

The University of South Africa and The Open University, UK: Do Different Contexts Equate With Different Approaches to Distance Education?

The second wave of distance education gave rise to single and dual mode universities (Anderson & Simpson, 2015; Guri-Rosenblit, 2009). Single-mode institutions are also called mega-universities, where all staff and systems are dedicated to distance education only (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). The University of South Africa (Unisa) and the Open University, UK (OUUK) are single-mode distance education institutions, but function in different contexts. While Unisa, established in 1873, is a mega-university in South Africa, a developing country in the Southern Hemisphere, the OUUK, founded in 1969, is a mega-university in the United Kingdom, a developed region in the Northern Hemisphere (Mayes & Young, 2000; Miller, 2010; Peters, 2010; Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013). Both institutions are known for their pedagogical approach to education that allows working students to study at their own pace, without having to be on campus (Peters, 2010; Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

Although these institutions have differing contexts, there are also many similarities in their evolution and approach to distance education. The subsequent discussion, therefore, presents a comparison between these two mega-institutions and provides an understanding of whether context influences how distance education is approached at Unisa and at the OUUK, using the theoretical principles of transactional distance to support these observations. Analysing the development and organizational structure of these institutions from a transactional distance theory lens would provide insight into how social interaction and collaboration have been incorporated in course designs, because “through increased communication, the quality of the educational transaction at a distance will improve” (Garrison, 1998; p. 123).

Unisa and the OUUK: Historical Development, Mission, Values, and Population Served

Just as Unisa is the largest open distance learning (ODL) institution in Africa, the OUUK is the largest dedicated open and distance learning institution in the United Kingdom, each of them providing service to large numbers of students regionally and globally, with student populations of around 300 000 and 200 000 respectively (Davies & Stacey, 1998; Haughey, 2010; Miller, 2010, Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Williams & Gardner, 2012; Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013; Hulsmann & Shabalala, 2016; Manson, 2016).

Peters' (2010) describes openness as widening access "to adults, gender, places, methods, technical media and contents of learning," as well as "being open for the underprivileged and undeserved of society" (p.62). In this light, it can be argued that each institution widens access to people previously excluded from higher education. Unisa's mission is based on transforming South African society by redressing past inequalities caused by the unjust apartheid system based on racial discrimination, but has minimum educational requirements for admission to its undergraduate courses; while the OUUK advances self-improvement initiatives for working adults and for those excluded due to the elitist system of tertiary education in the United Kingdom, and has no minimum admission requirements for its undergraduate program other than the prospective student being eighteen years of age (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2010; Haughey, 2010; Peters, 2010; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Williams & Gardner, 2012; Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013; Manson, 2016). What positions Unisa in a slightly different light though, is the University's transition from having a largely English-speaking management structure to being headed by Afrikaans-speaking executives, and finally to the present-day African mega-university with broad-based black empowerment (BBBE) mandates (Manson, 2016). This is a

significant wave of development in the University's evolution, as it has not only opened access to students but to academics from marginalized groups as well.

Recent trends, however, indicate that besides the adult population that distance education generally attracts, Unisa and the OUUK have been attracting young school leavers, locally, regionally and globally, who do not enter residential universities for varying reasons, thereby changing the student demographics of these distance education institutions (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2014; Facts and figures, 2017). By implication, the self-directed learning approach incorporated in course designs, specifically focused for the mature learner, will have to be relooked to accommodate the young school leaver requiring greater assistance and direction, as well as more interaction and collaboration with instructors (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Msila & Setlhako, 2012). Therefore, the argument that remains at the core of this paper is how have these institutions reduced the transactional distance between students and instructors in this distance education landscape that provides access to thousands of students.

Organizational Systems, Model of Teaching and Learning, and Technologies Used

The OUUK and Unisa both function on the systems design of institutional organization, with various interrelated elements, including inter alia, course designers, technical experts, technologies, and resources utilized, instructors, and copyreaders (Croft, 1992; Tait, 2002; Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2010; Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013). Rumble (1995) points out that "one of the features of elements within a system is that they are often related in complex ways, in the sense that the influence of one element interacts on other elements and then, through a series of relationships, its initial influence feeds back on itself" (p.6). Both institutions have moved towards online models of distance education delivery that enables the massification of higher education required to improve access to higher education (Peters, 2010; Bates, 2011;.Moore &

Kearsley, 2012). This approach requires a new pedagogical approach to teaching and learning that would incorporate synchronous and transactional communication that requires an interpretive systems approach to distance education, with various stakeholders in order to create a meaningful teaching and learning process (Rumble, 1995; Garrison, 1998; Gokool-Ramdo, 2008; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Msila & Setlhako, 2012 Tait, 2018).

The OUUK and Unisa disseminate course materials through various mediums and technologies, both offline and online, with the principle difference being the capacity of information and communication technologies (ICT) between the two institutions in relation to context (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Haag, 1995; Msila & Setlhako, 2012; Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013; Hulsmann & Shabalala, 2016; Ramdass & Masithulela, 2016). The challenge for Unisa is to provide support and training for learners from rural areas with poor infrastructure, thereby adopting a blended learning approach, integrating a mix of online and offline resources for learners, until more feasible solutions to digital access are found (Ramdass & Masithulela, 2016). The OUUK, on the other hand, is an industry leader in multimedia channels in its delivery of course materials, beginning with its relationship with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in airing lectures. The OUUK has also gone through a transition in its development and evolution and has moved to more synchronous teaching and learning technologies in the 1990's already, which could be attributed to the first-world context of the institution that is positively correlated with better funding and infrastructure development (Mayes & Young, 2000).

Nonetheless, despite the differences in infrastructure development and ICT capacities related to contextual factors, the challenges in reducing the transactional distance between instructors and students between these two institutions are very similar as many courses designs align with

industrial systems of mass education in line with the large numbers of students they serve (Haughey, 2010; Peters 2010; Rivers, Richardson, & Price, 2014). These factors encourage the adoption of the asynchronous features of modern digital technologies, thereby restricting the full potential use of interactive technologies in reducing transactional distance (Scanlon, 2011; Williams & Gardner, 2012; Cooper, 2015; Rienties & Toetenel, 2016). What is important to note in this discussion is that collaborative interaction needs to be built into course design within each element of the overall distance education system (Rienties & Totenel, 2016). Simply having the digital technologies or the necessary infrastructure is not the only condition for reducing the transactional distance between instructors and students, there needs to be a concerted effort in integrating the pedagogical and theoretical principles of dialogue and ‘didactic conversation’ into distance education design of each course to facilitate student satisfaction and success (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Rienties & Totenel, 2016).

Conclusion

Unisa and the OUUK are both distance education leaders that open access to higher education. Despite functioning in different contexts, there are various similarities in the organizational structure, mission, values, and approach to teaching and learning in the two institutions. Although the core differences between these institutions have been outlined, this paper specifically focused on the similarities between these institutions and the approach to teaching and learning, with particular emphasis on transactional distance theory. It was thus concluded that meaningful interaction had to be built into course designs throughout the system, and was not only dependent on the availability of interactive technologies, but also on the effective use of these technologies based on a transactional theory approach.

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