means, the development of multi-media teaching resources, the teaching practice, the reform of teaching mode and practice, teaching management and reform, study of pilot task. In addition, there were 19-second level indexes including 8 core indexes, which fully indicated the direction of this assessment. The guideline for this assessment was to improve the reform by assessment, achieve development by assessment, achieve combination of assessment and development, and focus on development. It intended to promote the open learning pilot projects, which were initiated in 1999 and accelerate the establishment and improvement of the teaching assurance system and learner support service system provided by RTVUs.

This assessment has realised the expected outcomes, which can be represented in 5 aspects: (1) The change of ideas and conceptions of nearly 50, 000 staff in RTVUs system, achieving the transformation from “teaching and tutor centered” mode to “student and study centered” mode; (2) Actively raised and allocated funds to accelerate the construction of basic facilities to achieve “the combination of space and ground network, and the intercommunication among platforms at three levels”. The total investment exceeded 3 billion Yuan RMB. (3) Established a rich teaching resource in different transmission media,(4) Reformed the teaching mode, actively promoting online teaching; (5) Intensified the development of tutors, management staff , technicians, and research staff and optimized the human resource network covering the whole country. In fact, the biggest beneficiaries were students. In 2002, the MOE published the results of assessment which clearly pointed out that the teaching reform and the new mode of teaching on trail basis by CCRTVU are being more and more recognised by society in China. And students welcomed it and their attitudes towards it were affirmative, which indicated a good trend of reform of the pilot project and extensive public favour.

As the key organizer of the three assessments for large scale, we have gained a lot while practising and doing research. Our understanding of teaching assessment has been gradually deepened as well. Here I would like to put forward 5 points about assessment strategy for your comments.

1. Great attention should be attached to the formative information. It can represent the effectiveness of one project or one pilot site. It will be better if a series of vertical data can be obtained; at the same time, the requirement for vertical information can serve as a spur and a driving force for the assessees in their work.
2. The method of assessment with fixed quantity combined with determined nature should be adopted. With this method, it can not only avoid the inaccuracy of assessment results and obtain a certain number of data from survey and measurement but can also summarize elements from different aspects to contribute an objective and justified assessment to the assessees.
3. It is a common phenomenon that differences exist in different areas and environments. The assessment should not be too hasty and should mobilize the initiatives of different aspects. The uniqueness of the assessees should be stressed in the assessment report.
4. The main body of the assessment should be pluralized. It can be an internal self – assessment by college or students themselves, or an external assessment by government social groups; self and mutual assessments at different levels are crucial for a large teaching system.
5. Under the precondition of teaching quality assurance, assessment can work as an important means of efficiency improvement and cost reduction for distance education.

In conclusion, the assessment of distance education is a driving force for the healthy development of ODL in China. And its significant function will clearly show in the next two years.

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Phenomenological research in ODL teacher education contexts: A South African experience

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Introduction

This paper aims to show that however 'critically reflective' one might consider oneself to be as an ODL practitioner, there is always the potential to 'see' more – and that adopting a 'phenomenological attitude' and engaging in phenomenological research processes, is one way to do this. Speaking of how researchers make use of the phenomenological approach within, particularly, pedagogically orientated contexts, van Manen (1990:1-2) says that

> when we raise questions, gather data, describe a phenomenon, and construct textual interpretations, we do so as researchers who stand in the world in a pedagogic way … pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience [that contributes] to one's pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact.

How one might come to develop and own the phenomenological sensitivity of which van Manen speaks here, and the relevance of such a sensitivity for ODL contexts, form the focus of this paper.

The research on which this paper is based, works from the premise that in an ODL environment characterized by massification, change, conflicting interests and new market-driven imperatives, it is becoming increasingly easy to lose sight of students-as-*people* (and not mere ciphers and statistics). The paper draws on current Ph.D. research into students' experience of the demands of a module (*Reading and Writing Academic Texts (RWAT))*, that specifically aims to develop students' academic literacy competence. This module is a core, compulsory module in the mixed-mode Bachelor of Education Honours programme offered by the School of Education and Development at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

A phenomenological point of departure

While there is little scope in this paper to trace the history of phenomenology or to present the many forms of phenomenology that have arisen over the years, it is essentially the study of 'essences'. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) says in his Preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*; "phenomenology ….puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'. …It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is". It is, in other words, about going back 'to the things themselves'.

There are many positions from which one can engage with phenomenology as a both a philosophy and a research methodology - from the purely philosophical to the thoroughly interpretive, the latter most widely exemplified in the fields of psychology, education,

nursing and anthropology. This study, contextualised as it is within an explicitly 'applied' discipline viz. teacher education, is orientated towards what van Manen (2002:np) terms a 'Phenomenology of Practice' i.e. it is characterized by a hermeneutic/ interpretive response, rather than, for example, an existential/ transcendental response. Thus the form of phenomenology which governs this study foregrounds 'being-in-the-world' - following Heidegger's (1954) use of the term i.e. it emphasizes the "situatedness of human reality" (Walters, 1995:793), and all that that might imply. Ontologically, it admits to a reality that stands separate from consciousness, but that can only be 'known' through consciousness. It is thus, an approach that foregrounds self-reflexivity and self-knowing.

Methodologically, phenomenology is 'discovery orientated' i.e. it is concerned with revelation and disclosure – not explanation and prediction, with the particular and the ambiguous rather than with the replicable and the clearly defined ie. one does not set out to prove an hypothesis. It also acknowledges the inevitability of the researcher's subjective influence and does not seek to erase it, or to present 'value-free' claims about experience/ knowledge and so on. What it does do, however, is offer strategies for reducing the impact of this influence viz. through the processes of 'reduction' and 'bracketing' by which one attempts to render oneself as 'noninfluential' as possible during the process of research. (Giorgi, 1985).

But to 'do' phenomenology requires much more than an intellectual grasp of the principles and concepts discussed above. Merleau-Ponty (1962: viii) says of phenomenology that it can be identified as "a manner or style of thinking" but that "the practice of phenomenology requires an experiential change in the phenomenological practitioner" (Priest, 1998:29), and because of this "cannot be wholly learned verbally and cannot be wholly learned second-hand or on authority" (ibid). To grow in and towards van Manen's phenomenological sensitivity means finding a way to transform apparent abstractions into practice. And it really is only when one faces the demanding, confusing, illuminating process of trying to do so that the exactitude of phenomenology as both a philosophy and a methodology is experienced.

From abstractions to the 'real'

In the remainder of this paper, and again because of constraints implicit in it, I selectively highlight two aspects of phenomenological research that relate directly to 'practice', in the hope that by demonstrating phenomenology-in-use, ODL readers' interest will piqued sufficiently for them to engage with the approach themselves.

The first aspect I wish to give attention to is how we 'name' the object of our reflections and/or research – the 'it' of our investigations. In phenomenological parlance, the 'object' of our reflections must of necessity be 'a phenomenon' and one that is 'lived', since phenomenology's primary focus is on experience. Approaching an aspect of our practice (e.g. a 'module' or 'course' or 'assignment' etc.), and speaking about it in this way i.e. in a language quite different from our routine descriptions of it, can work to subtlety sharpen a lens of objectivity unexpectedly available despite an apparently overwhelming degree of 'subjectivity' embedded in the actual process of 'uncovering'. From my own experience, the word 'phenomenon' has a ring of impartiality to it, an 'unrelational' potential as a *term*, that frees the mind from established perceptions of what it is one should be looking at, and how and why. Despite this phenomenologically

legitimated space, however, it can be an extraordinarily difficult one to access. Let me give you an example.

I am intensely interested in knowing students' 'real' experience of the *Reading and Writing Academic Texts* module, and the effect it has had on their post-graduate life. Broadly speaking then, that which is *lived* is central to this research. But *what* of 'that which is lived' constitutes the most relevant phenomenon in terms of my pursuit of a greater understanding of the impact of the RWAT module? As I struggled to get greater and greater clarity on what exactly the phenomenon under study should be, I engaged in more and more strenuous intellectual debate and questioning, pushing 'reflective' limits to an extraordinary level. What I needed to do was find a way to speak about the RWAT module in such a way that it could be 'seen' to be standing in its own space, despite its fundamentally non-autonomous nature. Doing this kind of intricate, multifaceted, illusive kind of thinking took time and energy, and was a far cry from my previous 'reflective' processes. As I pared away at the notion of 'lived experience', I uncovered a disconcertingly large tapestry of possibilities.

To start with, I could do no imagining beyond *students' lives*, but constituting the *phenomenon* as 'students' lives' rang shallow and inappropriate – and potentially a methodological nightmare. Which students? Where? Why them? What period of their lives? My doubts grew. But if 'students' lives' was not the phenomenon, then what was? I then shifted my gaze to the purpose of the RWAT module, and its outcomes, and began to consider 'the academic argument' that we teach in the RWAT module (according to the model developed by the Sydney School of Systemic Functional Linguistics) as a possible phenomenon. If our main goal in the module is to teach this genre (in the very limited, formulaic way that we do), shouldn't this be the 'object' of my enquiry? I drafted and re-drafted dozens of possible research questions but the words I needed to define a single, recognizable, researchable phenomenon eluded me. Coming to the point, therefore, when I could finally describe the phenomenon for this study as 'RWAT as a *lived module'*, was a culmination of months of rigorous and disciplined thought, the full extent and rigour of which is possibly not conveyed here.

Finally, I was able to see that if we attempted to uncover the RWAT module as a *lived module* (as opposed to the module as *thought about*) we would be able to claim that "what we would learn about the module in *this* way could enable us to reach a far more profound insight into the module than we could ever have reached by thinking about it. Such an uncovering of the 'lived module' should make possible an insight which would enable us to understand *how* it enhances the students' powers: which would enable us to predict its effect on the students, which would enable us to develop it, to compare it to other modules, enhance its effectiveness etc. If we succeed then we will have shown that the 'lived module' is 'more objective' in Heidegger's sense, than the module thought about" (Wait, 2004: personal correspondence).

Eliciting 'lived' experience

The second aspect on which I would like to focus is the phenomenological interview. As with all qualitative interviews, the "'social relationship', that is the conscious awareness of the intersubjective nature of the interviewing context, and existent or emerging power relations, is of critical importance" (Seidman, 1991:72). In the phenomenological interview, however, the researcher aims to provoke, through possibly only one or two governing questions and sporadic prompts and requests for clarification, a narrative-style

response to the experience of the phenomenon under study. When asked to describe their experience of a phenomenon, an ideal phenomenological interviewee would then go onto describe, unselfconsciously and fluently, her/his experiences, inadvertently (because that is the nature of story telling) concretizing these descriptions in physical actions and behaviours. Such a goal in phenomenology works from the premise that normally what one expresses in speech is what one thinks. Merleau-Ponty (1968:126) puts it this way:

> But because he has experienced within himself the need to speak, the birth of speech as bubbling up at the bottom of his mute experience, the philosopher knows better than anyone that what is lived is lived-spoken, that, born at this depth, language is not a mask over being, but if one knows how to grasp it with all its roots and all its foliation – the most valuable witness to Being.

So, the goal in phenomenological interviews is to capture the experience of the phenomenon through that which is spontaneously and unwittingly given, rather than through a thoughtful, intellectualized response. Problems arise, however, when the language that would normally 'bubble up at the bottom of his mute experience', and which I take to be the mother tongue/primary language of a speaker, is not the language of the interview. When cultural, racial, social, economic *and* linguistic differences exist between a researcher and her/his participants (as is the case in this South African study), that 'bubble of mute experience' which the phenomenologist so badly wants to hear i.e. the 'unedited' *lived-spoken,* will inevitably take a more winding, self-conscious, uncertain, considered route to the surface. See *Appendices A and B* as examples of this. Both of these extracts are from one of the phenomenological interviews conducted in this study. In both these extracts it should become immediately apparent that I have not achieved the phenomenological interview goals outlined above. As much as I tried to diminish *my* 'spoken input', I found myself internally driven to fill the pauses Sipho[27] left between and within his comments, simply to keep the interview moving, and I was not skilled enough to elicit any experience embedded in 'the concrete' of the RWAT module as 'lived' as he spoke about this aspect of the module. On the other hand, every so often, one gets exactly what one was hoping for: not only evidence of understanding of the issue under discussion, but a *voluntary* transfer of meaning to another context, and 'concretised' in 'real' experience (See *Appendix C*: Interview with Thandi[28]).

But what should one do when one simply can't seem to channel a participant into revealing experience in the way that one wants because 'language' intrudes? How does one validate irrelevant-to-the-phenomenon dialogue without jeopardizing the quality of the relationship between researcher and participant? What kinds of questions are 'typically' phenomenological, and which are not? What authentically can be understood to constitute 'concrete', 'embodied' experience of the phenomenon under study? And if there are so many questions needing to be asked of phenomenology-in-use, is it worth pursuing?

One option is clearly to jettison phenomenology and reorientate one's research and pedagogy towards something simpler and more familiar. The other option is to say *yes*, we must go on, for several reasons. The first is that ODL teacher education *is* such a complex and contested enterprise, particularly in countries such as South Africa where there is a history of discrimination, educational inequity and social injustice, and so we

[27] A pseudonym
[28] A pseudonym

should expect complexity when we research these contexts. The second reason resonates with the position taken at the very start of this paper in relation to the increasing *im*personality of ODL teacher education programmes. Now, more than ever before, is the phenomenological sensitivity of which this paper speaks, so urgently needed, and grappling with the phenomenological process as described here can give rise to that. A final reason not to abandon the phenomenological approach when the going gets rough, is because the approach itself *must* continue to be challenged. Knowledge production is not a static enterprise and no established theories or ideologies, or their related research methodologies should be considered sacrosanct.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to illustrate, through reference to personal experience, and data derived from phenomenological interviews, that hermeneutic phenomenology has much to contribute to ODL research and practice. Though the study on which this paper is based is far from over, and I would not yet make any claims to being an experienced phenomenologist, I do know that my research processes thus far have exercised a profound shift in my sense of 'Being' – both as an individual, and an ODL practitioner and researcher – and that I am close to acquiring the phenomenological sensitivity I believe so critical to the work we do. I also hope that by sharing this research experience with others in the field of ODL, that stimulating and challenging debates will emerge from it.

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APPENDIX A

[Int.= Interviewer; Res.= Respondent/ Participant.]

Extract 1 (Sipho)

Int Let's talk about time in the RWAT module. To do what -

Res What we're supposed to do …

Int …all that we are trying to do.

Res No, we needed at least maybe two terms.

Int Ok, ok.

Res Yes, two terms, yes. Because we couldn't finish – do all this, but these were good actually.

Int Were they?

Res Yes, they were very good because we had time when we had to prepare for the exams. It's only that sometimes we are low. So even if you can read then you find that I can't get through and then you can't phone now and again for each and every problem!

Int But now in terms of time, how could we – I know you said two semesters, how – what would be for you the best model for learning this stuff?

Res Ok, I can't say, it's only that this text, to me it looks like these are the examples, isn't it?

Int Mmm.

Res So maybe having more examples sometimes looks like it's work that you have to read, you have to do, and all that. So it adds on what you are expected to do.

Int Ok …

Res I don't know whether maybe I make myself clear, but having more…

Int No, you make yourself very clear …

Res … more examples …

Int It means more reading?

Res That meant more reading for us.

Int And the more reading there is the more difficult it is to get through?

Res Sometimes confusing, yes, yes, because we have to relate – we had to relate this, but it is help, when you look at it later that, ok, when you are looking then, then you look at this, then you look at that, then you get through it. But I think you need experience, if you are a first-timer student then you have difficulty.

Int And everybody is a first-timer when they do RWAT!

APPENDIX B

Extract 2 (Sipho)

Int Ok. You said just now that it was difficult when I mentioned the political project. Are you able now to explain to me what Johnson[29] meant when he said that the genre approach could be understood as a political project?

Res Well, the way he explained political – that is political er, in pedagogic. But it becomes difficult for me to get close to grasp it.

Int Because it – because it – all right, let's try undo that one. Why was it so difficult for you, do you think? Because remember you are one of the top students.

Res What can I say – what can I say. I'm not sure what – but what I've realised is that whilst she was focusing on the pedagogy, that we – according to us, the language should is a school thing, …

Int Us being teachers?

Res Yes, is a school thing while maybe he also talked about adults – he did also mention about adults and all that, which also – which also has to do with the politically, trying some redresses and all that, redresses and all that, all those things.

Int But that's still not very clear, even now, or is it clearer for you now, what we mean by – let's change the words for that. Let's just say that teaching writing is a – should be understood as a political project.

Res Yes.

Int How would you understand that if I said that? Don't worry about Johnson?

Res Yes, I think it's …

Int Why? Why "political"?

Res If you say teaching ….. can you rephrase that again?

Int Teaching writing in schools should be understood by educators as a political project.

Res So the argument is as a political …

Int I want to know what you make – what sense you make of what I've just said?

Res Mmm, I think maybe it should – it had to do with the politic – politic being involved, or maybe being taking part in as far as maybe directing – I don't know …

Int So that's still – the way I'm using that in English, is that proving a barrier for you?

Res It doesn't prove a barrier but it take the politic above the education so that it is politic then education.

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[29] This is a reference to one of the prescribed readings: Johnson, D. (1994) Language and Education in South Africa: The Value of a Genre-based Pedagogy for Access and Inclusion. In: *The Quest for Identity in a Multicultural Society: South Africa*. Feral, C. (ed) Conference Proceedings: International Seminar, France, December 1994

Int And is that a good or a bad thing?

Res Well in reality it is something that is taking place, but sometimes you don't want to look at it as a top-down approach all the time. Because it leaves us not having alternative -

Int Mmm, mmm

Res … on the ground, because you always think that things will come from above.

Int You mean that's …

Res Because of the polity who have got powers.

Int Ok, from our history, you mean?

Res Yes, from our history.

APPENDIX C

Extract 3 (Thandi)

Int. So, your experience of RWAT? How did it relate to your personal sense of power? Was there a relationship at all? Did RWAT do anything for you?

Res. Yes, it did.

Int. Along those lines?

Res. Along those lines of power, yes. and it has made me to read more.

Int. Really?

Res. Ja, I've started reading – I wasn't interesting in reading that much. Though maybe I like inspirational books, so – but it gives me that power because I could relate to social issues very well. So I would feel in some cases I am powerful with the other people, because of the information that I have.

Int. Why do you think you're reading more though?

Res. Self empowerment, I would say, I've been through a lot in my social life. My self-esteem has been very very very down. So I wanted something to boost me.

Int. And how did RWAT …

Res. For the fact that now – for the fact that I can argue.

Int. OK.

Res. Really, it's an achievement for me.

Int. So you really did come to grips with …

Res. Yes, I did …

Int. … trying to argue this stuff?

Res. Yes.

Int. Goodness, that's really interesting. It really is. I think you've stated that the most – the most articulate way that I've heard of that being a consequence of this experience.

Res. Ja, …

Int. So to go back to how it means that you have learnt to argue, what does that mean in reality for you? You've learnt – we taught you how to write a very recipe-like – and you can argue, um, you say that it has actually taught you much more than that. It's taught you about – what are the bits that match?

Res. Er – I'll refer again to our SADTU[30] meetings, when you got there they have three cards, yellow card, green card and a red card. The green card you raise when you want to make a point, yellow card if you want clarity, and the red card if somebody is saying something out of order. So you will just raise up your hand and say something, and just see that red card and it means, my goodness, or I'm not speaking on what – on anything that is relevant to what is being said now. So that issue of cohesion – it came up so it helped me a lot, because you'd say, ok,

[30] SADTU: South African Democratic Teachers' Union

we’re talking about this point now. So I will go further to that one, because it doesn’t link to what is being discussed at the moment.

Int. Ok! Oh, that’s fantastic! So well explained, thank you.

Staff Development, an issue for Open and Distance Learning: a reflection at the University of South Africa

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Introduction

The induction programme for new staff members remains a debated issue (George, 2002). And even introducing a new role to staff members remains problematic for many institutions of higher education. This state of affairs is even gloomier when we think of Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Therefore, experienced academics who don't want to reflect on their practice and their students' learning find it difficult to influence institutional and curriculum development and cannot create and recreate their own identities.

The quality of teaching and learning in the higher education sector now matters more than it ever mattered some few years ago. Such pressures clearly demand a more professional approach to staff development and training. Thus, staff development and training must comprise a much wider range of opportunities to meet the diversity of needs in a new situation.

Background, opportunities and challenges

The last two decades have seen the training of higher education personnel becoming a common international practice. Countries like Norway, Holland, Australia, the USA and the UK have initiated and established various staff development training programmes. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2003) refers to the professionalisation and development of academic staff, i.e. the focus is on those who teach. The CHE (2003) observes that in the South African context staff development, academic development, staff support, and services remain under-resourced areas. And, as such, these areas require staff development in terms of learning and teaching. This is critical if lecturers are to become knowledgeable about new educational theories and methods, and to apply them effectively to their changing teaching context (CHE, 2003). Furthermore, CHE (2003) has indicated that staff development is primarily an institutional responsibility and must be operationalised within an institutional context. However, it is increasingly influenced by national policies and global trends. This poses a very serious challenge for ODL institutions like the University of South Africa (Unisa).

Nothling, Grundling and Goodwin-Davey (2003) list some of the findings of the research based on redefining and reconsidering the place and purpose of staff development at Unisa:

- Most academic staff members at Unisa do not understand their roles and therefore do not understand their learning needs for professional development.
- There is the lack of a dual responsibility to maintain a culture of lifelong learning (both at the Bureau for Learning Development (BLD) and amongst academics).

- There is the lack of a culture of quality assurance and reflection on the needs of educators, the needs of learners etc.
- Incentives to undergo further professional development on ODL and on teaching environment are lacking.
- There is no accreditation for training and development initiatives that are effective, which have been undertaken so far.
- Not enough time to accomplish necessary tasks, including professional development.
- Lack of an effective induction programme for new academic staff.

In this context, staff development may be regarded as a broad range of activities, designed to promote growth. It is against this background and context that this paper wants to reflect on staff development at University of South Africa (Unisa). One of the goals of this study was to explore issues relevant to staff development programmes in ODL. As such, I hoped to discover some of the pertinent issues that confront academics and staff developers when it comes to a university's staff development programmes. Zulcowski (2000) argues that successful practices of ongoing classroom-focused distance education programmes depend on a number of key factors. One of the key factors to success in distance education learning is the teacher. This will demand staff development activities that have at their core an adaptive teaching and learning transaction approach. And as distance education continually reflects rapid growth, staff development will become a forever-debated issue. Furthermore, the lack of time and resources for staff development will add still more challenges.

Methodology

This study was carried out at University of South Africa (largest provider of distance education in South Africa). Although the sample size was going to be small and not cover population groups I decided to make use of questionnaires for this research. I assumed an absence of any questionnaire bias, though by default, there were cues to influence respondents, especially respondents from the BLD, as they were aware that I am the coordinator of Staff Development (SD).

The starting point was what LeCompte & Goetz (1996) would refer to as criterion-based sampling. I searched for academics from the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, and Learning Developers who have a role in staff development in the Bureau for Learning Development at the University of South Africa. The cover page of the questionnaire stated to the respondents that staff development would refer to their being currently involved in staff developing and training others or having been staff developed and trained by others.

I randomly distributed the questionnaire to the BLD and at Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences staff members. Of the 21 questionnaires distributed to the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, 12 were returned by the designated cut-off date, one week after distribution. And of 20 distributed in the BLD, 13 were returned by the designated cut-off date, one week after distribution. While a major disadvantage may have been the few responses, one could assume that a high level of anonymity and confidentiality was established. However, a return of 40% with the 'judicious' use of reminders is acceptable (Cohen & Manion, 1996). Furthermore Cohen & Manion (1996) argue that sample size depends on one's research purposes; however, a sample size of 30 could be regarded as the minimum number of cases required and the sample in this study

comprised 40. However, as a researcher, I used a mix of open-ended and closed- ended questions and lastly a space for comments was provided so as to give insights that otherwise might have been omitted. The questionnaire started with two items which asked for the respondents' qualifications and year obtained. The remaining 10 items were grouped as follows:

3 closed-ended questions;
7 open-ended questions, 6 with sub-items requiring elaboration of the response.

Literature on staff development in distance education

Littlejohn & Sclater (1999) share the view that in facilitating a staff development programme, academics often struggle with a number of conceptual barriers. One reason for this is that most educators/academics have themselves been participants in a traditional teaching and learning environment.

Castling (1996) shows that staff development is a vehicle for the management of change. Therefore, staff development personnel must be seen as agents of change, with their role being predominantly to empower staff by helping them cope with internally and externally generated change. If the orientation from the top is of crucial importance, then change will be seen as inevitable, necessary and stimulating and can be a rich source of learning. Furthermore, staff development will be seen as a focus of creativity, energy and achievement.

Staff development is a complex process carried out within interlocking relationships. Thus, staff development is not merely an administrative function, non-direct training; but a process which is much more of an art than a science. Therefore, staff developers are no longer functionaries, but designers, interpreters, and mediators of learning (Castling, 1996).

An institution can assist academic staff by providing proper training and academic staff development. Often it is assumed that academic staff can adapt to any teaching and learning style, and little attention is paid to their training needs (Bashir, 1998; Cornwall, 1988). Furthermore, academic staff members need to be given time and resources if staff development is to be a success.

Findings and impacts on staff development

The findings of this study indicate a number of directions. Staff development can be regarded as first and foremost an attitude, and as showing the commitment of people to refine their personal gifts so as to achieve specific objectives. Therefore, the faculties must have the desire to create strong and comprehensive staff development programmes. However, if we don't check the attitudes of the people we want to develop, we may labour in vain.

In order to bring about positive attitudes to staff development, one will need both formal and informal programmes. Informal staff development relates to what we do on a daily basis for colleges and staff, whereas formal staff development comprises planned programmes. Staff development may involve identifying conceptual framework, which serves as a guide to the development and implementation of the vision of the institution.

Furthermore, the faculty and staff need to identify action steps to make this a reality. At Unisa, in order to plan and implement a formal programme we need to develop clear prerequisites for such programmes and identify organizational input into such programmes. Rogus and Wildenhaus (2000) suggest that to assure a strong programme we need to establish a policy stipulating involvement in staff development. Furthermore, provide a separate budget and commit to engaging staff in the programme planning process, beginning with the diagnosis of needs and extending through specific programme planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Implications of the findings

The findings set out a number of challenges for the design of effective and integrated staff development, such as:

- The creation of a time and space for staff-development,
- Staff development is regarded as important by academics; however there is a need to know very clearly what it is that will enhance teaching and learning, in ODL matters mostly,
- Academics, coming from conventional or face-to-face situations, encounter problems in changing to an ODL context. The issue here becomes how do we raise awareness of staff development so that they can cope in the new academic environment?
- Some academics appear unclear about the nature of staff development, and can hardly link activities of staff development explicitly and coherently.
- The need for precise and explicit identification of the skills, knowledge and attitudes we want to affect cannot be overemphasized.
- Taking part in staff development impacted on their practice as academics.
- The demands of staff-development impact on academics' skills. This simple means that we need a new focus on staff-development, which will be informed by the needs of academics. This shift in focus leads to a coherent and consistent response spilling across faculties/colleges and schools, thus impacting on the management and monitoring of staff development activities.

One of the findings, which interestingly stemmed from both academics and learning developers was the need for a combination of both a formal and informal staff development programmes offered at various times over many weeks. This is something that runs contrary to most traditional approaches, where we have daily, week-long or even block sessions for staff development. Though this style may help immersion into the content and skill areas, academics do not have enough time to devote to a week-long or even block session. Staff development programmes need to be paced over several weeks, so that academics can move at their own pace. Therefore, the university must coordinate staff development from a central position. However, we must be aware that even if decisions are taken centrally, it is staff members who must instil an understanding of this reasoning into their students.

Discussion

As already stated, one of the goals of this study was to explore issues relevant to staff development programmes in ODL. Providing for staff development is one of the most formidable challenges for an ODL institution like Unisa. This challenge is formidable but not simple, because of the linkage between various student programmes and

faculty/college staff development, and also because the field of SD has recently experienced (and continues to experience) several paradigm shifts, which have seriously impacted on providers and participants.

Roguss & Wildernhaus (2000) argue that there are different shifts in staff development. In order to ensure that faculties/colleges are engaged in staff development, which will result in effective learning, a variety of tasks can be carried out. Rogus & Wildernhaus (2000) suggest such tasks, amongst others, should include viewing all interaction with faculty as having staff development implications and making a clear distinction between informal and formal staff development activity

Cowan (1978) argues that the most effective development occurs at the intersection between curriculum, institutional and staff development as shown in Figure 1. Furthermore, Cowan (1978) argues that it is only when institutional strategy is thought through, into the details of what it implies for curriculum development and staff development, that it will be truly effective.

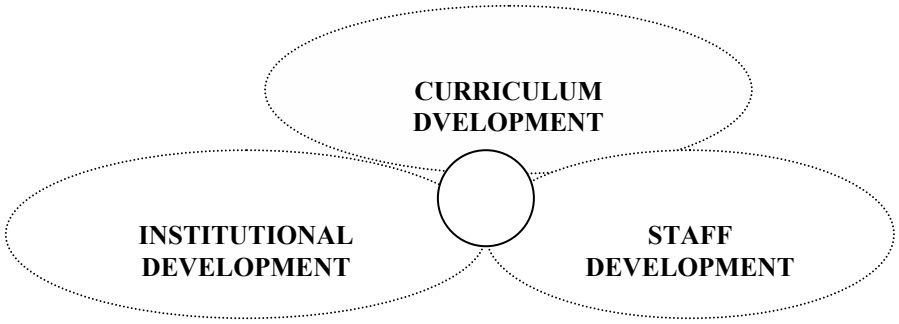

Figure 1. Pattern of integrated development (Cowan; 1978)

Stuart (1996) argues that staff development will have to give up its emphasis on service to individuals and become an integral part of organizational planning and development.

Conclusion

The experience of this study is that staff development is a powerful tool for changing and enhancing teaching and learning amongst students, staff and the institution. I would argue that staff development is one of the most talked about elements of teaching professionalism, yet one of the most undermined factors. And in the face of change, staff development is an invaluable tool for academics to effectively deliver effective teaching and learning. George (2002) emphasizes that to be effective in learner-centred teaching, teachers must know what is happening for their students; and action research is the way to find out, simple and yet sound. Furthermore, the practice of action research potentially changes not only the quality of the experiences of teaching and learning, but also the nature and role of staff development, at least in its later stages when it becomes continuous professional development (George, 2002). Therefore, we need to provide opportunities for formal and informal staff development programmes via college development, and to offer training and other forms of institutional support for teaching and learning in the ODL context.

In ODL, staff development is a complex issue, as its aim is to empower staff on behalf of the institution and its objectives. This will demand a wide range of interpersonal skills and high levels of energy and organization. Accordingly Castling (1996) advises that above all, staff development calls for a positive orientation towards change, based on a strong belief in every individual's capacity for growth in a supportive environment. More so, as we may need to develop the attitudes and capabilities we want to develop in our students. The need for a supportive culture is critical, as this will determine the access to a variety of means of professional growth.

The challenge of providing staff development at departmental or institutional level can no longer be neglected or ignored at Unisa. Staff development needs to be conducted within the framework of the institutional process, so as to exert its full impact on the quality of the institution's learning and teaching.

There are a number of reasons why lecturers do not participate in staff development. Bower (2001) says the fear of appearing incompetent may cause faculty to resist involvement in any activity for which they have not had the proper training.

Staff development will continue to be required as the open learning procedures become embedded in the culture of the university. If we need staff to develop, in our strategic planning we must increase training opportunities, improve training facilities and provide the necessary assistance, direction and support. Staff development must aim at inculcating ODL teaching and learning methods. Focusing on staff development alone has its own limitations. Though great care was taken to define and select a substantively representative sample of learning developers and academics, there is always a possibility that the sample may not have been sufficiently representative.

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Towards excellence in student services at the National Teachers' Institute (NTI) Nigeria

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Introduction

Teacher education in Nigeria is increasingly responding to quality agendas that demand evidence of competence in teacher training as well as quality of output. While such demands can have positive impact for teaching and learning across teacher training colleges, it can also present a lot of challenges where the student body is to a large extent heterogeneous and are geographically dispersed. These challenges also demand that programme evaluation be complemented by empirical field-based research.

This paper is based on a doctor of education research in progress that draws on the perceptions of students, tutors, field centre coordinators and central management to evaluate the support services provided to students enrolled for the National Teachers' Institute (NTI) Nigeria Certificate in Education by distance learning system (NCE/DLS) programme. Thorpe (1993) stresses the fact that evaluation means more than assessment and points to the fact that evaluation is concerned not just with what was meant to happen (e.g. using examination results as a measure of outcomes), but with what actually happens (i.e. the process).

The main rationale for this study stems from the fact that despite the practice of distance education in Nigeria for the past two decades, there is a lack of empirical research or publications in the area, that reveal clearly the current state of the practice of student support services in distance education in Nigeria and from which to draw best practices. This study therefore aims at finding out what the NTI is doing, how well they are doing, and where they are heading, with regards to supporting the learning process for students enrolled in the NCE programme. Secondly, the benefits practitioners gain by taking on the role of researcher have been highlighted by a number of writers (Schön, 1983; Thorpe, 1993; Jarvis, 1995) in the last two decades. Schön (1983) for instance suggest that theories are formed by reflecting on practices that are based on the knowledge brought from earlier actions or experiences. Personally, my immediate past role as Liaison officer/Coordinator of the Institute's Distance Learning programmes in one field centre has provided me with experiences to be used as a basis for this study.

In the first part of this paper, a brief statement of the problem is presented. This is followed by an outline of the research design and a summary of findings from different perspectives. Finally, issues for consideration are highlighted and implications drawn for policy and for practice.

Statement of the problem

In an attempt to address the issue of teacher shortage for the implementation of the Universal Primary Education (UPE), Government in 1976 established the National Teachers' Institute. This is over two decades before the enactment of a National Policy

on Open and Distance Education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2002), which has now provided the policy framework for the operation of distance education delivery system in the country. The NTI NCE/DLS course is modular by design and is organised in four cycles, corresponding to four calendar years. Teaching is divided into two semesters of 52 weeks, with each semester having an average of three modules per subject. Teaching practice is compulsory and course tutors and staffs of the Institute do supervision. An external moderator from the College of Education or university is used to moderate teaching practice scores, while students are assessed through continuous assessment and final examinations.

The first sets of students for the NCE course (29,214) were admitted in 1990 and completed the course in 1993. Out of 28,324 students who completed, 24,378 (about 86%) qualified for the award of the NCE certificate (Bunza, 1997). This is a significant number when one considers the fact that the Colleges of Education (There are 67 Colleges of Education comprising of 20 owned by the Federal Government, 41 by State Governments, 5 Private and 1 for the military in the country) collectively graduate about 30, 000 NCE teachers yearly from full time studies (Federal Ministry of Education, 2003). From 1993-2002, 71,116 teachers graduated from the NTI programme (NTI, 2002).

However, results released as at November 2004 for the 2003 graduating students show that out of 21,928 who sat for the examinations, 10,629 (48.47%) students passed while 11,299 (51.53%) failed as shown in table 1

Table 1: NCE/DLS enrolment/output for 1996/1999 - 2000/2003 cohorts

Cohort	Number Enrolled in First Year	Number who Sat for Exams in Final Year	Number/Percentage Passed	Number/Percentage Failed
1996-1999	7,798	5,117	2,116	3,001
			41.35	58.64
1997-2000	6,638	7,651	3,991	3,660
			52.16	47.84
1998-2001	8,804	8,923	5,067	3,856
			56.78	43.21
1999-2002	9,422	13,228	5977	7,251
			45.19	54.81
2000-2003	19,658	21,928	10,629	11,299
			48.47	51.53

Source: Compiled from students performance analysis records - NTI Academic Services Department

Although enrolment and completion rates appear to be steadily increasing, output from the programme appears to have dropped from 24,378 (86%) in 1993 to 2,116 (41%) in 1999. The pass rate has remained on average below 50% since then. Due to partial and unreliable registration data, it is not clear the actual number of students completing the

course or failing when compared to the enrolment for a "theoretical" cohort. The evidence (as presented in table 1) would however appear to show that some students dropout of the system while others return to it.

Research design

Nigeria is geopolitical zoned into six: North-West; North-East; North-Central; South-West; South-East and South-South, with each zone having an average of six states. The NTI runs the NCE/DLS programme in 37 States of the Federation, including the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) with over 400 NCE study centers. The research was carried out in six states namely: Kaduna, Niger, Bauchi, Enugu, Cross River, and Lagos. Twelve study centres (six urban and six rural) were visited. It must be mentioned that the very remote centres (e.g. those that needed to be reached by boat or canoe or by trucks) were not considered due to shortage of time and travel cost.

Methodologically, the study uses a mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) evaluation approach. The evaluation framework developed for the study is based on the formative approach and is limited to being illuminative in identifying any changes required in the provision/implementation of support services which will eventually improve students' learning and in turn the quality of output. In order to do this, it was important to find out from students, their perception of various aspects of support services such as: administrative, guidance and counselling, tutorial/face-to-face arrangements and learning materials.

Data Collection activities were carried out between August and October 2003. This involved distribution of questionnaires to 370 students. The questionnaire was in two parts. The first part consisted of four distinct sections, as mentioned above. Each item listed in this section was evaluated by students, using a 5- point Likert-type scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The statements were framed to get both positive and negative feedback and the criteria were equally weighted. The second part of the questionnaire was designed to obtain information on students' characteristics such as: gender; age; educational background; professional background; student circumstances; geographical situation; special needs; communications technology connectedness and motivation for undertaking the course. The final instrument showed a high Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0.82.

In order to determine institutional orientation and perspectives with regards to support services, individual interviews were conducted with 3 central management staff, 6 field centre coordinators, and 12 part-time tutors. An interview schedule, which consisted mainly of semi-structured questions, was used. The interviews were conducted in English and were tape-recorded. Broad topics addressed during the interview with course tutors/supervisors included: their background qualification, how they viewed their present role compared with previous roles; what kind of support they provide to the students (whether academic, or personal); their experiences in working with distance learning students; what instructional methods they used, their general perception of support services provided for students and tutors by the Institute and problems they faced with distance learners. For management staff, topics addressed included: the changing needs in the Institute's objectives; the major forms of support provided; implementation and monitoring of support services; the effects on students (pass or fail rates); how students are recruited and enrolled; how course materials are distributed and maintained;

feedback mechanisms put in place; and plans for the use of ICT. Documentary materials were also used in support of interviews and to gain a further understanding of official perspective of student support system, administrative structure and other aspects of the programme. The documents included: students' handbook; training manual for course tutors and centre supervisors; strategic plan of the NTI and monitoring and evaluation guide for the NCE. Examination results were also used to provide an insight into students' performance.

Major findings/discussions

Figure 1: Major findings on characteristics of students

- 57% of the sampled students are female; 43% are male
- Mostly adult students. 93% are aged 23years and above, with 28.1% falling in the 33-37 age group. The youngest age group (18-22 years) make up 7.4% of the sample
- All of the students had the basic qualification of WASC/GCE/SSC (63.8%) or TC11 (36.2%) required for admission into the programme.
- 73.5% of students are employed; 26.5% are unemployed
- 54.9% of students have taught for between 0-5 years, 1.5% for 31 plus years mainly in primary schools.
- Distances travelled to state offices are for the majority (45.6%) in excess of 20 Km; to study centers and nearest library is frequently between 1-5 km
- 51.1% of students use electricity as their source of light to study in the evening. However, a significant minority (49%) uses either candles or lanterns.
- Most students (52.9%) prefer to study at the study centres; 40.7% study at home; a small percentage (6.4%) study at their work place or library

Access to technology:

- 80.4% of students have access to the radio, 40.4% to tape recorders and 41.2% to the television at home.
- Access to new technologies (e.g. computers and internet) at home is poor, with only 5.8% of student having access to the computer and 1.2% to Internet
- The radio and television are the most frequently used to assist students in their studies
- 94.4% of students would welcome training in the use of computer

Reasons for enrolling in the programme:

- 88% of students just wanted a job after completing the course; 65.2% wanted to be good community leaders.
- Few (38.9%) students enrolled in order to develop their intellectual knowledge; 38.6% wanted to gain admission to degree courses later on in their careers
- Few (31.9%) of students enrolled in order to be good classroom teachers

Demographic findings in this study (see Figure 1) show that the NTI students are typical of distance learners in that: they are adults (the largest proportion of the sample is aged between 33 and 37); largely female (as females make up 57% of the total sample); they are part-time students and therefore may have other responsibilities such as work (about 74% are in employment) and/or families. Educational backgrounds for these students do

not vary much since the target groups for the course are serving teachers and secondary school leavers. While highly motivated to enroll for the programme by the economic benefits that would follow their enhanced qualification and status and their perceived need to improve their ability to participate in community work, students are less intrinsically motivated to improve their intellectual knowledge and classroom performance. Typically students also come from resource poor environments and have to travel frequently between one and five Kilometers to access facilities at study centres.

Figure 2: Students Perceptions of Support Services

Administrative support services:

- Information on admission and registration is adequate
- Students can easily access information on their progress from the state office
- Administrative staff at state offices are friendly and helpful
- Late conduct and release of examination results is problematic

Guidance/counselling support services:

- Sufficient pre-course registration counselling is provided
- Students receive helpful support in planning and organising their studies.
- Support for academic/personal problems is provided by tutors
- Students experience difficulties in getting additional academic support when unable to attend contact sessions or examinations

Tutorial/Face–to–face contact:

- Students are pleased with the frequency of face-to-face contact sessions during the weekends and vacations
- Class times are convenient for students
- Contact sessions are seen as essential for understanding of the course
- Students are happy with the teaching methods used
- Tutors encourage group interaction during contact sessions
- Enough time is given for submission of assignment
- 57.6% of students view assignment turn-around time to be excellent
- The course workload is not too much for students to undertake
- Feedback on assignments is considered helpful and fair

Learning material support:

- Course books are found to be clearly written
- Modules are well structured and easy to follow
- Activities set for students are found suitable and relevant to the needs of assessments
- Course books and study guide are regarded as essential for a good understanding of the course
- Provision of course book is regarded as poor
- Library services/reference materials is regarded as poor

Although students' approval of support services (as shown in figure 2) is generally at a good level, there are reports of delays in the production and distribution of course materials and the unavailability of reference materials from the library. Since both the quality of course books and their availability are meant to impact on learning outcome,

the current situation is problematic for both tutors and students as course books are not available. For the tutors, the lack of resources impacts negatively on their facilitative role, and for the students, they are unable to move beyond simply acquiring information.

Figure 3: Student support from management, coordinators and course tutors' perspectives

Support from a management perspective

- Student support is viewed as integral to the whole NTI system and is driven by the need to provide for interaction between the learner and tutor and with fellow learners
- A decentralised support system is operational
- A managerese approach is adopted
- Media used emphasises one way communication though face-to-face provide elements of two-way communication
- The central role of the tutor is emphasised.
- Collaborative relationships are formed with other agencies for cost effective provision of support materials
- Externalising issues – problems displaced to other parts of the system and past set up

Support from field centre coordinators perspective

- The role of a coordinator is perceived as tasking and challenging
- The support for tutors and students is considered inadequate
- Poor record management at head office
- Lack of resources has a negative impact on their duties – ineffective monitoring blamed on lack of resources
- Admit having drop-outs from the programme

Support from course tutors perspective

- Tutors perceive their role as one of providing academic and personal support to students
- Tutors perceive students as having low motivation to do the course, and as lacking the skills to work independently
- Tutoring role is oriented towards a traditional pedagogy (e.g. lecture method) during class sessions
- Lack of resources impact negatively on their roles
- The support provided to tutors and students is perceived as poor

Constraining forces in the provision of support

- Funding
- Poor infrastructure nationally
- Lack of access to technological aids
- Struggle with organizational culture and staff orientation/ development

Findings from the four groups – students, central management, field centre coordinators and course tutors show commonalities in terms of problems encountered in the provision of student support services. Students, coordinators and tutors complain of resources such as learning and reference materials. Central management perceive finances and poor infrastructure nationally as a major constraint on the provision and distribution of course

material, and expansion of media. Coordinators also perceive funding as a major constrain on the effective monitoring of study centres.

However, the traditional factors of male/female, rural/urban are not necessarily the issues here as little difference was registered in perception among these groups. For example, students in both rural and urban centres appear to be equally disadvantaged in terms of electricity supply and library services. Both male and female indicated they would like to learn through the distance learning mode again, implying that this mode of learning appealed to both sexes equally.

Findings also show discrepancies in certain areas. There is a miss-match in perceptions between what central management say they provide and what students and tutors say is being provided for them. For instance, while central management says state office does not communicate promptly on matters concerning students; state office says there is poor record management at head office. While central management is pleased with the structure put in place for part-time staff training, the impact is yet to be felt by centre supervisors and course tutors as exemplified in the following excerpts from interviews:

We are currently running a training course for supervisors and course tutors managing distance education programmes. Out of the six zones in the country, the training has been conducted in two zones. One of the areas we touched in that training is learner support – what kind of support could course tutors and supervisors give to the students and how can they assist the students learning at the center? .... From what we have heard particularly after the first training we understand that things have improved, which means that the training has been worthwhile in the first instance (Central management).
They organised one workshop quite recently, but course tutors were not invited. Those that were invited were centre supervisors. It was administrative in nature so to say (Tutor)

Again, the claim made by central management on the conduct and release of examination results appear contrary to what students, tutors and coordinators perceive the situation to be, and what the researcher encountered in trying to obtain students results for use as baseline data for the present study. While central management claim that the Institute does not take more than a month to process examinations, the researcher was only able to obtain results for examinations scheduled to be taken in September 2003 in February 2005 (these results were officially released in November 2004), over a year after the examinations were conducted. These findings present some major challenges for the NTI in the provision of support services to meet the needs of students and to sustain their motivation on the course. The problems identified in this study places students at a high risk for drop out and poor course performance.

Overall, learner support as it emerged in this study is seen as an integral part of the NTI system and so it is built in as supplementary to the main medium, which is printed text. Apart from supplementing the course material, the forms of support provided meet the demands of the cognitive, affective and systemic functions mentioned in the literature (Tait, 2000) and are relevant to the NTI student population. There is however not much emphasis on individual support. The forms of support provided are instead oriented towards the group. There is no provision for students to seek help outside that provided during contact sessions. Despite the fact that Open and Distance learning has since diverged by using a range of media, to facilitate communication between the learner and

teacher and to make learning more interactive the NTI has not in the over twenty-five years of its existence been able to make that transition in its course delivery strategy. Due to accessibility and cost, other media such as telephone, television, radio and Internet have remained unexploited.

Also omitted are services for students with special needs of one sort or another (e.g. disabilities) and residential schools. The evidence would seem there are few (14%) with disabilities, but it is not clear whether these are cognitive, physical or emotional. The omission could mean the NTI do not have these forms of support, or that students with disabilities are there but have not been identified and so are not catered for. It could even mean that this form of support is there but are not seen as contributing to learner support. These are issues that will need further exploration.

Conclusion and issues for consideration

The final part of this paper will explore some of the issues and research needs highlighted by this study:

- Institutional commitment - One important finding emerging from this study is that student support in distance education does not mean merely putting a bureaucratic structure in place. It means demonstrating commitment in terms of resources and effective tuition. It also means putting the learner rather than the institution at the centre of learning. Learning is possible in a teaching-learning situation if the learner is free to explore ideas, materials and resources that are available to him according to his abilities. It is only then that s/he can take control of learning activities and be able to challenge [the teacher] authority. What then is the learner's interest when quality is on the agenda? Results point to sustaining and improving best practice. The standard which concerns students is the best that the support people (particularly tutors and field coordinators) and the system can be for them given the limitations of resources and within the constraints of the Institute and not the minimum standards as set out in official documents. Students value face-to-face contact and criticise late production/distribution of course materials and late conduct and release of results. It therefore follows that a greater attention needs to be paid to these areas for the achievement of excellence.

- Expansion in media and delivery method- a strong vision and mission has already been developed in the NTI. Its vision of becoming an internationally acknowledged centre for distance education and the leader in teacher education in Nigeria can be realised through strengthening its student support system and expanding its delivery system to provide opportunities for greater access, diversity and flexibility. In the changing educational environment, ICTs are enabling more established providers to re-think and re-engineer the nature of their student services. The UK Open University and the University of South Australia are involved in such a process as part of a strategy to position these Universities as global players (Rumble, 2000; Kenworthy, 2003). Of course, the NTI cannot achieve this re-engineering alone. A strategy for attaining this vision must be through government commitment to provision of resources and infrastructure that can support distance education. Areas of focus and emphasis would therefore include: science and technology development, establishment of a reliable and cost-efficient infrastructure, the use of cost-efficient media such as the radio and television for teaching and learning, international

cooperation in research and development and above all, good governance and transparency in economic policies. Within this partnership of the State and the NTI, combined with local community support, new technologies can be introduced in the NTI programme and can play an important role in improving the quality of the programme and output and in the long term, the quality of primary education.

- The creation of a learning community - desired changes and improvement can also occur if the Institute takes collective responsibility for students learning through an effective and sound organisational infrastructure. Wenger (1998) posits that learning is situated - i.e. it is a function of the activity, context and culture in which it occurs. For learning to occur in the NTI context, there is the need for harmonisation between the different areas (Headquarters, zonal office state office and study centres). At the moment, the NTI has the machinery in place, which is not working efficiently. It is therefore necessary for central management to commit resources for long term learning in terms of money, time (e.g. ensuring that course materials are produced and sent out to students as at when due, timely release of students' results,) staff motivation/training and to improve communication between the various groups. By so doing, every member will feel a sense of belonging to the community and be able to work towards a common goal. For better integration of students as part of the learning community, the NTI can borrow from the example of the University of South Africa (Nonyongo, 2003), in establishing a student representative body, which could enhance student participation at different levels of the Institute's decision making.

On reflection

Despite its limitations, this study has illuminated some of the problems encountered in the provision of support to students and also established empirical evidence on the need for quality student services. We (in Nigeria) need not so much of alternative pathways to education as to provide the resources necessary to accomplish this. We need not so much of an andragogical system or to discard with traditional methods as to encourage self-responsibility for learning (e.g. helping students to develop the necessary skills and self-discipline to study on their own) and to expand our notion on teacher professionalism. Students in the Nigerian context are more likely to value active and passive learning equally provided they are properly guided.

Thorpe (1996) draws attention to issues of evaluation in ODL and suggests that practitioners discover more about their practice and those it affects in the process of carrying out evaluation research. Personally, this study has enabled me to reflect on and critique my own practice as a one-time coordinator of a state office in the NTI system. With the resources available to me on my doctoral programme, and the support given by tutors, I have been able to take a proactive role in my learning. Suggestion is therefore made that more evaluation be carried out that is driven by the need for institutional and individual development rather than by external pressures for quality control/assurance or the need for increase in enrolment. It is my hope that findings from the study will be directly applied back to practice.

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Working in difficult circumstances: A case study of the Institute of Distance Education, University of Swaziland

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Introduction

This paper discusses difficult working conditions at the Institute of Distance Education (IDE), which is part of The University of Swaziland (UNISWA), and how these difficulties affect the quality of the teaching and learning at the IDE. The paper begins with a contextual background with the aim of locating the IDE within the wider university education context. It progresses to reflect on IDE practice through assessing the major constraints that the Institute has been facing. Finally, recommendations for improvement are discussed.

Contextual Background

The IDE was established as a result of national demands on the university prior to 1994 to increase the production of skilled labour force for both the private and public sectors. UNISWA is the only university in Swaziland. The public at large and the private sector looked upon the University to widen access to its programmes. However, widening access to conventional university education was not possible due to its inherent constraints in terms of rigid admissions and shortage of human and physical resources/facilities on campus. The number of employed, self-employed, unemployed and post high school individuals who wanted to enrol into the University programmes far exceeded the available resources/facilities on campus. To address the problem, UNISWA established the IDE in 1994.

The mission of the IDE is to create educational and training opportunities for individuals. The individuals targeted include people who were: i) in employment and could not attend classes on a full time basis, ii) unemployed high school graduates who needed further education and training to get employment and/or to improve their lives, as well as iii) post high school graduates who wished to enrol at the University through the regular stream but missed the opportunity. In the larger perspective, the aim of the IDE is to offer higher education programmes for the benefit of all those who had been deprived of the opportunity to enter the main stream education earlier including those in employment, women and adults who wish to upgrade their education or acquire knowledge in various fields through distance education.

The mandate given to IDE is to work, in collaboration with the conventional Departments of the University, to plan, design and offer the University programmes to off-campus students using the distance education delivery mode and to ensure the equivalence and parity of standards between on-campus and off-campus University

programmes. Currently the IDE is offering Degree, Diploma, and Certificate programmes (Appendix 1) and thus its motto is*: "Taking the University education and professional programmes to the people than the people coming to the University."*

Constraints

This section deals with some of the difficult circumstances under which the IDE is running. Distance education is generally considered the second best choice to conventional education and is undervalued. Jenkins (2002) explains that distance education remains on the periphery in most countries and is underdeveloped, hence its low status. Distance education now faces a concern for quality and in resource constrained countries, like Swaziland, the challenges are numerous. Like in other dual mode institutions, the wider University of Swaziland community is concerned with parity of quality standards and esteem between the distance and the conventional university education modes. Harry and Perraton (1997:7) argue that 'There is still scepticism about the legitimacy of distance education in countries as different as Swaziland, China and Canada.' In the case of Swaziland, the scepticism is perpetrated by practice challenges within the IDE. The IDE has been the subject of severe criticism due to the factors which will be discussed in this section.

Many of the constraints stem from the organization and sub-systems of the education offered through the IDE. Edirisingha, (1999) cited in Perraton (2004, p.6) in general identifies three sets of factors affecting distance education's effectiveness and sustainability, namely context related, intermediate and programme related factors. These are well summed up in the model (see Table 1). The factors within the model will be used to discuss the constraints faced by the IDE in an attempt to engage in reflective practice as well as recommend improvements.

Table 1: Distance education programmes factors

Context related factors	**Intermediate factors**	**Programme-related factors**
Political context and political support	Funding regime	Instructional design
Integration into the mainstream education	Cost of the programme	Selection of media or technologies
Independence of the organisational structure	Relevance of the curriculum	Quality of the learner support system
Access to communication infrastructure	Existing structures and collaboration	Capacity of in-house research

(Adapted from Edirisingha, 1999)

Programme related factors

Programme related factors have a significant influence on distance education. Perraton (2004: 7) argues that the four factors shown in Table 1 as programme-related are the staples of good practice in open and distance learning because unlike context related and intermediary factors, they are under the direct control of a distance institute, like the IDE. These factors are discussed next.

IDE Programmes

Although IDE was established in 1994, its first intake of students was in August 1996 when 150 students were admitted to programmes in the Institute. At that time, it only offered three programmes, namely, the Diploma in Commerce, the Diploma in Law and the B.A. (Humanities) Degree. Since then a number of programmes and courses have been added to those on offer, and these include the Bachelor of Education (Adult Education) Degree and the Certificate in French which were started in 1997. From this academic year (2004-05), the Institute has started the Bachelor of Commerce programme. The student enrolment in B.A. Humanities and Diploma in Law has been encouraging compared to other programmes (Table-2).

Table –2 Students enrolment in IDE from 1996-97 to 2004-05

Programme	**1996-97**	**1997-98**	**1998-99**	**1999-00**	**2000-01**	**2001-02**	**2002-03**	**2003-04**	**2004-05**
B.A. (Hums)	56	109	99	219	290	326	416	441	512
B.Ed. (Ad.Edu.)	-	16	44	66	81	88	79	64	66
Diplo.in Commerce	24	21	36	81	106	157	179	250	320
Diploma in Law	70	72	102	178	298	478	570	691	689
Certifi. in French	-	-	1	3	5	6	2	0	06
Bachelor Commerce (Started in 2004-05)			-	-	-	-	-	-	**30**
Total	**150**	**218**	**282**	**547**	**780**	**1055**	**1246**	**1446**	**1623**
Growth Rate	-	(45.3)	(29.4)	(94.0)	(42.6)	(35.3)	(18.1)	(16.1)	(12.2)

Source: IDE Records, University of Swaziland.

Table-2 clearly shows a continuing increase in the IDE enrolments each year. The student enrolment in all programmes was 1055 in 2001-02 representing a growth rate of 35.3% from the 780 students who were registered with IDE in the academic year 2000-01. If the same trend continues, it can be projected that the enrolment would be over 4000 students in the next 5 years. The sustained student enrolment growth implies that there is national demand for Distance Education programmes which inevitably raises supply challenges in that the IDE may in future become unable to admit all students. The main constraint of the programmes offered by the IDE is that they duplicate the programmes offered through the conventional mode. The distance students therefore have to compete with the full time students for lecturers as well as learning resources like library books. They further have to compete for limited jobs upon completion of their studies.

Instructional design

One way to ensure educational quality in a distance institute is through successful curriculum design which can increase the effectiveness of the distance education pedagogy. Robinson (1997) notes how distance education can create good quality learning materials explaining theory and techniques, which may be illustrated using print and other media. To design and develop quality materials, best practitioners can be drawn to contribute to the materials. The instructional materials developed at the IDE are

not fully self-instructional because they are not fully self-evaluating, as the model answers to self-check questions are not developed in the instructional materials.

Further, due to scarcity of funds and resource persons (subject experts), the course modules are not prepared on the "course team approach" model, and hence compromise the quality of most of the course modules. In a course team approach model, the best practitioners develop the materials in teams which become a community of practice and they engage in collaborative strategies to improve the quality of the materials.

Presently, the IDE depends on individual faculty members drawn from the wider university to write the materials yet some are unable to do so due to heavy teaching loads at the IDE and the wider university. Some modules are written by under qualified tutors who have not had training in university teaching. Further, Perraton, (2004) and Robinson, (1997) argue that in much of Africa there is over-reliance on print media, which is not combined with other forms of mass media, such as broadcasting and online learning resources.

However, the reality is that many IDE students do not have access to computers and the internet except within the university. Even within the university, there are not enough computers to share between full time and distance education students. Another concern is that the materials are not pre-tested, (ibid), yet pre-testing ensures that the materials are pilot tested prior to being used by the students so that technical and problem areas are identified and modified in time to ensure that the materials are of a good quality.

In-house research

There is a need for research at the IDE. Increasingly practitioners recognise the value of reflecting on their own work and exchanging experiences in circles of peers that operate in comparable circumstances, (Gibbons et al. 1994 cited in the EFA, UNESCO, 2004). By engaging in research, the IDE staff will be able to review all the IDE programmes and activities especially as they relate to the students the IDE serves. The main reason preventing faculty from carrying out research is due to under-staffing; hence faculty has no time left for research.

In addition, due to limited tutorial support, very few IDE students engage in research. This adversely affects the quality of their education yet like all the students in the wider university, the IDE students are equally entitled to good quality education. Research skills are an important component of university education since traditionally the mission of universities is to equip learners with critical knowledge and skills to help them not only in jobs but also when they further their studies after the first diploma or degree.

Media or technologies

The IDE does not utilise the use of information and communication technologies to enhance educational quality and to support the limited face-to-face teaching. Saint (1999) suggests that such support may either be direct or indirect. Direct support occurs when lecturers and learners can access the latest information, well-developed syllabi, reference resources, effective learning exercises and creative teaching aids via the internet. Indirect support occurs when e-mail and internet are employed to nourish local research activities.

However, the South African Institute of Distance Education (1999) warns that care is needed to avoid commitment to inflexible technologies chosen without reference to educational need and context. The technological considerations should not underestimate the needs for good pedagogical practice. Emphasis therefore should be on teaching and learning and not on the technology but rather the technology is to be used as a teaching and learning tool.

The management of teaching and learning at IDE depends on the structure, infrastructure and policies of the Institute. The distance education delivery mode broadly involves teaching and learning at a distance with a package of multi-media approaches, which involve printed course materials, face-to-face sessions and technology based education. The IDE has been following the system of providing printed course materials to the learners and arranging face-to-face sessions through Lecturing and Tutorial sessions but not providing technology based education due to financial constraints and understaffing and inexperience with technology based teaching and learning.

Learner support systems

Another reality at the IDE is the lack of adequate student support services. Experience indicates that governments and university institutions tend to under-fund distance education, thereby compromising its effectiveness. Such under-funding is most common in the provision of the critical student support services.

Since the distance education delivery mode is different from the daily teacher-student learning approach, the problems and barriers encountered by the students are: lack of regular tutor contact and isolation from other students. First year students who join the IDE face numerous problems like a completely new environment in an off-campus system, with a new method of teaching and learning and a sense of isolation. Laurillard (2002) argues though that for effective learning to take place, there has to be an iterative dialogue between a learner and others. Others may be a tutor, peers as well as the dialogue inside the learner's mind as the learner engages in the self study of course materials.

The need for learning support to distance student cannot be over emphasised to help the students not to feel a sense of isolation not only from faculty but also from peers. There is a need for more student support as Kulkarni (1995) emphasises that the Academic Counsellors, through their interaction with students build confidence in learners to adapt to the new system of learning in open and distance education. Therefore the Academic counsellors can eliminate the sense of isolation of the distance learners.

Similarly, Keast (1997), Moore and Kearsley (1996) argue that student support is universally underscored as the most critical factor influencing student success. Where students are scattered, smaller support groups and more tutors are needed. Spronk and Radtke (1998) observe how with such an approach, positive strides will be made to promote distance education because cooperative group effort facilitates learning. A community of learners indeed facilitates deep rather than surface learning which has positive implications on the quality of the education received by the students.

Teaching and learning

The concept of open and distance education implies that the learners are expected to go through the self-instructional course materials supplied to them and attend face-to-face sessions to get their doubts clarified by the subject experts. If they are not satisfied by the tutor clarification / service, then the whole purpose would not be served. To provide full academic support / satisfaction to distance learners, there is a need to appoint senior experienced teachers to tutor the distance learners.

Distance learners have to be taught to be independent learners. Wedemeyer (1971) sees the independent learner as the original or 'proto' – learner whose success in learning enables him/her to survive. To make them independent learners, suitable counselling is required, which only the experienced lecturers can deliver. Hence, proper guidance and counselling with proper facilities are required to be provided, like separate library facilities with adequate infrastructural facilities at study centres are to be provided.

Faculty problems

Currently the IDE is understaffed which is causing management problems with students' admissions, registration, tutorial and counselling services, examinations and record keeping from time to time. Within the IDE, faculty has to be redeployed from carrying out unit activities to do administrative work. This disrupts the work in the units. Further, the faculty experiences problems such as lack of staff training in course development and production of technology based lessons. Also due to the scarcity of experienced lecturers in some subjects, the IDE is compelled to appoint inexperienced tutors, who are under qualified in teaching university students, to tutor distance learners resulting with some dissatisfaction to distance learners. Another major constraint is that most of the faculty lack specialised training and experience in distance teaching, yet distance education requires specialized techniques of instruction since it is fundamentally different from face to face instruction.

Context related and Intermediate factors

Equally, to ensure quality education, attention is to be paid to the context-related as well as the intermediate factors in a distance institution as shown in Table 1. Even though these factors are not under the direct control of the IDE, they directly impact on the activities of the IDE and affect the quality of teaching and learning. One example of a context related factor as it relates to the IDE is that the organisational structure of the IDE is not independent from the wider university organizational structure. An intermediate factor affected by such lack of independence is funding of IDE which has massive implications for the delivery of quality education at the IDE. Even though the IDE generates money, it cannot decide how and when to finance projects to improve service delivery at the IDE; rather, like the rest of the UNISWA departments, the IDE has to prepare project proposals usually rejected by the UNISWA Planning Committee. The ultimate challenges faced by the IDE include a compromise of the quality of the teaching and learning as well as inefficiency in delivery of services to the students. Such challenges are a product of the decline in budgetary resource allocations which, in turn, have a negative impact on the quality of the education offered, (Magagula, 2003). The reality therefore is that at the IDE the major financial constraints impact negatively on the teaching and learning activities.

Recommendations

In order to overcome the constraints that IDE is facing and improve the system and further to achieve planned objectives, the following suggestions are made. The Institute plans to conduct a needs assessment for short and long term life-long relevant programmes and courses, in order to provide relevant and high quality courses and programmes. The Institute will add more University long term programmes to the ones that it currently offers. The Institute continues to work on other programmes it plans to introduce in the coming years **(Appendix– 1).** The main aim is to ensure that future programmes to be offered by the IDE will not duplicate those offered by the conventional departments within the wider university as it is currently the case.

This unit is responsible for conducting research on areas of concern to the Institute and is expected to conduct evaluation research on the delivery mode of the institute and come up with possible ways of improvement wherever possible. It is also expected that this unit will come up with information on which programmes to offer in IDE in response to needs in the labour market. Because of resource constraints, the position in the Research and Evaluation Unit has not been filled up at the IDE since its inception. There is a need on the part of the IDE to fill up the position to improve the system based on research findings.

The Institute has prepared a paper for the Academic Planning Committee of the University on its future development and structure. With the proposed future development of the Institute, there will be a need for student counsellors, full-time Learning Centre Coordinators, core staff members in the Academic Studies Unit, Materials Design and Development Unit, Student Support Services Unit and also in the Research and Evaluation Unit. Once the paper is approved, the structure of the Institute might change.

Further, the IDE has to put in place a clear learner support system to provide more orientation and continuing support to new students and to help them adjust to the distance education mode. Effective tutorial support is to be given to the students as well as the setting up of study support groups in order for the learners to become a community of learners committed to deep rather than surface learning.

Finally, the IDE has to formulate a strategy on how it will integrate educational media into the existing print based media within a well defined time frame. As a distance education institute, the IDE needs to put in place technology based support to the print based media for effective teaching and learning to take place. Materials development is to be done through teams of practitioners.

Conclusion

The IDE faces many challenges which affect the quality of the education given to distance education students. Therefore for the University of Swaziland to address the urgent need of developing the country's human resource, it has to urgently address the challenges faced by IDE and strengthen the provision of distance education for the whole country. The recommendations made in this paper indicate that the IDE can change its practices and improve the quality of its education provision by revising the majority of its

programmes and if it is adequately funded, to hire curriculum designers, instructors, and develop technologies which will address the needs of distance learners.

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APPENDIX - 1

Currently the IDE is offering the following programmes.

DEGREE PROGRAMMES

1. Bachelor of Arts (Humanities) (4 Years Programme started in 1994-95)
2. Bachelor of Education (Adult Education) (5 Years Programme started in 1994-95)
3. Bachelor of Commerce (5 Years programme to be started in 2004-05)

DIPLOMA PROGRAMMES

1. Diploma in Commerce (4 Years Programme started in 1994-95)
2. Diploma in Law (3 Years Programme started in 1994-95)

CERTIFICATE PROGRAMMES

1. Certificate in French (2 Years programme started in 1994-95)

FUTURE COURSES

Further, the IDE is planning, designing and developing materials for new courses to be offered in future. The proposed new programmes are:

1. Diploma in Education Management (2004-05)
2. Short Professional Courses (2004-05)
3. B.A.- Social Science (2005-06)
4. Bachelor of Education (Primary & Secondary) (2005-06)
5. Diploma in Journalism (2005-06)
6. Post Graduate Certificate in Education (2005-06)
7. Master in Business Administration (2005-06)
8. Diploma in French (2005-06)
9. Bachelor of Science (2006-07)
10. Bachelor of Laws (2006-07)

Learning and teaching with new technologies: from innovation to impact

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Introduction

When MIT was founded in 1865, William Barton Rogers, a geologist, established a new kind of institute - one that stressed the pragmatic and practical. By combining teaching, research and a focus on real world problems, he pioneered the teaching laboratory. In a clear dissent from the common view of higher education of his day, Rogers believed in the educational value of "useful knowledge". Today teaching and research - with relevance to the practical world as a guiding principle - continue to be MIT's primary purpose.

A core value of MIT is its openness. MIT is, of course, not open in the sense that the Open University is open to its students. It is, however, open in its desire to share its knowledge with educators around the world and thereby broadly affect high-level education. This commitment is now expressing itself by exploiting new technologies. As an early adopter and developer of new educational technology initiatives to enhance teaching and learning, the Institute then went the next step and developed a broad outreach program.

This paper will focus on four projects that successfully use educational technology - iLabs, Technology Enabled Active Learning, OpenCourseWare and the Learning International Network Consortium - and how they are being used nationally and globally. These would not be possible without the marriage of new computer technology and new pedagogy. It will also look at how external funding moved these initiatives from ideas to reality, and assess their efficacy in teaching and learning.

The iLab Project

Recognizing the paucity of laboratories and the importance of hands-on experiences in engineering education, the iLab project was launched by iCampus, a MIT-Microsoft initiative, in 1999. Devised by Professor Jesus del Alamo, iLab's mission is to explore the technology and pedagogy of online laboratories, real (not virtual) laboratory experiments that can be accessed through the web.

iLab is an online laboratory, that is, a laboratory that can be accessed through the Internet. It is a complex laboratory designed to perform experiments with instruments set up so that all actions can be performed electronically from a computer and controlled through the Internet. This allows the user to perform experiments remotely from anywhere in the world at any time. In essence this is the iLab concept. iLab is deploying five remote, web enabled laboratories ranging from a heat exchanger to a shake table for earthquake engineering.

While the primary focus of iLabs' first two years was the development, testing and implementation of a range of web-enabled labs at MIT, the recent focus of this project has been developing a stable, sustainable software infrastructure that labs can share. (See http://icampus.mit.edu/projects/iLab.shtml) One of these labs is openly available to any user at http://openilabs.mit.edu/.

ILabs have been used by students at MIT and from universities in the UK, Singapore, Sweden, Greece and Taiwan. One lab alone (microelectronics weblab) has already been used in educational assignments by over 3000 students around the world.

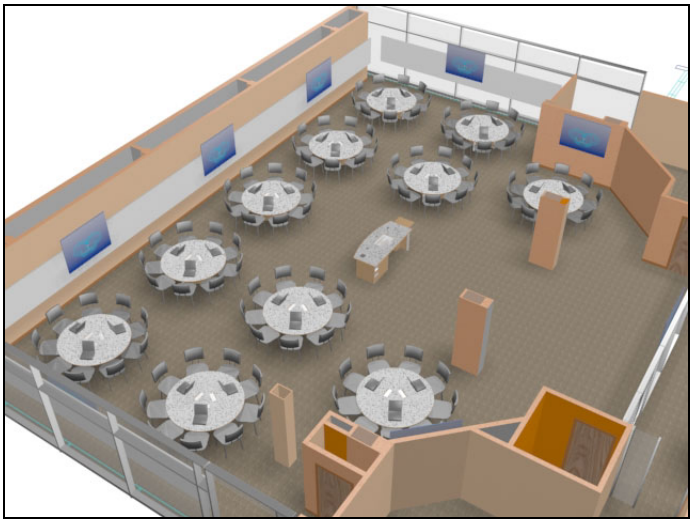
Through a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York in 2005, students and faculty at three African universities will be collaborating with MIT on advancing the development and educational uses of iLabs through a partnership between MIT's Center for Educational Computing Initiatives (CECI), Makerere University (Uganda), the University of Dar Es Salaam (Tanzania), and Obafemi Awolowo University (Nigeria). In this initiative, new iLabs will be developed by the African partners in collaboration with MIT. In addition, MIT faculty will work closely with their African colleagues to introduce new laboratory experiences and develop new content in several graduate and undergraduate courses in fields ranging from electrical engineering to physics.

Technology Enabled Active Learning (TEAL)

The MIT Physics Department has recently introduced major changes in the way that introductory physics is taught at the Institute, through Technology Enhanced Active Learning (TEAL). TEAL received major funding from the Alex and Brit d'Arbeloff Fund and additional funds from iCampus. The project is led by Professor John Belcher, and is an outgrowth of initiatives sponsored by the MIT Council on Educational Technology. This new format is a merger of lecture, recitations, and hands-on laboratory experience into a technologically and collaboratively rich experience for incoming freshmen.

Professor Belcher found a problem inherent in the traditional MIT large lecture format (400-500 students) that is widely acknowledged to be a problem elsewhere: by the end of the semester students were either frequently absent from his lectures or were not paying attention when they did attend. TEAL is attempting to combat low attendance by incorporating "active engagement" methods into the class. More specifically, this means that short intervals of formal instruction in a studio classroom are interspersed with desktop experiments and collaborative work in groups.

The studio physics classroom is designed for moving between lecture, experiment, and discussion portions of the class. It consists of 12 round tables that seat 9 students each. In the center of the room is an instructor's station used to present material that can then be projected on eight projection screens located around the perimeter of the room. Located along the perimeter of the room are numerous whiteboards available for impromptu discussions and presentations by both staff and students. On each table three laptops allow for the students to work in teams of three on experiments and problems assigned in class.



TEAL Classroom

A major focus of the TEAL pedagogical approach centers on interactivity (in a group or by use of the whiteboards) and passive visualizations of physical phenomena. Visually compelling animations of electromagnetic phenomena have attracted national and international attention. These visualizations are on-line and freely available for non-profit educational use.

With a grant from the Davis Educational Foundation and under the auspices of MIT's Center for Educational Computing Initiatives (CECI) the TEAL project builds on previous efforts for the development and dissemination of visualizations in electromagnetism. The central questions to address are: (1) how effective are visualizations in conveying key ideas; and (2) what are the essential elements of a visualization and the way in which it is delivered that maximize its effectiveness? In terms of dissemination, the project is committed to an open source software model and to the testing and development of the pedagogy for a broadly diverse group of students. The Davis-funded project will look at how educationally effective visualizations are in a variety of schools in New England and then test these in educational institutions nationally.

It is expected that TEAL will enhance student understanding of electromagnetic phenomena, an essential part of a scientific and technical education. Its broader impact will lie in research towards the development and evaluation of a pedagogical framework available to students of diverse backgrounds. It will be visual, which tends to be background independent, and there will be a number of links to review material if the student needs it. The full development of such a framework will ultimately have an impact across all science and engineering disciplines.

OpenCourseWare (OCW)

After much debate MIT chose not to offer distance learning courses or online degrees, a path taken by many American universities in the mid-1990s. The idea of OCW came from a faculty committee established in 1999 to look at how MIT should position itself in the Internet age. The group concluded that MIT should freely give away its course

materials, a revolutionary way of thinking at that time. It was hoped that "OCW would also serve as a model to inspire other universities to share information, creating a worldwide web of knowledge to benefit humankind" (MIT Spectrum).

With initial funding of $11 million from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, OCW was announced in 2001 and the first major website was launched in 2003. The ultimate goal is to make materials used in the teaching of almost all MIT's undergraduate and graduate subjects available on the web, free of charge, to any user anywhere in the world (http://ocw.mit.edu/). Although this is not a distance-learning project and there is no interaction, the project has had an enormous global impact. Dr. Susan Hockfield, President of MIT states: "MIT OpenCourseWare expresses in an immediate and far-reaching way MIT's goal of advancing education around the world."

As of April 2005 there are materials from 1100 courses available on the web. Global impact is as follows: traffic from users in more than 215 countries, city-states, and geographic areas; 31,500 users around the world self-subscribed to monthly “MIT OpenCourseWare Update” email newsletter. Traffic from top 20 countries outside the United States in February 2005, in web hits was as follows:

Table 1: OCW traffic from top 20 countries

	COUNTRY	*WEB HITS*		*COUNTRY*	*WEB HITS*
1	India	1,601,529	11	Brazil	408,815
2	China	1,294,650	12	Iran	343,253
3	Canada	880,494	13	Norway	336,624
4	Thailand	783,840	14	Turkey	331,451
5	Taiwan	778,753	15	Italy	323,836
6	United Kingdom	765,737	16	Mexico	315,689
7	South Korea	706,063	17	Spain	306,408
8	Germany	470,954	18	Singapore	258,237
9	Japan	431,821	19	Portugal	257,424
10	France	417,000	20	Netherlands	211,221

A secondary and equally important goal is to encourage other institutions to develop their own platforms, using the technologies employed by OCW. In February 2005 MIT participated in a meeting with several U.S. universities that are developing their own open courseware sites. Also included were representatives from universities in China, Spain, Portugal and several South American countries. OCW has also been adopted and used in the curriculum at the Fulbright Economics Teaching Program - a joint American-Vietnamese graduate school for Vietnamese professionals. MIT's China Program sent five MIT students to the Tibetan-Qinghai Plateau in 2004 to work with Qinghai University faculty and students on MIT-OpenCourseWare subjects in biotechnology, computer science, and environmental engineering.

So far eight U.S. colleges have started "open courseware" projects including Utah State University where programmers have developed free software, EduCommons, to help create the websites (http://ocw.usu.edu) (Young, 2005).

Evaluation: how the above are helping teaching and learning

In collaboration with a professional expert (Professor Judy Dori of the Technion in Haifa, Israel) MIT has assessed the TEAL project. Using standard assessment measures, the studio format and use of visualizations show that learning increases by a factor of two over the traditional lecture format at MIT (Dori and Belcher, 2005).

Evaluation of TEAL has found that student understanding of physics concepts improved considerably even though students need to be prepared and instructors trained for the change from lecture-based classes to those that employ active learning pedagogies. Naturally enough, some students have criticized this new way of teaching physics and MIT has incorporated their feedback while remaining committed to using "active learning" in the teaching of physics.

Evaluation of iLabs shows that students are intrigued and motivated and that there is better student participation and higher scores than in regular homework. Students tend to work late at night, when it can be unpleasant to be in a real laboratory, so they appreciate the convenience. The simplified interface minimizes frustrations with hardware and students can easily work in a stop and go mode.

An evaluation report of these projects, and eight other initiatives, is available (Breslow, 2004). Among its findings are the following:

- Active learning pedagogies increase learning gains
- Both students and instructors need to be prepared
- Elements of active learning may not be applicable for all cognitive tasks and for all students
- Educational technology is most successful in meeting unmet or poorly met educational needs
- Too much technology can be detrimental to the learning process

In addition, the cultural context needs to be taken into account. For example, active learning will be more difficult in a country where team learning is rarely used.

MIT OpenCourseWare users overwhelmingly are finding that MIT OCW has a significant positive impact on both teaching and learning activities (Carson, 2005).

Table 2: Visitor assessment of current impact

Degree	Educator	Student	Self Learner	All Roles
Extremely positive/Positive	78.4%	82.4%	79.4%	**80.1%**
Moderately/Somewhat positive	18.0%	16.0%	18.5%	**17.5%**
Not positive	3.6%	1.7%	2.1%	**2.4%**
Total	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

Source: 2004 Intercept Survey

Table 3: Visitor impact statement agreement

Statement	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neutral	Disagree/ Strongly Disagree
Helped me be more productive and effective	81.1%	18.3%	0.5%
Helped me learn	88.0%	11.6%	0.5%
Improved my courses using OCW (Educators)	84.5%	12.9%	2.7%
Increased my motivation and interest in learning	80.2%	19.0%	0.8%
I would recommend OCW to others	92.5%	7.1%	0.5%

Source: 2004 Intercept Survey

An emerging MIT-based Consortium of Practitioners: Learning International Network Consortium (LINC)

LINC is a consortium of educators, scholars, researchers and professionals from over 25 countries focusing on higher education in developing countries (http://linc.mit.edu). Over 100 participants from these countries participated in the first two symposia held in 2003 and 2004 at MIT. Participants included senior MIT faculty and policy makers from USAID, the Open University, the World Bank, corporations and foundations, the Virtual Universities of Pakistan, Syria and Africa and the Israel Open University.

LINC is the creation of Professor Richard Larson who believes that "virtually every country realizes that their most valuable assets are what lie between the ears of its citizens". Working with representatives from Algeria, Israel, Jordan, the Palestine Authority, Pakistan, Syria and United Arab Emirates, Larson hopes to develop a program in distance learning and group collaborative learning to better educate science and math teachers in the Middle East.

As an emerging organization of practitioners, LINC is sponsoring various programmatic initiatives. Its goals are to foster cross-cultural collaboration, use distance learning in developing countries to provide access for higher education and encourage peaceful collaboration and understanding among countries through the use of educational technology initiatives. The challenge now is to secure funding, to identify the barriers and to build on its success in incubating programs and bringing them to fruition. A third workshop is planned for October 2005.

Conclusion

In concluding I would like to inject a personal note: I can attest to the fact that distance learning changes the course of an individual's life. I graduated from the Open University in 1980 during the days when there was no educational technology used except for television and radio.

The process of learning has of course changed and now the Internet allows access to rich educational content from the four corners of the globe. Yet content is still crucial - it is the Open University text units that I remember not the envelope they came in. MIT's mission includes disseminating its knowledge and, with many of its educational technology projects, is now evolving from innovation to global impact.

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Note: iCampus was initiated in October 1999 as a five-year, $25 million research alliance between MIT and Microsoft Research to enhance university education through information technology and to sponsor innovative projects with significant sustainable impact at MIT and elsewhere.

The purpose of the Council is to provide strategic guidance and oversight of MIT efforts to develop an infrastructure and initiatives for the application of technology to education. For more information, please visit
http://www.swiss.ai.mit.edu/projects/icampus/projects/teal.html

The TEAL visualizations were one of only two finalists in the 2003 Pirelli International Awards "…for the best scientific or technologically inclined multimedia work that comes from an educational institution…" (http://www.pirelliaward.com/news0408.html). The TEAL Shockwave visualization "Charged Particles Interacting In Three Dimensions" was a semi-finalist in the 2003 NSF/Science Magazine *Science and Engineering Visualization Challenge*, an international competition. (http://web.mit.edu/8.02t/www/NSFViz.htm)

Interested individuals can access the visualizations at the TEAL tour website, http://web.mit.edu/8.02t/www/802TEAL3D/teal_tour.htm

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Narrative inquiry and reflective practice – two of a kind: a case study of the Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching

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Introduction

This paper highlights the potential significance of employing narrative inquiry as an evaluation and research tool to reflect on and improve the quality of online and flexible learning courses. Further, it is argued that narrative inquiry has much to offer the developer of online learning in the design and implementation of activities to support reflective practice. Some preliminary outcomes from using a narrative inquiry approach in the Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching (GCLT) Course in the Faculty of Law of Monash University, Australia are reported.

Narrative inquiry as a research method for reflective practice

In recent years among educational researchers coming from different disciplines there has been a growing recognition of the value of employing narrative as a research method. For instance, in Canada, F.M.Connelly and D.J.Clandinin have been advocating the value of narrative inquiry as a research method for the area of secondary teaching. In Australia, for example, N. Gough has been advocating the significance of narrative inquiry for the area of environmental science.

These authors equally perceive narrative inquiry as a valuable research method which has much to offer in terms of reflective practice in a wide range of disciplines. These also include online, open and distance learning. Narrative inquiry offers researchers a holistic human-centred perspective which other methods do not present. Narrative inquiry studies problems as forms of storytelling involving characters, and both personal and social stories. A key contribution of narrative to research into open and distance learning resides in the manner in which it frames the study of human experience.

Narrative is well-suited to address issue of complexity, and cultural and human centredness in teaching and learning. It traces human experience through the construction and reconstruction of personal stories. It can also 'explore' the social context or culture in which this construction takes place. Whilst a story unfolds the complexities of characters, relationships and setting, it enables the researcher to explore complex problems revealed through the story. Through focusing on critical life events, narrative inquiry filters out detail and highlights significant aspects of human experience, which are frequently overlooked by other more traditional research methods.

Narrative also has implications for education's view of the learner. A concern for the narrative brings to the forefront features of learner's thinking and learning needs that may

have been neglected in more traditional types of instructional research approaches. Whilst the use of narrative as a research paradigm has not been widely accepted until recently, it is now gaining momentum in a number of disciplines and particularly in educational research (Theobald, 1998; Toffler, 1998).

However, in the context of research and development, what makes them noteworthy is their educational value. Unlike many of the stories we meet elsewhere, we might assume that those we read and hear in the context of teaching/instruction or learning are usually intended to help us learn. A second assumption is that through the stories we read and hear from those participating in classes or instruction we may learn more about the human-centred issues or shortcomings of the teaching or instructional experiences. This is a fundamental link of narrative with teaching or instruction as human activities and thereby with research and development into teaching/instruction and learning. Apart from the areas of teaching and instruction, narrative appears to be valuable to research and development in a wide range of other areas, such as medicine, science, economics, politics, law, etc.

McEwan and Egan (1995) note two contributions of narrative to research. It can be argued that these are also applicable to the issues of development and evaluation. First, narrative provides account of the history of human consciousness. Stories relate in general terms to the life journey of the human species and the changes that have marked our development as thinking beings. Second, at the level of the individual consciousness, stories record personal consciousness from infancy, through youth and adulthood, to old age. McEwan and Egan (1995) maintain that such stories are most frequently represented in literature. These stories make up the wealth of moral tales: autobiographies, confessions, biographies, case studies, fables and any number of other didactic forms.

Stories continue to form the intellectual and practical nourishment of oral cultures. Other works which have explored the narrative (eg. Britton, 1970; Rosen, 1985; Hardy, 1977; Bruner, 1986; Geertz, 1973; MacIntyre, 1981) support the trend to the recognition of the importance of narrative in learning. They argue that narrative is vital in the learning process with its function in constructing the outer environment of communication and action, whilst simultaneously constructing the inner one of thought and intent. Narrative provides ‘a thick description’ by delving beneath the outward show of behaviour to explore thoughts, feelings and intentions.

Recent work by Bruner (1990, 2002) illustrates the spread of narrative approaches to educational development and research. As an influential cognitive psychologist specialising in the practice of education, Bruner has reformulated his view of the field, shifting from a more cognitivist view of psychology towards a construction he has labelled ‘cultural psychology’, in which he claims the narrative provides a basis for understanding action. Bruner does not dismiss scientific methods for understanding social phenomena. Rather, he acknowledges them and their important contribution, but advances the claims of narrative beyond its traditional basis in literary criticism and literary theory.

If narrative is fundamental to communication, then the use of narrative as a research and development method may, for instance, give us a better understanding of teaching/instruction, learning and performance in a wide range of environments and may

assist in generating more appropriate teaching/instructional design principles, tools and techniques.

Finally, any discussion of the suitability of an approach must also acknowledge its limitations and constraints. Connelly and Clandinin (1990), for instance, talk of intersubjectivity (researcher's slipping into commitment to the whole narrative plot), smoothing (tendency to invoke positive result regardless of the indications of the data), cultural or operational constraints to the study. Whilst all these are noted as constraints and possible limitations, particularly from the perspective of the traditional research methods, it should be acknowledged that in the narrative inquiry methodology they are also seen as integral to the story.

Background to the case study: Discipline-based courses offered by Monash University

At Monash University the Higher Education Development Unit (HEDU) in the Centre for Learning and Teaching Support (CeLTS) offers a one-year generic Course called the *Graduate Certificate in Higher Education (GCHE).* Following the establishment of this Course, the Faculties of Law and Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences at Monash University decided that they preferred the discipline-based approach to professional development for their teachers and designed their own Graduate Certificate Courses.

The Educational Development and Flexible Learning Unit (Faculty of Law), developed a two-year *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching (GCLT)*. The Centre for Medical and Health Sciences Education (CMHSE) in the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences developed a similar one-year Course called the *Graduate Certificate in Health Professional Education (GCHPE).*

Course structure of the Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching

The *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching (GCLT)* Course, currently offered by the Educational Development and Flexible Learning Unit at Faculty of Law of Monash University is the first degree of its kind offered in Australia, and it was specifically designed for those teaching Law and Law-related subjects at tertiary level who wish to enhance their professional teaching practice. This two-year Course is offered part-time and flexibly delivered online.

The GCLT Course learning environment – an important component of the story

Critical to the development of reflective practice is the online learning environment that is used to deliver the course. In the Faculty of Law several Courses, including the *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching (GCLT)*, are conducted using purpose-built online teaching and learning software called LEX. LEX is designed to enhance interaction between the learners and the teachers and among the learners in order to create shared knowledge and understanding. Its aim is to provide an integrated online learning environment.

LEX is structured in a way that it allows construction of a more holistic learning environment, which encourages participants to engage, collaborate and reflect online. The heart of LEX, and the feature arguably most useful for developing reflective-type

activities, is the activity design and search features. Learners can participate in activities that can be shared at a number of levels. The levels of activity can be defined by the teacher as either 'shared', that is, available to all students, 'group-based', available to only a small group of students, 'non-personal individual', available only to the student and teacher and finally, 'personal individual', only available to the student for their own personal work.

The activity design feature allows the teacher considerable freedom to design online activities that encourage learners to develop a response, view responses of others, modify their answer to represent their newer understanding and reflect on prior responses to develop new understandings. This design also allows the use of online role playing and other group activities. An example of this is displayed in the Figure 1. This activity occurs in a module of the Unit 1 of the GCLT Course and asks learners to describe a teaching event and then reflect on ways to improve it. It is worth noting that both activities occur in the context of resources to prepare them for the activity and additional links explore further resources on the topic, should they wish to do so. As with all shared activities, there is the opportunity to view other responses, review own responses and change responses.

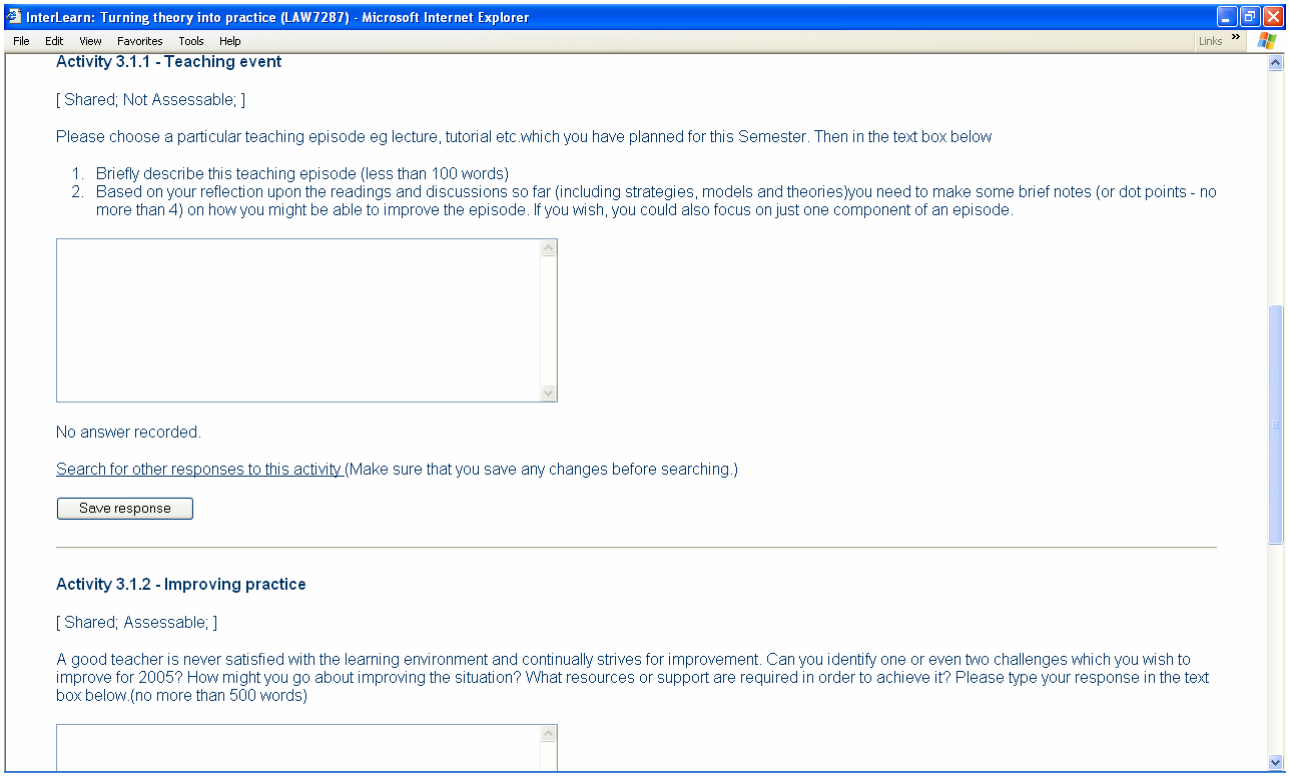

Figure 1: Screen capture of activity in Lex

The LEX 'worksite' further incorporates a Contact page showing contact details of all Unit Participants, Teachers and others (eg. educational developers or guest speakers). It contains a Unit Discussion Forum, which enables both Teachers and Participants to read and post their comments. There is also a Notice Area where the Teachers can post their messages, but the Participants can only read from it. The students are individually able to log on to a workstation and accomplish specific tasks. Figure 2 displays the organiser

interface of Lex, with links in the top navigation bar to the Contact, Discussion and Notices details. This page also provides direct links to modules and topics, their progress on assessable tasks and whether feedback has been provided. These features are detailed more in Webster et al (2004).

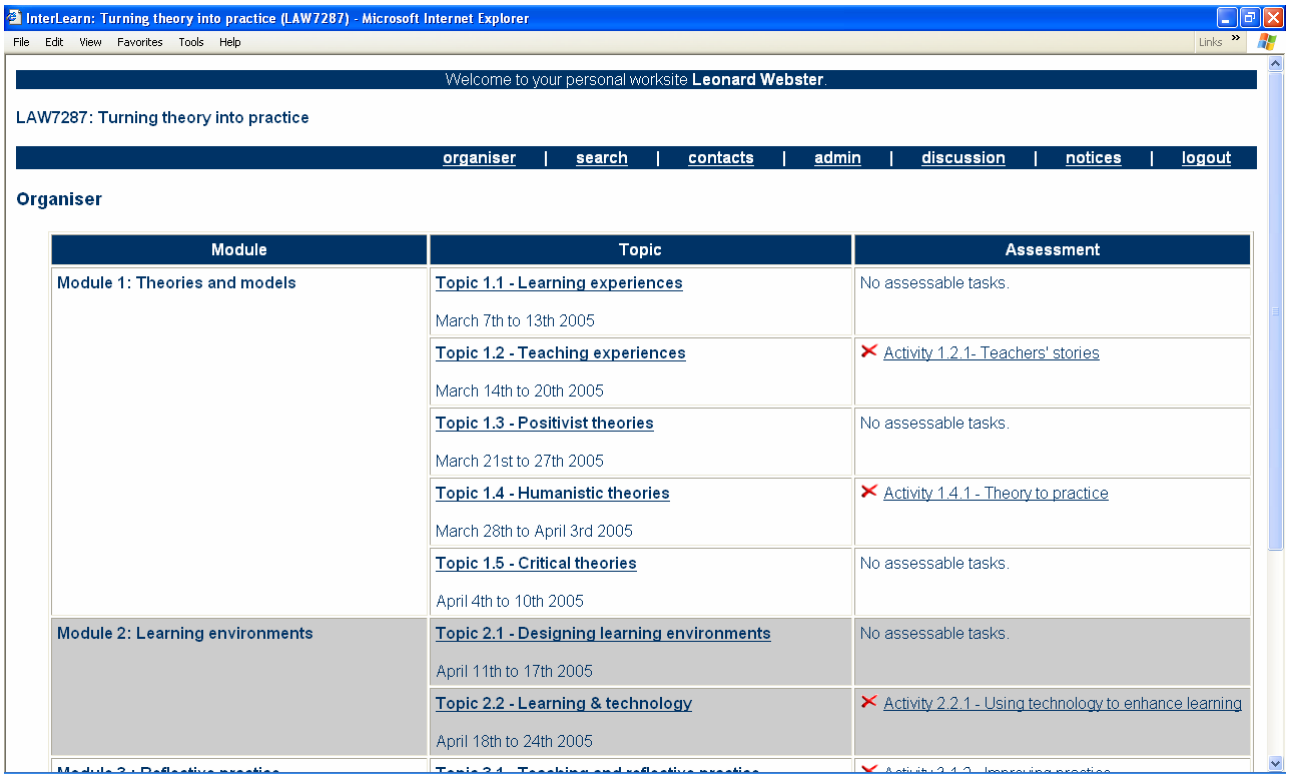

Figure 2: The advance organiser page and navigation bar in Lex

Romeo et al (2002) observed a number of benefits for both students and teachers resulting from employing online learning tools. For teachers, these benefits were: organisational – in the encouragement of learners to take responsibility for their own, self-regulated learning; and curricular – enabling integration of curricular activities and creation of some authentic classroom activities. For students, these benefits included: educational aspect – in assisting learners in building on their previous knowledge, helping them develop and refine learning as well as problem-solving strategies, and encouraging a shared ownership of learning; and socio-emotional aspect – fostering cooperation, self-evaluation, self-regulation, self-correction and commitment to learning. These benefits held equally for the online activities and resources employed throughout the *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching*.

Narrative used for reflective practice: stories of experience from the teachers who completed the pilot course

After finishing the Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching (GCLT) Course the first pilot cohort of students have been asked to reflect on the Course through their individual stories of experience. This was a form of evaluating the course, which both the students and Course teachers found immensely helpful. Through these stories in their individual ways students have gone through the aspects and issues which they have personally considered significant. Their reflective stories offered valuable feedback in terms of

positive features of the Course but also identified areas where some alterations should be made.

The participants in this first cohort identified some significant positives, including the flexible delivery of the Course, which was perceived generally as "very helpful" and well-suited to their diverse teaching, research and administrative responsibilities. They appreciated the fact that they could manage their workloads around their "other less flexible commitments", and this provided them with time to reflect on Unit materials and come back to them later if they needed to. They found the web-page structure for the Units "easy to work with", and considered the readings, activities etc. incorporated into each Module "self-contained", and the accompanying information sufficient "without being too cluttered". They also appreciated the information sharing and feedback within their groups, and being able to access other group members' work online or in face-to-face sessions.

The participants in this first cohort also identified some areas which needed improvement, such as the technical issues they sometimes had (i.e. problems in accessing the Course and its individual parts online).

However, overall the participants in this first cohort felt that the Course had encouraged them to reflect more on their own teaching practices by exposing them to the feedback of others, and made them more open to trying new teaching methods, including flexible and online delivery.

Following are some samples from a story of experience of a student who has completed the pilot GCLT Course. Here the student expresses their views on the various aspects of the online course mentioned above:

> The importance of reflective practice was obviously a strong theme of the subject. From my perspective, the content of the subject certainly encouraged a fair degree of self-reflection. From a personal point of view, self-reflection normally involves me reviewing all the doubts I have about my teaching abilities. I question whether my teaching is really improving at all, do I do enough to facilitate learning, or am I a boring, uninspiring teacher. I suppose this is the whole idea behind reflective practice (ERIC Digest No. 122), and I certainly hope that the process of worrying about these things ensures that I am a more effective teacher! The taxonomies we looked at are a useful reminder of the ideals of teaching and learning. I know I tend to assume that I know what these ideals are, but if pressed I doubt if I would be able to express all the considerations in, for example, Bloom's taxonomy. So reviewing some of these theoretical checklists certainly helped me to reflect on what, why, and how I do things (or don't do things). Certainly, one thing the course has helped with is to suggest some ideas as to alternative ways of conducting teaching and learning…
>
> …all of the material we considered was thought provoking, and it may have been helpful to be more critical about these theories and taxonomies and how relevant they are to teaching in law and other social science subjects… Learning Outcomes and Assessment – the subject's focus on learning outcomes forced me to actually think about what students should be taking out of courses, rather than simply focusing on my own teaching practices. This encouraged me to think quite

> critically about what law schools generally expect their students to learn, and how this measures up against my opinions of what life experiences students will have once they leave law school…
>
> …. I think the flexibility built into the subject was a bonus… I found the subject webpage to be an effective and easy to use learning tool (notwithstanding some of the technical glitches that became a bit frustrating later on in the piece). That is, I think it performed many standard functions of teaching and learning - setting out learning outcomes, a reading guide, allowing for submission of written assessment - through a centralised, easy to access on-line environment. Working through the webpage was in itself a useful learning experience. Since being at Monash, I have had very little direct engagement with subject web pages. My involvement has been limited to emailing overheads and other materials to the webmaster for posting on the page, and occasionally checking the site itself to see what is on there. It was helpful to experience a subject page from the student perspective, because one can reflect on whether the web page is helpful for learning purposes, what doesn't work, and so on.
>
> ... The combination of assessable and non-assessable tasks, the available materials, and the subject webpage, were all essential elements of the learning experience in the subject…the writing tasks set in the subject were an important part of the learning process because they did challenge us to think about the connection between some of the different theories and practices and the law teaching environment. This didn't always feel like a snug fit - I think this is reflected in some of my answers to the writing tasks set during the subject - however, they did facilitate engagement with both the reading material and my own teaching practice.

Ongoing challenges: maintaining relevance to the discipline

Even though, broadly, the participants in the *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching* Course would belong to a community of tertiary teachers of Law and Law-related subjects, individually they might belong to different organisational units within different Faculties of Law around Australia, therefore they would belong to different 'sub-communities' with different focuses and perhaps even understandings through the lenses of not only their individual subject areas but also their particular Law Faculty cultures. One of the key challenges of this particular online course was to encourage the individual Law teachers to share their understandings of teaching and teaching practices. Related to that is the encouragement of creativeness, innovativeness and openness to review. All these might be impacted on by the learners' individual 'sub-communities'. Thus to encourage the learners to network, transfer understandings from one 'sub-community' culture to another, and also to share their ambitions, might prove rather important as well as challenging in running such an online course.

Strategies that were adopted in the development and running the pilot GCLT Course to ensure that relevance to the discipline was maintained included:

- Continuing involvement of selected Law Faculty staff in the key stages of Course and Unit design, implementation and evaluation.

- Encouraging the Faculty of Law staff to teach in Unit 2, which dealt specifically with the Law Teaching context.
- Inclusion of a work-based project in Unit 4, which ensured participants had the opportunity to apply what they had learned in previous Units to a Law Teaching issue.
- Using feedback from the first cohort to inform the quality development process for the next offerings of the Course.

Possible improvements for future offerings of the Course - to ensure that relevance to the discipline was maintained - could comprise:

- Inclusion of external advisors and evaluators to monitor Course content and assessment activities.
- Increased involvement of the Faculty of Law staff in teaching of the Units, eg. Units 1 and 4.

Benefits

For the GCLT there were a number of benefits observed soon after the commencement of the Course. For instance, the development of a community of teachers within the Faculty became evident soon after the commencement of the Course. Teachers discussed issues relevant to their discipline and Higher Education within the formal structures of the course, and continued to discuss issues relevant to their teaching incidentally, in the corridors and staffrooms as well as favourite coffee venues. There was a sense of a supportive group structure where issues that might have been difficult to raise in more formal settings of the faculty could have been raised in a non-threatening environment.

Further, as assessment tasks were aligned with participants' own teaching, many of the projects and pieces of assessment work were incorporated or trialled in their teaching allocation, immediately bringing benefits to the students in a relatively short timeframe. These improvement projects are sometimes difficult to initiate in Higher Education settings that have many demands, including the need for meeting research targets. The development and implementation of this course can be pointed to by the Faculty as one of its quality development projects, as well as providing a structured and contextualised approach to staff development.

For the staff, the acknowledgement of their effort by gaining a formal qualification has been perceived as a further benefit. This qualification has provided them with a formal Higher Education teaching qualification that they could take with them to other positions nationally and internationally. This would place them in a good position in those countries where a Higher Education qualification is becoming mandatory.

Finally, for the developers of this course who had previously worked in staff development at a Central University level, the course provided a meaningful long-term relationship with staff on which to build teaching expertise. The satisfaction of this longer-term relationship and the benefits of a structured course seemed more efficient and had greater impact than a collection of generic programs conducted in half days or short timeframes.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the potential that narrative inquiry has as an evaluation and research tool for the design and development of online and flexible learning courses. The authors maintain that narrative inquiry incorporated into the design and implementation of activities to support reflective practice may serve the developers of online flexible learning courses as a valuable tool. Narrative as a tool for reflective evaluation has been incorporated into the Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching (GCLT) Course at Faculty of Law of Monash University, and its use has had a positive feedback from both the students and the teachers.

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1983 – 2005

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1993	Quality Assurance in Open and Distance Learning: European and International Perspectives
1995	Putting the student first: learner-centred approaches in Open and Distance Learning
1997	The convergence of conventional and distance education: patterns of flexibility for the individual learner
1999	Learning and Teaching with New Technologies
2001	Supporting the Student in Open and Distance Learning
2003	The Future of Open and Distance Learning
2005	Reflective Practice in Open and Distance Learning: how do we improve?