

Teaching (still) Matters: Experiences on Developing a Heutagogical Online Module at UNISA

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Abstract *Online learning is beginning to make indelible inroads in South African higher education institutions. Although in its incipient stages in a few institutions it shows much promise for the future student who will study away from the actual university. Higher education institutions perceive the need to be of service to a large number of students who are not necessarily in the vicinity of the campuses. It then appears that the "new" universities will be incomplete without the introduction of effective online programmes. These programmes will be part of the future university and will ensure student productivity while also responding to the calls for massification. This article explores the utilisation of heutagogical principles in a new online programme at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Based on principles of self-guided learning, heutagogy magnifies the role of the student. The article also sheds light on how UNISA's online module maximises the effective use of heutagogy.*

Keywords: *Andragogy; Heutagogy; Responsive University; Constructivist Learning*

1. Introduction

McLaughlin (1987) highlights the importance of teachers in policy implementation and change. She cites Weatherly and Lipsky who emphasise that policy is transformed as individuals interpret and respond to it. Post-apartheid education in South Africa has been evolving, with the education system adopting various nomenclatures. Currently, the South African education has adopted the revised system referred to as the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). However, CAPS will fail if teachers are not adequately empowered. Higher education institutions can play a crucial role in this regard through the strengths of teacher training programmes. This article explores an innovative online module to be introduced at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in 2013. This will be a one year module meant to introduce students to basic teaching skills. The module is meant to equip students who do not have any basic formal teaching qualifications. Among the objectives of the module is to ensure that the students will gain an interest in furthering their studies in teaching and help in the transformation of education in South Africa. The post-apartheid policy of education envisages a certain kind of a teacher. It promulgates:

All teachers and other educators are key contributors to the transformation of education in South Africa. This Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades R-9 (Schools) envisions teachers who are qualified, competent, dedicated and caring. They will be able to fulfil the various roles outlined in the Norms and Standards for Educators. These include being mediators of learning, interpreters and designers of Learning Programmes and materials, leaders, administrators and managers, researchers and lifelong learners, community members, citizens and pastors, assessors and Learning Area or Phase Specialists. (DoE 2002:3)

To attain these qualities, there needs to be a meaningful empowerment of teachers in teacher training programmes. Whilst the module under discussion can be referred to as a basic introductory course to teaching, it introduces teachers to critical pedagogy. The strength of this module is its nature; that is being an entirely online. Others though might argue that this is the programme's weak point in that many students might be challenged in using technological tools to access the learning materials. Yet despite the many debates, online learning is arguably one among solutions to address the shortage of teachers in South Africa.

2. Online teacher training: The future?

Gold (2001) writes about the invaluable nature of constructivist approaches to online training of teachers. Furthermore, he explains how several types of collaborative exercises were employed and these included online evaluations, interactive essays and group projects. This online learning presents new opportunities different from those of traditional contact teaching. However, programme leaders of these programmes should be wary of using facilitators who will paradoxically use traditional methods in an online setting. The learning environments of constructivist online learning are usually more learner-centred and less content and teacher focused. Gold (2001: 36) also points out that "constructivism is less content-oriented and more learner-centred; the designer goal is to create an information-object rich, and socially meaningful (i.e. communication and collaboration filled) learning environment".

As technology advances around the world, universities are beginning to consider using online learning in the preparation of their students for tomorrow. With the burgeoning numbers in many contact universities, online delivery can be among the feasible solutions to service as many students as possible. However, online learning has not been without its critics. Caywood and Duckett (2003) write of literature questions the effectiveness of online programmes. Caywood and Duckett (2003:98) aver:

It was all felt that students participating in courses online didn't interact as much as their peers in traditional courses and that students may have gained knowledge but not an understanding of how to think for themselves...Online education is one form of distance delivery. Ko and Rossen (2001) defined online learning as the act of conducting a course partially or totally through the Internet.

Although the above shows concerns of the role-players, educational research reflects that there are no significant differences between online and on-campus learning in a number of learning areas (Caywood & Duckett, 2003).

Lieblein (2000) argues that there are critical factors for successful delivery of online programmes. Among the most important of these is the promotion of a sense of community among faculty and online students. Furthermore, Lieblein also lists a number of other factors that are pivotal in online learning. These include:

- Approaches to pedagogy;
- Conveying a sense of class;
- Timing;
- Synchronous vs. asynchronous methods and
- The threaded discussion.

Below the above are briefly explained.

2.1 Approaches to pedagogy

Facilitators need to employ strategies that employ effective teaching and learning.

2.2 Conveying a sense of class

It is also important for an effective online learning environment to present a sense of class, school and university.

2.3 Timing

Online students are ultra-sensitive to the time it takes for lecturers to respond to their questions. Online lecturers must define and manage teacher presence to avoid student frustration;

2.4 Synchronous vs. asynchronous methods

Synchronous methods refer to the use of chat rooms when all students are logged in at the same time. On the other hand, asynchronous methods do not require students to be logged in at the same time. Lecturers should be aware of what needs to inform their pedagogy at a certain point in time. It might be of necessity to pay particular attention in empowering students to use synchronous methods.

2.5 The threaded discussion board

Email, threaded discussion boards are some of the asynchronous tools that support lecturer-student as well as student-student interactions. Students who are normally shy and withdrawn in class may like using the threaded discussion board. Effective online teaching and learning need empowered students and facilitators who will be able to employ these and many other factors.

3. Online Teaching in South Africa

The South African higher education system has been undergoing constant changes since the 1990s. The advent of massification has ensured that many learners are accepted in various universities around the country. Online programmes can ensure that many students do enrol at universities. The paradox however, is that students in remote rural areas where there is less access to technology might not be available to them. However, despite the challenges, online learning can be the solution for the usually marginalised rural students who are usually far from the cities. Damoense (2003:44) contends:

In South Africa, there are large numbers of remote learners located away from the hub of higher education institutions. The use of computers in education should increasingly be viewed as an effective communication tool with vast opportunities for addressing the needs of these learners, since geographical location and time do not matter in asynchronous-learning environment. However, infrastructure and access in remote regions are major obstacles, difficult for the Government of South Africa, as socio-economic problems such as the current HIV/AIDS pandemic, rising poverty and unemployment impose great demands upon our nation's financial resources.

Yet what South Africa needs is the development of strategies to equip teaching staff at universities with the necessary skills for online learning use. The previous South African education was more teacher-centred in approach. The new effective e-learning strategies require the optimum use of learner engagement. Furthermore, in a country like South Africa where there are still many impoverished students the use of cell phones should also form part of e-learning.

Brown (2005) suggests a need to introduce not only online learning or electronic learning but m-learning as well. He refers to this as an extension of e-learning. Many students in South Africa including those in remote rural areas make use of cell phones, therefore m-learning makes practical sense. The use of this mobile learning can enhance learning in many impoverished, under-resourced African countries. Like e-learning, m-learning maximises interaction between student and student as well as between lecturer and student. The advantage of m-learning is that many might not have computers although they have cell phones. M-learning is mentioned here because we live at a time when the impact of cell phones cannot be ignored. Furthermore, Brown (2005) argues that m-learning is a subset of e-learning. In turn, e-learning is a subset of distance learning which also falls under *flexible learning*. E-learning environments can be divided

into networked and stand-alone environments and networked environments can be divided into online (wired) and mobile (wireless) environments (Brown, 2005).

4. The outline of the new online module at UNISA

The online teaching module recently developed seeks to maximise the use of technology; it would also empower the students through their use of the materials. In the Introduction to the module there is the statement:

To heed to the call of developing effective schools in South Africa, tertiary institutions should develop effective programmes...This module seeks to prepare you to become aware of the potential you have in enhancing the education practice in our country. You are in the process of undertaking an interesting and a challenging yet rewarding profession. You need to register with myUnisa and make ascertain that you frequently visit the site as you will need to participate in the discussion forums and engage in online activities of the learning communities.

The module is meant to be completed within 17 weeks and is referred to as, *Being a Professional Teacher*. Organised into six units, this one year module will introduce potential teachers to a number of themes pertinent to teaching. The six units are as follows:

Unit 1: The teacher as a Professional

Unit 2: The teacher as a Team Member

Unit 3: The Teacher as a Communicator of Knowledge

Unit 4: The teacher as a Resourceful Innovator

Unit 5: The Teacher as Leader

Unit 6: My Portfolio

The online facilitation of this module will follow self-determined learning. It supports an advanced level of andragogy referred to as heutagogy. Heutagogy underscores the idea of learning how to learn. Chapnick and Meloy (2005) explain that whereas andragogy focuses on the best ways for people to learn, heutagogy also requires that educational initiatives include the improvement of people actual learning skills themselves. Canning (2010: 60) argues:

Developing heutagogy meant creating a self-directed learning environment for students to discover their own strategies for learning. It consisted of building their confidence to actively participate to share their knowledge and understanding of early childhood concepts. This is not only supported their individual learning experiences but students also recognised how these strategies could be transferred into their everyday practice of working with young children.

Heutagogy applies different principles from those of andragogy, for decades the latter has been pivotal in many adult education programmes. Andragogy lays the foundation for effective heutagogy. Nafukho, Amutabi and Otunga (2005:11) cite Lindeman who underscored the value of the adult learner's experience with regards to adult education, observing that the approach to teaching adults should be through situations rather than subjects. Furthermore, these writers opine that the best way to manage differences between adult learners is by creating activities that tap into the adults' experiences, such as group activities and simulations (Nafukho et al. 2005:12). Michael Knowles who pioneered adult learning identified the following characteristics of adult learners: autonomous and self-directed; foundation of life experiences and knowledge; goal-oriented; relevancy-oriented and being practical (Lieb 1991:1). Lieb also expands on Knowles' theory when he contends that adult learners can learn only if four critical elements are addressed and these are: motivation; reinforcement; retention and transference. Lieb (1991:5) asserts:

Although adult learning is relatively new as a field of study, it is substantial as traditional education and carries a potential for greater success. Of course, the heightened success requires a greater

responsibility on the part of the teacher. Additionally, the learners come to the course with precisely defined expectations. Unfortunately, there are barriers to their learning. The best motivators for adult learners are interest and selfish benefit. If they can be shown that the course benefits them pragmatically, they will perform better, and the benefits will be longer lasting.

The essence of the above is much linked to experiential learning and some writers have highlighted the need for this aspect in the field of adult education (Widemeersch, 1992; Jansen & Klerq, 1992). Knowles (1980) has also argued extensively on the value of experiential learning in adult education, distinguishing between andragogy and pedagogy. Wildermeersch (1992) cite Weil and McGill who have shown that experiential learning is associated with a number of educational practices. These two delineate the educational practices of experiential learning. The first one is concerned with assessing and accrediting learning from life and work experience. The second one focuses on the organisation of institutional change. The third raises consciousness and community action. Finally, experiential learning is related to growth and development (Wildermeersch, 1992). Houben (1992) also points out that any adult educational programme should be modified to the level of knowledge, the experiences and the client's needs if the developer wants to be successful. Moreover, Gadbow (2002) underscores the needs to teach all adult learners as if they are special; emphasizing individual learning needs as well as differences.

Michael Knowles' has written extensively on the importance of self-directed learning in adults. Knowles (1975:18) defines self-directed learning as a process where individuals take the initiative with or without the help of other people, "in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes". Furthermore, Knowles (1975) argues that there are three reasons for self-directed learning. Firstly, people who take initiative in learning learn more than do people who sit waiting to be taught. Secondly, it is a sign of maturity when people develop an ability to take increasing responsibility for their own learning. Finally, learners need to take initiative under the current educational developments for proactive learners will lessen the chances of being anxious and frustrated.

5. After Andragogy-What will universities learn from heutagogy?

The recently introduced module at UNISA follows the principles of heutagogy. In all the six units, the students will be expected to follow their module content in a self-determined, innovative and creative manner. The students will also be expected to create a picture of what it means to be a teacher. As mentioned above, heutagogy builds the noble principles of andragogy discussed above. It is fast being viewed as a natural progression from earlier educational methodologies and may well provide the optimal approach to learning in the 21st century (Kenyon & Hase, 2001).

As highlighted above, heutagogy is perceived as an approach that has gone one step beyond andragogy; to a new set of principles and practices that may have application across the entire spectrum of the education and learning life span (Kenyon & Hase, 2001). The online module developed at UNISA accommodates these aspects. It promotes student independence and goes beyond knowledge acquisition and underscores how that knowledge is given meaning and interpreted. We are now at a time when innovations are happening at a rapid pace hence the teaching and learning strategies need to be adjusted accordingly. Heutagogy is opposed to teacher-centred approaches and wants to ensure that the students design the course of study whose outline is given to them by their teacher. Unlike in simple pedagogy, the students in a heutagogic environment determine assessment through stressing learning on what interests them more. However, the introduction of heutagogical strategies should not imply the disappearance of the teacher or facilitators especially in undergraduate programmes. McAuliffe, Hargreaves, Winter and Chadwick (2008:4) contend:

Even although the heutagogical principles indeed empower the learner within a learning situation, it is still seen (especially in undergraduate education) that the educator/facilitator should remain a vital part of helping learners interpret their world while at the same time maintaining a distance appropriate to encouraging

learners to actively engage in that world through the process of discovery as it relates to their own interests and needs. This implies that students need to be supported until they reach a certain level of maturity. Heutagogy works well if it is able to nurture students to be able to grow within the programmes they are enrolled in.

6. Conclusion

Teacher preparation is among the most important task that any conscientious society can invest and engage in. As the times change so should the quality of teacher training programmes. The online programme discussed in this paper yearns to achieve the effective strategies of a self-guided learning. The latter is relevant to present day South Africa where policy expects optimum performance from teachers. In South Africa the post-apartheid education policy envisages teachers who will assume dynamic roles in educational transformation. This policy also expects teachers to be qualified, competent, dedicated and caring. Furthermore, other teacher roles include being mediators of learning; interpreters and designers of Learning Programmes; scholars, researchers and lifelong learners as well as administrators and managers (DoE, 2002). The heutagogical principles in any teacher preparation programme will enhance the teachers' skills and equip them with the necessary best practices. The new online module discussed here will ensure that this initial teacher preparation programme will assist in enhancing the critical acumen necessary in effective teachers.

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