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Towards learner-centred distance education in the changing South African context

Jennifer Glennie (1996)

The two social orders, for which education is preparing white and black, are not identical and will for a long time to come remain essentially different.... The education of the white child prepares him for life in a dominant society and the education of the black child for a subordinate society. (Welsh Commission, 1936)

There is no place for [the African] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. Within his own community, however, all doors are open. For that reason it is of no avail for him to receive a training which has as its aim absorption in the European community. (Verwoerd, 1954)

Education and training are basic human rights. The state has an obligation to protect and advance these rights, so that all citizens, irrespective of race, class, gender, creed or age, have the opportunity to develop their capacities and potential, and make their full contribution to the society. (Department of Education, 1995)

South Africa in transformation: New goals, values and principles

With the adoption of the interim constitution in 1993, South Africa ushered in a commitment to a just, democratic society based on a culture of human rights. In almost every respect, this constitution is in direct antithesis to the colonial and apartheid regimes which the majority of South Africans endured for so long. The African National Congress (ANC) made many compromises in the process of negotiations. Not least of these was its agreement to a Government of National Unity, in which cabinet seats are allocated according to the proportion of votes a party receives. So, for example, in education, the deputy minister is a key member of the National Party, the party which gave birth to and nurtured apartheid for over 45 years. Furthermore, in the negotiations, the National Party and the Inkatha Freedom Party achieved extraordinary powers for the provinces, on the confident expectation that they would win at least one of the nine provinces each.

Nevertheless, this Government of National Unity has adopted a vision for transformation of our country: the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)- The programme recognises that the legacy of colonialism and apartheid has resulted in South Africa being one of the most unequal societies in the world, with lavish wealth co-existing with abject poverty. It seeks to mobilize all our people and our country's resources towards the final eradication of the results of apartheid, and the building of a democratic, nonracial, and non-sexist future (ANC, 1994, p. 4), and to meet the objectives of freedom and an improved quality of life for all South Africans' (GNU, 1994, p. 4). Central to the programme is that it should be a people-driven process; in other words it should focus on people's immediate needs and rely in turn on their energies, 'so that together the people of South Africa can shape their own future' (ibid., p. 6).

One of the prerequisites of the RDP is the transformation of our education system (ANC, 1995). On the 25th of June, 1955, at Kliptown, the Freedom Charter demanded that the doors of learning and culture shall be open. Thirty-nine years later, and for the first time in the history of our country, the government has the mandate to plan the development of the education and training system for the benefit of the country as a whole and for all of its people. So, at long last South Africa has an education white paper which states that:

education and training are basic human rights and ... the state has an obligation to protect and advance these rights, so that all citizens, irrespective of race, class, gender, creed or age, have the opportunity to develop their capacities and potential, and make their full contribution to society. (Department of Education, 1995, p. 25)

The white paper, which includes a comprehensive set of educational goals, values, and principles, states that:

the over-arching goal of policy must be to enable all individuals to value, have access to and succeed in lifelong education and training of good quality. Education and management processes must therefore put the learners first, recognizing and building on their knowledge and experience, and responding to their needs. An integrated approach to education and training will increase access, mobility and quality in the national system.... [That system] must provide an increasing range of learning possibilities, offering learners greater flexibility in choosing what, where, when, how and at what pace they learn. (ibid., p. 21)

The white paper goes on to commit itself to the redress of education inequalities, the deployment of resources according to the principle of equity, and the encouragement of *independent critical thought*.

The emphasis in the previous paragraph is mine, and serves to underline the way in which our new government has committed itself vigorously to the various aspects of a learner-centred approach as outlined by, for example, Lewis and Spencer (1986), Hodgson (1993), and Knowles (1990). This is no surprise: anti-apartheid popular education movements and thousands of non-governmental organisations have struggled for these ideals over the last forty years. Their influence in the white paper is apparent.

In the organization for which I work, The South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE), we view learner-centredness as a key principle of any open learning approach. We emphasize the notion of the learner as an active participant in an interactive process which builds on learners' own experiences, and meets their needs, while developing independent

and critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Butcher, 1994). For us, independent learning is about learners taking responsibility for what and how they learn, rather than an emphasis on individual students working by themselves, 'banking' the content handed down to them by the teaching institution.

But what chances are there of putting these ideals into practice? The South African education department faces enormous and diverse challenges. Nowhere has the effect of colonialism and apartheid been more devastating than in the field of education. Five key features are pertinent.

First, the system was fragmented along racial and ethnic lines, producing what was euphemistically called 'The Decentralized Education Structure in Southern Africa'. This consisted of no less than fifteen racially- and ethnically based departments of education, with the authority for white education being further divided into four provincial departments. Second, vast disparities existed between black and white provision. South Africa has spent a sizeable proportion of its budget on education (in 1994, 27.5 per cent of budget and 7 per cent of GDP). This has resulted in a substantial, well-resourced sector designed for, and still primarily used by, white people. Simultaneously, millions of black South African adults are functionally illiterate, millions of African children and youth are learning under devastating conditions, and, in 1994, no less than 1.8 million African children aged between 6 and 18 were not enrolled at school. Third, the curriculum was saturated with racial ideology and the educational doctrines of apartheid. Fourth, the undemocratic nature of educational governance excluded teachers, parents, workers, and students from decisionmaking processes. Fifth, and finally, apartheid education and its aftermath of resistance destroyed the culture of learning in large sections of our communities.

The white paper outlines a number of strategies to create a unified education system, to rectify past inequalities, to develop appropriate curricula, and to introduce democratic participation. These include the introduction of a national qualification framework, a major curriculum development exercise, compulsory schooling for 6-year-olds from 1995, particular attention to a comprehensive reform and redirection of in-service education for teachers, and a student recovery programme in science and mathematics.

The white paper also commits itself to open learning:

The dimensions of South Africa's learning deficit are so vast in relation to the needs of the people, the constitutional guarantee of the right to basic education, and the severe financial constraints on infrastructural development on a large scale, that a completely fresh approach is required to the provision of learning opportunities.

The Ministry suggests that open learning is such an approach, and proposes to establish a National Open Learning Agency as a flexible and responsive agency whose task would be to promote open learning principles and assist institutions to translate these principles into practice (Department of Education, 1995, p. 28).

The white paper has also identified distance education as an essential mechanism for achieving its goals. However, it does not envisage distance education methods as being used exclusively by dedicated distance education institutions. Rather, it sees these methods being adopted by a very wide range of institutions and organisations, and having particular relevance in at least four areas: teacher education, further education, adult basic education and resource-based learning at schools.

What can current distance education provision offer?

Size

The distance education sector in South Africa is already considerable. In 1995, its overall budget was well over one billion rand, in a country where the education department's budget was about thirty billion rand. It includes the University of South Africa (UNISA) which, with its registration of over 130 000 students, rates as one of the ten largest distance education institutions in the world. There are other significant players. Technikon SA (TSA) has approximately 85 000 students studying towards various vocational certificates and diplomas at the post-secondary level. VISTA university, created in 1980 as a university for African students in so-called 'white South Africa', has an enrolment of over 20 000 teachers in distance education programmes. Another 80 000 teachers are improving their professional qualifications using distance education methods at a range of colleges and universities. This means that approximately one-third of the national teaching corps are involved in distance education programmes. A distance education technical college, Technisa, enrolls some 8000 students. In 1992, the commercial correspondence colleges had an enrolment of 50 000 for secondary qualifications and of 101 000 in courses leading to professional qualifications.

The considerable growth seen in this sector can largely be attributed to the increase in African students. For example, UNISA's enrolment of African students increased from 4943 in 1975 to 50 292 in 1992: nearly a tenfold increase. Technikon SKs African enrolment increased from 4253 in 1989 to 31 203 in 1993, while VISTA's distance education enrolment (all African student's) has increased rapidly from its inception in 1981 to its current numbers of about 20 000 students. We thus find that distance education students made up some 47 per cent of all African students enrolled in universities in 1993 and 38 per cent of all African students enrolled in Technikons. Furthermore, a growing number of students at these institutions are studying on a full-time basis. At UNISA and TSA, this category constituted over 30 000 students in 1995. Clearly, distance education institutions are becoming a very significant part of higher education provision, not only for working students but also for those wishing to study on a full-time basis who are unable to find places as on-campus students. This trend is likely to grow. A recent student demonstration at a college of education, which had closed its doors to hundreds of disappointed applicants, was quietened by the arrival of registration tables from distance education institutions.

While distance education institutions can certainly claim to be opening up educational opportunities, particularly to African students, they cannot claim to have provided great opportunities for success. Of course they can boast an extraordinary array of graduates, including President Nelson Mandela, Prime Minister Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, and the Chairperson of the Constitutional Assembly, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa. Such students, one would suspect, fall into Ross Paul's category of 'students [who] would succeed in any university, given the opportunity, and they sometimes succeed despite the university!' (Paul, 1989). But for the ordinary mortal, the situation looks much less rosy.

Quality

A recent international commission into distance education, commissioned by the African National Congress (ANC), organised by SAIDE, and chaired by Professor Ghanaraj Dhanarajan, demonstrated appalling completion rates for all students, but particularly for African and Coloured students. In the main, only 10 per cent of African students who enrol in a degree programme at UNISA can be expected to graduate over a nine-year period. An analysis of Technikon SA results produced slightly higher throughput rates of approximately 17 per cent. On the basis of these figures, visits to the institution, and an analysis of documents, the commission declared that:

the new government will have to consider the cost efficiency of its investment in human resources development, and serious questions must be asked of institutional policies that give access, but fail to provide forms of education that enable students to capitalise on their opportunity. (Intentional Commission into Distance Education, 1995, p. xxii)

This is indeed a serious consideration for the newly established National Commission into Higher Education because, at university and technikon level, distance education is well-resourced. Distance education institutions receive two-thirds of the subsidy which contact institutions receive for an equivalent full-time student. Indeed, in the case of VISTA, there are strong indications that the subsidies for the distance education students act as the 'cash cow' for highly cost-ineffective decentralised campus provision on seven sites, none of which has more than 2500 students.

The international commission further points out that the quality of current provision is *comprehensively deficient*, based as it is on an *outmoded and very limited conception of what distance education is and how it should be managed, and provided* (*ibid.*, p. xxi). The commission concluded that:

taken as a whole, distance education's contribution to the priorities for education and training in the [ANC] Policy Framework is variously marginal, inefficient, and, in the values sought for democratic South Africa, dysfunctional. (*ibid.*, p. xxii)

Some of the key reasons for their conclusions relate to the near-complete absence of learner-centredness in the design of the teaching and learning system. This absence is considered under three headings: the system and learners' needs; learning resources and learners' experience and needs; and the promotion of rote learning and thinking.

The system and learners' needs

The kind of students most likely to benefit from distance education at the post-compulsory stage in South Africa are those over the age of 18 who may not have completed formal schooling. The majority of these students cannot afford residential study for reasons of cost or time, come from working-class houses where self-paced study may be difficult for social or material reasons, and rely on public transportation systems which may be deficient. The vast majority are black, and at least half are women, a fact that is generally ignored. School-leavers who have had inadequate schooling are particularly likely to need some form of distance education either to get them into the job market or into postsecondary education.

Some may be released from employment for distance education study. In some regions (for example, KwaZulu-Natal), the majority live in semi-rural or rural areas. It is not unusual for a dozen people to share four rooms. The average student will not necessarily share all of these characteristics or limitations but a high proportion of them will.

Many learners undertaking distance education programmes at secondary and tertiary level do so on the basis of very negative experiences of education. Their schools have operated sporadically, their teachers have often been alienated, unmotivated, and authoritarian, and rote learning will have been the norm. The prospective learners are likely to lack many essential learning skills, and, in general, are underprepared.

To compensate for this degree of disadvantage, distance education institutions would have to provide multi-faceted learning environments sensitive to the particular needs of the students. However, the international commission found that in the vast majority of cases, public distance education provision is no more than correspondence education; perhaps with occasional personal touches, such as brief visits by a lecturer to outlying centres (sometimes to give a lecture to two or three hundred students at a time). In such a context, study materials become all-important. Yet in South Africa, comparatively little time is given to their preparation. Typically, the task is undertaken by a single author, sometimes with the help of an editor. The result is usually dull, impersonal, authoritarian, and uninspiring.

With regard to tutoring, the general impression of the commission of the public provision was of a service 'that was completely fragmented, uncoordinated, unplanned, *ad hoc*, insensitive and, but for a few exceptions, largely useless. It is provided by the centrally-based academic who carries out the task by one or more methods: Telephone tutoring; a 'travelling lecturer' scheme where the central academic visits selected sites to deliver a few hours of lectures; and student appointments with the academic.

When one tries to think of how this might operate in a UNISA course with several thousand registered students, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the arrangement is a charade, even when the academics concerned see themselves as spending a great deal of time in the process. (Dhanarajan, 1994, p. 4)

Telephone tutoring is a hollow option for most African students, who often have access only to public telephones, especially where it is suggested that calls be made between 8 am. and 12 noon on weekdays. Assignment marking is poorly monitored and its quality uneven. In courses with low enrolment 'lecturers' may take care to mark assignments carefully and quickly, giving constructive comments; but in large courses, the turn-around time is often as long as three to four months in the public institutions, and the remarks are dismissive and demotivating. Scant attention is given to counselling. For example, one institution has no formal provision, another has a half-time person responsible for 20 000 students, and a third has only 12 counsellors for 125 000 students.

On the basis of this picture, the commission found that publicly-funded distance education systems were certainly not designed with the needs of learners in South Africa in mind.

Learning resources and learners' experience and needs

The commission found many examples of distance education courses whose developers clearly had no desire to know or understand their learners, or to respect their life experiences. In a ludicrous, but actual, example one course asserted that 'non-white people tend to be impulsive and to have a more impetuous temperament which, in many cases, cannot be restrained', whereas 'whites lead dignified, quiet and calm lives, have self-discipline and selfcontrol and are highly developed and intelligent people'.

Even where racist stereotyping is not involved, well-meaning course developers demonstrate little desire to learn of and respond to learners' needs. For example, SAIDE is in the process of conducting a national audit of teacher education through distance education and it has reviewed a sample of courses from 19 institutions. Preliminary findings demonstrate that there is frequently no reference made or account taken of the context in which the learners (in this case, practising teachers) find themselves. second language usage, classes containing 80 pupils, an absence of learning culture in the school, etc. The audit also indicates a general lack of interest as to whether the courses are indeed meeting the learners' needs. For example, few mechanisms appear to be in place for course-evaluation by students. This is particularly surprising considering that the students themselves are teachers.

Promotion of rote learning

A key aspect of learner-centredness is the promotion of independent and critical learning skills. In South Africa, across almost the entire primary and secondary education systems and some sections of the tertiary system, the exact opposite, rote learning, is the norm. This tendency does, of course, exist in all countries, but in South Africa it is grossly exaggerated, largely on account of the approach of Christian National Education (CNE). Central to CNE policy is the notion that:

through the Fall, sin has penetrated by means of heredity to later generations, and the child as the object of teaching and education is therefore a sinfull and not a sinless being. (FAK, 1948, Article 4)

The policy purported to be a policy for white Afrikaans-speaking children, but it had far-reaching consequences for the education of all children in South Africa since it paid special attention to African education which it saw as the responsibility of 'the Boer nation as the senior white trustee of the native', who is in a state of 'cultural infancy' (ibid., Article 15). The results of this approach are still very much with us. One of the course reviewers in the teacher education audit notes: -

The style is impersonal and the tone prescriptive. The course writers are the authorities and the students must do as they are told. In courses, assignments and examinations have been designed to check whether students have 'absorbed' the course content. There are no opportunities for students to develop a critical perspective on the subject matter. (Reed, 1995, p. 2)

Creating learner-centred distance education in South Africa

As distance education moves from the margins into the mainstream in South Africa, progressive distance educators have a heavy responsibility to bear. Although many of us have advocated, with near missionary zeal (Tait 1994, p. 1), the advantages of distance education methods, we have been acutely aware of the less savoury social-control functions which distance education has so easily served: political indoctrination, production of docile and uncritical graduates, and the appearance of opening access without providing conditions necessary for success. How then do we try to ensure that distance education serves the emancipatory, empowering and developmental functions to which we have committed ourselves? In particular, as a crucial aspect of these goals, how can we encourage learner-centred distance education in South Africa?

An open learning approach

At SAIDE, we have committed ourselves to developing distance education within a framework of open learning. The concept 'open learning' has often been used in service of distance education, with the unfortunate consequence that the two terms have tended to become conflated. This we believe is not very useful, particularly because there is nothing innate in distance education methods of provision which automatically equates with openness in approach (Rumble, 1989). We see open learning as an approach to all education, the principles of which can continually inform educational practices in order to improve them. In South Africa, these principles should suffuse the education and training system as a whole in order to ensure its effective transformation. Only then can that system begin to cater for the diverse educational needs of all people in the country while meeting the needs of a developing economy. For us, open learning describes an approach which seeks to transform the nature of educational opportunity and to remove all unnecessary barriers to learning, so that as many people as possible are able to take advantage of meaningful learning opportunities throughout their lives. Education should therefore cease to be something that only occurs within the walls of a school, conducted by the talking teacher and aimed principally at young people. The focus should move instead to the learner and the outcomes of learning. Learning should take place in a number of contexts, in a multiplicity of sites, through a variety of mechanisms, and for people of all ages. We have highlighted the following as key principles around which the concept of open learning is built.

- The learning process should centre on the learners, build on their experience, and encourage independent and critical thinking.
- Learning opportunity should be lifelong and should encompass both education and training.
- Learning provision should be flexible, so that learners can increasingly choose where, when, what, and how they learn, as well as the pace at which they will learn.
- Prior learning, prior experience, and demonstrated competencies should be recognized so that learners are not unnecessarily barred from educational opportunities by lack of appropriate qualifications.
- Learners should be able to accumulate credits from different learning contexts.

- Providers should create the conditions for a fair chance of learner success, inter alia by ensuring support throughout the learning process.
- Learning should be of the highest quality.

Well-functioning distance education

Within this framework of open learning, we have begun to develop the notion of the well-functioning distance education provider in South Africa. Such a provider's main task is, as we see it, 'to design and manage successful learning', while understanding that its product is 'service to the learner' (Swift, 1994, p. 2). In designing the learning environment, we encourage education providers to choose appropriate combinations of methods for particular learning contexts. For this reason, we see the sharp distinction between face-to-face and distance teaching as unhelpful. Some key features of our notion of the well-functioning distance education provider include well-designed courses, integrated learner support, counselling, and a commitment to the selfimproving organisation.

We plan to assist in the development of a network of such providers who will design and offer a very wide range of education programmes aimed at meeting the diverse needs of learners. Mechanisms will need to be established to encourage collaboration, so that enough resources are available for quality course development, and so that institutions who have operated so separately in the past can begin to work together in a spirit of collegiality. Such programmes would fall within the soon-to-be-established National Qualifications Framework. This will ensure that learners can accumulate credits for their learning outcomes towards nationally-recognised levels of learning and agreed pathways of progression.

Network of community learning centres

Such providers would, in South Africa, need to be supported by a network of community learning centres. In brief, community learning centres provide a place where people can meet, attend classes and discussion groups, study, pick up books and other materials for learning, and, where possible, make use of computer facilities, workshops, and laboratories (Davids, 1994). Some of the most exciting recent developments in South African education and training already revolve around such centres of learning. Community learning centres could be established at a range of physical structures which already exist, and could make use of facilities during afternoons, evenings, and weekends. These could include local schools, local libraries, community buildings, places of worship, places of work, technical colleges, colleges of education, and residential institutions of higher education working co-operatively with distance providers. Learning centres would be used by distance education learners as well as by a range of other learners, especially in adult basic education and training (Ngengebule *et al.*, 1992).

Of paramount importance, however, is that the development of such a network should not take away from institutions' responsibility for their learners. Rather, the network is an aspect of the necessary social infrastructure, which distance education institutions would use in much the same way as they use (and pay for) the postal service. The institutions must

however, ensure that they develop, implement, and continually evaluate and adjust the services offered to learners.

Progress thus far

SAIDE's task is to promote and develop this vision of a national network of providers and learning centres, and to assist in the establishment of innovative initiatives which give it practical expression. We do this through advocacy, information sharing, networking, research, professional development, and assistance in planning.

Already there is a range of exciting developments. In the Free State, a consortium of the local university, technikon, and technical and other colleges, together with the national dedicated distance education institutions, are working on the collaborative provision of programmes for lifelong learning from basic to advanced level. Essential to their scheme is the establishment and maintenance of a network of learning centres by the province.

In KwaZulu-Natal, the Regional Institutional Co-operation Programme (RICP) brings together all the universities and technikons in the province in an effort to meet the province's higher education needs by rationalising and coordinating efforts. In particular, the RICP is committed to increasing access to first-year study by offering 'foundation courses' using distance education methods. This will involve the creation of a provincial higher education course development unit.

SAIDE is supporting both these efforts, while simultaneously preparing a submission to the National I-Higher Education Commission on how, in General, to develop and fund mechanisms to facilitate the use by traditionally face-to-face institutions of distance education methods.

In teacher education, the distance education aspect of the national audit is developing a vision of a future teacher education system, dedicated to South

Africa's newly articulated development goals, and operating according to open learning principles. Currently, there are 19 distance education programmes separately producing in-service courses for the quarter of the teaching force that is un- or under-qualified, and for the countless others requiring professional development. Collaboration amongst these institutions, and the use of the approximately one hundred colleges of education, as well as the approximately two hundred teacher centres, as learning centres, make such a vision realisable. The Eastern Cape is already exploring such a scheme.

Meanwhile, the dedicated distance education institutions are responding to change. Technikon SA has adopted an Integrated Learner-Centred Distance Education (ILCDE) approach, and has recently voted the necessary finance from its existing resources to implement the approach (Technikon, 1995). The implementation of these objectives requires huge organisational change, and is fraught with difficulty as these changes are resisted by sections of staff and council.

At VISTA, the university as a whole is in a state of turmoil, and at the time of writing has been without permanent senior management for over six months. The distance education

section is valiantly developing new course development procedures, against the background of great uncertainty.

At UNISA, a more piecemeal approach has thus far been adopted. An encouraging step was the adoption by UNISA of the learner support system which was run independently by SACHED Trust for over 20 years (Nonyongo, 1993). Unfortunately, the integration of this support system has not yet taken place. Very recently, UNISA began a strategic planning process. The following objectives were put forward at its initial planning workshop as essential components of its new mission:

- Establish a legitimate, democratic governance structure that continually and creatively shapes the university's future.
- Develop a devolved management system and style that is inclusive transparent and efficient.
- Provide conditions favourable to maintaining a well-qualified and highly-motivated staff that reflects the demographics of South African society as far as possible.
- Operate a student-centred tuition system characterised by flexibility, access and the delivery of study material that is quality assured and contextually relevant.
- Formulate a language policy which strives for maximum communication and recognition of cultural values and respect for human dignity.
- Foster an open, tolerant and reconciliatory South African society with a spirit free from all discrimination and prejudice. (UNISA, 1995, p. 7)

However, implementation strategies have yet to be developed to achieve these objectives.

Conclusion

As we seek to develop these promising beginnings into our grand plans, the key challenge will be to try to ensure that the design of learning programmes is not dictated primarily by the needs, traditions, and vested interests of the institutions and their staff, but rather by the needs of the learners. As the international commission notes:

Whereas in the past, universities, technikons, colleges and schools have determined the conditions under which they will teach, they must now think of themselves as facilitators of other people's learning. (International Commission into Distance Education in South Africa, 1995, p. 48)

At the heart of this goal is, as Tait (1995, p. 1) points out, knowing who your students are and what their needs are. In a country as deeply divided as ours has been-where many staff, especially in essentially correspondence institutions, have had no contact with major student groupings and where some, at least, would prefer to keep it that way-this is a major challenge. We must consciously and actively:

develop and maintain approaches which enable students to have their voices heard, and for open and distance educators and their institutions to be able to listen to and understand the practical implications of what is being said. (Evans, 1994, p. 128)

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