

Theme - Technology

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Abstract

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is given many new advantages through e-learning education as different technological tools can now be explored to minimise the distance between the educator and the student. This chapter will make use of a case study to investigate, through empirical research, if academic staff at higher education institution are adequately prepared to become capable eLearning teachers. It will give a general background of how the curriculum and the process were planned and where it was benchmarked before and how this was adapted to become a home-grown framework for an ODL university on its way to becoming an Open and Distance e-learning (ODEL) institution.

Introduction

At one of the biggest ODL institutions in the world, the University of South Africa (Unisa), ODeL is seen as a work in progress and as a vision for the future; therefore, the focus for professional development at this institution has been on preparing academics and allied professional staff for teaching and learning in a digital environment. While the primary group for continuous professional learning is the academics, all those who support them in their roles of teaching and learning are called allied or adult professionals (Gravani 2007:690).

According to the Framing Professional Development at Unisa (FDP 2014:3) document, ODeL includes print, fully online and the broad continuum of blended learning. Historically, ODL has always included educational technologies, therefore, technology-enhanced learning means online and internet-based teaching and learning environments which informed the strategy for the proposed interventions at this institution (Tang & Choi 2009:7).

In terms of the mandate for professional development at an ODL institution, this case study intends to explain the complexities of the ODL academic by acknowledging the different stages of their career path by identifying the following three distinct subgroups:

- **Newcomers:** These are usually new academics coming from a face-to-face institution, or academics that are new to the context of ODL. They are usually hired for their subject matter expertise, but may have little or no experience in a distance education environment.
- **More experienced academics:** These are academics who have been at an ODL institution for a while, but who are now faced with other roles and responsibilities with accompanying challenges. At the same time, this group of academics may also be faced with new challenges in terms of new pedagogies as the organisation moves forward.
- **Pedagogical leaders:** These are academics who have reached a point in their academic careers where they are moving into roles of management, governance and leadership, and who therefore need professional development support in these areas (FPD 2014:4).

Professional development activities in an institution are not completed in just one or two years, but carry on, over the whole career of the academic. Therefore, a wide variety of offerings is needed to meet the various needs of this complex target group (Trowler & Knight 1999:189).

Members of the Centre for Professional Development (CPD) at Unisa embarked on a benchmarking trip to the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) to visit three institutions in the UK (Oxford Brookes' Headington Campus, the Open University of the United Kingdom – OUUK and Leicester University) and two institutions in the USA (Howard University and the State University of New York – SUNY, Syracuse campus).

The purpose of this visit was the following:

To understand the philosophy and methodology adopted by the five identified universities, all of which have proven themselves in either professional development or aspects related to ODL, to survey the professional development facilities at those universities that have an established and sought-after infrastructure in place and to strengthen collaborative links with colleagues at those institutions.

This visit proved to be the cornerstone of the proposed professional development undertakings and it led to the Framing Professional Development at Unisa (FDP 2014) document, which was approved by management as the official way forward.

From face-to-face to ODL

ODL, according to Siaciwena and Lubinda (2008), necessitates a strong community of support between the people and the systems to make everything run smoothly. The

purpose of an induction programme is therefore to help build that community of practice by introducing newcomers to the academic world of teaching and learning within the ODL environment to achieve the following goals: to create a basic understanding of ODL as it operates at an institution in all its complexity and with all its support systems, to create awareness of how academics work in the system, to invite new academics into the ODL praxis community in order to focus on student-centeredness and teamwork where new academics can develop a network of meaningful relationships with their colleagues.

In order to achieve these goals, a series of online courses were introduced where newcomers at the institution could discuss their work by participating in group discussions during their first few months of employment. These online courses were designed to be short and flexible to not only allow them to participate in the courses, but also to enable them to still continue with their work in the academic departments. Various types of activities were introduced, such as information sessions, scenarios of typical institutional situations, individual exploration and team exercises. They were exposed to the whole ODL teaching and learning experience: from student profiles, to policy implications, to the learning management system (LMS) of this institution, called myUnisa.

As already mentioned, the foundation of this induction programme is a series of online courses, called Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) based on the fact that it will be open to those staff who wanted to explore and experience the demands of the ODL environment. Sometimes new employees did not yet have computers and, for that reason, some face-to-face work sessions were introduced where they could gain hands-on experience with some of the basic systems and processes of the institution in order to provide them with access to a computer and give them guidance to immediately start exploring the workplace. Because of departmental demands, they were not able to spend much time in the lab once they were issued with a computer therefore they only attended two days of each week to participate in planned facilitated sessions. The rest of the week, they continued to work on tasks online from their respective workstations. Because of the complexity of the tasks, the duration of the series of six internal MOOCs offered was approximately four weeks each, with face-to-face support which proved to have created a valuable community of practice for these newcomers.

In the first in the series of six MOOCs, ODL was introduced as an educational transaction where the teachers' and the students' life stories came together. The complexity of the institution as a typical ODL system, or rather systems within systems, was examined where the government and institutional policies such as the following were key threads that guided the course:

the professional roles typically associated with an ODL educator; the students and what they bring to the learning environment; the enabling environment necessary for effective teaching and learning in an ODL context – introducing learner and

academic support systems; how policy influences what one does – the external and internal directives; and the virtual learning environment from e-Connect to the LMS.

In the second MOOC of the induction programme, an overview of the LMS was provided and the tools were explored. This LMS is the online home of all the modules, from the blended modules based on printed study guides to fully online modules. As new academics, they are expected to know how to navigate it in their modules and how to support their students on this platform.

In MOOC 3, the students unpacked the general nature of assessment in an ODL environment and the key role played by the submission of assignments, from multiple-choice assignments for large classes to online assessment types. The following topics around assignments were unpacked:

the notions of formative and summative assessment, strengths and pitfalls; the status quo of assignment procedures, from MCQs to essay-type; assessment of learning, for learning and as learning; importance of feedback in ODL assignments; and the procedures to be followed.

MOOC 4 followed on from MOOC 3, but here the nature and application of culminating assessments, namely examinations, were explained in terms of the 21st century ODL environment that has to adapt to shifting needs and available platforms for examinations. This included everything from standard invigilated exams to portfolio submissions and non-venue-based examinations that lead to the summative completion of modules and programmes via alternative assessment procedures such as:

existing procedures around venue-based examinations; addressing needs of special groups of students with options for assessment; and support systems for assessment and examinations.

The purpose of MOOC 5 was to share what was happening in terms of e-learning. A number of aspects were considered, including cutting-edge practices in online learning environments such as the use of various multimedia for teaching and learning; open educational practices; social media; online learning and e-learning in an ODL; the role of digital literacies; different types of learning in the e-learning environments; and establishing a professional digital presence – both personal and professional.

MOOC 6 gave an overview of how to facilitate teaching and learning in more relevant and appropriate ways for the digital age. As new lecturers, they are expected to teach modules with an online presence and the following were explored:

the importance of an online social presence; how to change the *status quo* on teaching and learning (print versus online teaching); how to teach on myUnisa; the importance of various learning pathways; how to utilise e-tutors in the teaching of modules; and how to support the learning processes of students.

These internal MOOCs were modified to suit the institution's specific needs, thus, they could also have been called Massive Online Unisa Conversations (MOUCs), because it was open to internal staff only, which meant they were not really open or massive.

Their purpose was to provide interactive online experiences for newcomers in order to raise awareness and explore emerging topics. The duration of the MOOCs ranged from days to weeks, depending on the topic and the interest of the group. Once a newcomer has participated and completed all the activities, he or she was assessed. As evidence of completion of the induction programme, each participant was assessed on the contributions he or she made. If all the assessment tasks were completed, they received a digital badge as recognition. By implication, they were expected to complete the online courses and submit the required assessment tasks.

The curriculum for the more experienced academics (as mentioned before) was planned to take them from the induction programme and face-to-face sessions (from an introduction to ODL) to the more complex ODeL environment.

From ODL to ODeL

More experienced and able staff members, capable of online teaching are now taught what methodologies to use to develop their capacity to become ODL teachers within an e-learning landscape. This consisted of the following two modules:

Module One: Design of an ODL programme, where staff need to familiarise themselves with appropriate policies and procedures that govern curriculum design, including the elements of the Framework for the Team Approach (FTA 2013:4). They are taught the four steps of curriculum design and which team members should be invited at what time to support the team with the design, curriculum planning, learning design planning and the learning pathway steps.

Themes such as the following are explored within the ODeL environment: decisions that need to be taken within the curriculum such as learning theories and what learning design should follow these theories. Course design decisions are made from information such as the student profile, the higher education level of complexity, whether it is a blended or fully online module and how the assessment plan will fit into the course design. The importance of the structure and pacing of the learning text are taught through practically planning a course and constructing the navigation path thereof. A review of the technologies and the available tools is also explored and a sustainability reality check is done for the contexts that this course is planned for. Online activities often include a teaching and learning plan for its own environment; group work with colleagues through a wiki; blogs as reflection on how successful the planning was in the past; and how to master a module site.

Module Two: Contemporary conversations around assessment, where staff would have discussions around assessment as a tool for learning in an ODeL. A formative assessment plan forms an important component of the learning process, as the participants are introduced to ways of using it throughout their modules and are familiarised with sensitive ways to provide frequent, focused, formative feedback, as well as strategies to develop a student's ability to improve the quality of their own learning.

Themes such as the following are explored:

The design process and plan for assessment; to design, test and evaluate the instruments that are to be used; development of new instruments and rubrics to define the criteria and the support that is needed. Practical activities are supported here by examples of recent assessment plans, case studies of actual examples and a reflection portfolio is developed.

Once the participants have mastered the above two modules and are able to apply what they have learnt in praxis, they are encouraged to become scholars and pedagogical leaders in the field of teaching and learning.

From ODeL to a scholarly approach to teaching and learning and pedagogical leadership

Participants are now exposed to reasons why strong leadership is required to support the development of effective ODeL programmes. This is taught through the following two modules:

Module One: a scholarly approach to teaching and learning, where students have to deal with the demands of an ODeL environment in a scholarly research-based manner, which has to result in a publication. The following learning units were introduced:

Learning unit one: Scholarly approach. A research-based approach resulting in a research proposal or a short paper on how a department's teaching approach might be transformed.

Learning unit two: A portfolio of managerial documents to transform a department's teaching and learning approach.

Learning unit three: The role the institution plays and the role the academic staff need to play in future if it is to respond to the rising demands for higher education. An introduction to how technology can enable access and enhance quality, if used appropriately and responsibly, and discussions on the balance between teachings versus research activities of academic staff.

Learning unit four: How technology is making an impact on higher education currently, the LMS, social networking, MOOCs and open educational resources (OER) where licensing, sourcing, adapting individualised learning pathways, machine mediated learning and post-humanism application of theory are implemented in real-world contexts.

Module Two: Pedagogical leadership in an ODeL environment teaches staff to deal with the pedagogical demands thereof. They are familiarised with the complexities of teaching and

learning and are prepared for the different methodologies that can be used in this environment. The following themes are explored:

The team approach, multiple skills that are required, with case studies of effective leadership in education; strategies to obtain approval and funding internally, and where to find funding from external sources; strategies to support curriculum review, design and curriculum mapping; identification of the educational framework and the technology needed to support it; budgeting and paying for sustainable educational technology and its maintenance; processes and strategies to coordinate different responsibilities within the development of content; content experts such as instructional designers, technical platform developers, multimedia experts, graphic designers and language editors.

In short, leaders develop strategies to evaluate the quality of the ODeL of the institution and are taught how to use quality assurance tools and how the practice can be improved through evaluation and monitoring of processes and tools (Patton 2010).

Conclusion

In this chapter, willing and able academics on their way to becoming ODeL practitioners were discussed and a programme and a curriculum were proposed as a home-grown solution. This case study might help to assist other institutions to design their own professional development learning pathways as each institution has its own content and, according to Brenda Leibowitch (2015), universities should look beyond the potholes.

The question remains whether the academics and allied professionals mentioned above were adequately prepared for becoming an ODeL professional. Feedback from these clients after the piloting phase is needed, which will lead to more research. As aptly stated by Senge (1990) and Trowler and Knight (1999:189), professionals do not learn their art in a day or a week as it takes years to build a learning organisation, but, for now, this chapter will hopefully give direction for this road that is still less travelled.

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