



Report on

The 11th Cambridge International Conference on ODL
Reflective Practice in Open and Distance Learning: How Do
We Improve?

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I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the Commonwealth of Learning, and Helen Lentell in particular, for the generous sponsorship without which I would not have attended the conference.

Reflective Practice in Open and Distance Learning: How Do We Improve?

The conference theme sparked interest in and debate about the connections between reflection, practice and improvement. The ODL context naturally formed the framework within which all issues were discussions.

Presentations

Alan Mandell and Lee Herman of Empire State College, New York, introduced the conference theme by highlighting some of the assumptions people hold about reflection. They presented scenarios to illustrate how students, teachers, managers and institutions engage in reflective practice. At the close of the conference, the speakers referred to *bewilderment* (a painful phase of confusion) and *wonder* ('aha' moment) as experiences that characterise the process of reflection. They emphasised the importance of reciprocal bonds between those who come together to share their bewilderment. Collaboration, they explained, is born out of our self-insufficiency, humility, need to learn, and realisation that our bewilderment is not ours alone.

Key Note Addresses

- Sir John Daniel: ODL- what's in a name?

This address drew attention to the unquestioned proliferation of "new terms for old realities" and "new terms for unknown realities". With reference to ICTs in education there is an abundance of names, the use of which downplays the implications and limitations of ICTs. Such terms range from flexible, blended, virtual, online, elearning, ilearning, mlearning, technology-mediated, technology-enhanced learning, etc.

Sir John stated that the progression from correspondence-distance to ODL has to do with an attempt to break away from the negative connotations associated with correspondence (linked to unethical commercial practices of private colleges). Whereas *distance education* is an economic imperative (cost efficiency), *openness* is a political imperative (widening access). *ODL* captures both perspectives. The idea of openness should be extended to curriculum such that students bring their own creativity, experience and interests into the curriculum. Regarding access, a distinction should be made between people disadvantaged by distance (eg rural communities) and those disadvantaged by other factors (eg huge numbers who are denied access to education because of gender or socioeconomic status). Innovative programmes have been introduced in India and Australia, for example, to reach children in remote areas, youth in jail, young mothers who want to further their schooling, and children with behavioural problems. Sir John pointed out that it is the dynamic of ODL, not technology *per se*, that makes it possible to improve access, cost and quality simultaneously.

- Maggie Coats: Reflection revisited- can it really enhance practice?

Maggie's presentation challenged the association between reflection and improvement with the following questions: How can you evidence reflective practice that leads to improvement? How do you judge, describe or measure that improvement? Is the reflective commentary of the practitioner claiming improvement sufficient? Maggie chose to use *enhance* rather than *improve*. According to her, the former carries the sense of

intensifying quality or value. She sees reflection, continuing professional development and action research as interwoven strands. Her conclusion: each of these strands imply some kind of change, and change in itself can prove to be yet another challenge. In response, Bruce King argued for the reward of scholarship of teaching in which evidence of "the impact of my teaching" is systematically gathered and related to what other scholars are doing. I was pleased to hear this because at Unisa we have just introduced the Excellence in Tuition Award, which is based on the notion of scholarship of teaching.

- Kuzvinetsa Dzvimbo: Limits and possibilities of ODL in Africa

This was a pictorial and enthusiastic presentation that raised our awareness to the technological disparities between developed and developing worlds. Moreover, the challenges of debt and poverty continue to plague many nations in the African continent. Yet, Kuzvinetsa maintains the African academy is "at the centre of the development of knowledge that should enable our institutions and nations to empower ourselves to take charge of our destiny". Open distance and electronic learning (OdeL) is one of the critical vehicles for increasing access to quality higher education and training. In this regard, the African Virtual University is already playing a key role in creating capacity building networks among partner institutions.

- Frances Mensah: Issues of cost, effectiveness and efficiency in ODL

Frances has been a director of the Namibian College of Open Learning since 1996. The college of 26000 students focuses on secondary school education but offers certain higher education programmes. She reported on the study she conducted regarding the effectiveness and efficiency of NAMCOL in comparison with conventional formal providers in the country. Her findings suggest that NAMCOL has remained at the same level of efficiency over the last five years but its effectiveness has increased. Also, there is no basis for assuming that as an ODL institution the college deserves to be funded less than a conventional contact institution. This is a point of relevance for Unisa; if we cannot prove that we are as effective and efficient as, if not more than, conventional higher education institutions, we will continue to be viewed as a 'cheaper' or 'second grade' option.

Other papers I enjoyed

- Yvonne Fung: Reflecting on research studies on face-to-face tutorials

Yvonne is investigating the question: To what extent do tutorials integrate collaboration, knowledge construction and reflection? It was interesting to hear how she attempts to connect together students' views, nature of tutorials, and the examination. This generated a lot of questions about her methodology and implications of her study.

- Brown Onguko/Chris Yates: Development of teacher reflective practice in Kenya

Chris spoke about the purpose, scale and impact of the Strengthening Primary Education (SPRED) and School-based Teacher Development (SbTD) projects in Kenya. I could see similarities between the challenges of teacher development in South Africa and Kenya, particularly concerning the teaching of Maths, Science and English.

- Amal Gouda: Professional dignity and reforming teachers' practice

Amal is studying the impact of the National Network for Distance Education (in Egypt) on teacher development. She found that teachers who perceive themselves to have more experience and expertise are reluctant to participate in teacher development programmes. They believe that their seniority and practical experience earns them professional dignity and authority. Society also values the teaching profession, even though the job is not necessarily high paying.

- Nokuthula Vilakati: Working in difficult circumstances

The Institute for Distance Education at the University of Swaziland is new, and is constrained by little of funding, lack of policy, inadequate staffing and other administrative problems. Many of us agreed these problems are not unique to her institution, and that there are no quick-fix solutions.

- Sushita Gokool-Ramdoo: How does one learn to be a reflective practitioner?

There were striking overlaps between the theoretical base of Sushita's paper and mine. The cultural, collaborative and transformational dimensions of learning and reflection were highlighted by means of authentic examples.

Contribution from Unisa

The *BA in ODL* presentation seemed to have been keenly awaited by many people. We tried to provide as much detail about our experiences of the management and development processes of the programme. We found the responses to the questions we posed very useful. For example, it was reassuring to hear that institutional collaboration and course team activities are seldom smooth, and that having clearly articulated expectations and responsibilities reduces the risk of project delays and interpersonal conflict. Our challenge now is to market the programme more vigorously so that it is sustainable. Applying the ideas of Coats and King, we also need to gather evidence of the impact of this programme on an ongoing basis with a view to enhancing our practice.

Feedback

I was impressed by the genuine interest that participants took in the presentations and by the quality of the feedback they gave to the presenters. In every session I attended, there was evidence of active listening and constructive engagement. Although my paper was on the last day of the conference, attendance and feedback were not compromised.

Home groups

The idea of daily home group meetings was great. The meetings were intended to facilitate joint reflection among delegates. We shared our impressions and understandings of the different sessions we attended. One value of home groups was that we could interact with each other in a relaxed and conversational manner. I think I gained as much insights about reflective practice from my home group as I did from presentations at plenary and parallel sessions.

Networking

I could see why the conference is kept small – we had ample opportunity to enjoy the company of individuals from diverse backgrounds. As Frances remarked, we had a fine opportunity to mingle with “walking textbooks”. I have since made contact with several people and also received some interesting resources from scholars I met at the conference. Sushita and I plan to rework our presentations to produce a joint paper for publication.

Overall impressions

The organisers did an excellent job of ensuring that papers are put together and ready for distribution on the first day of the conference. I am sure they did far more than handle registrations and chase deadlines. The conference venue provided a peaceful atmosphere and offered the practical convenience of having accommodation, meals, and seminar rooms on the same premises.

I feel every ODL practitioner/professional should have at least one chance to attend this conference. The size of the conference, its international mix and the quality of professional interaction make the conference truly worthwhile.

I do wish, though, that arrangements could be made to have

- A short tour of Cambridge for the benefit of those visiting for the first time
- A peer review process that ensures that submissions meet the requirements of research output (For institutional grant purposes, conference proceedings must be peer reviewed in a way similar to that of journal articles). Perhaps the category of non-reviewed papers could be retained for those who may not have the time to take their submissions through the review process, or intend to publish their papers elsewhere.
- Link the conference theme and peer-reviewed submissions to a special journal issue (eg in Open Learning)