

Problems hampering the collapse of distance in ODL

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Abstract

This article examines e-learning as a transformational educational tool in collapsing the transactional distance among communication science students at Unisa. The problem that was investigated pertains to students' inadequate engagement in the e-learning arena. The study targeted executive members of the Communication Science Association (COMSA), and Unisa Radio employees. The COMSA executives which consist of ten Communications Science students, and employees at Unisa Radio comprise 200 Communication Science Students. A survey research design was used, whereby questionnaires were administered to all COMSA executives and 50 per cent of Unisa Radio student employees, chosen using simple random sampling. The data gathered were analysed through thematic categorisation and tabulation and the findings were presented descriptively. An examination of the data indicates that students do not engage actively in e-learning. They use *myUnisa* for basic educational needs, but not for the purpose for which it is intended, namely to bridge the transactional distance in order to ensure increased engagement among all stakeholders. In light of the above, we recommend that an in-depth study be conducted to ascertain core issues in respect of why students do not engage actively in what is meant to promote a deep learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines e-learning as a transformational educational tool in collapsing the transactional distance among Communication Science students at Unisa. In order to achieve the stated aim, the article set out to investigate students' use of Unisa's e-learning forum, known as *myUnisa*. The latter is the e-learning resource developed by the university to improve communication between lecturers and students, while also improving its services to students to ensure a seamless learning experience. This is especially critical in bridging the transactional distance in Unisa's open distance learning (ODL) context. According to UNESCO (2002, 8), the term 'open distance learning' refers to teaching that is conducted by someone removed in time and space from the students, referred to as 'transactional distance'. ODL further aims to include greater dimensions of openness and flexibility in terms of access, curriculum and other elements of structure (UNESCO 2002, 8). The *myUnisa* platform is a learning management system for academic collaboration and study-related interaction. This system has been developed to supplement and enhance academic interaction and improve communication between Unisa and its students, as well as provide an opportunity for engagement among students. At Unisa, the learning process involves being part of a learning community where students can engage with their peers. In a typical distance learning environment, this opportunity for engagement is limited; therefore, *myUnisa* was launched with the intention of helping to bridge this gap.

Unisa was founded in 1873 as an examining body and later evolved into a university college, offering courses to learners through correspondence. Subsequently, the university migrated through the various developmental stages of distance education and, in January 2004, it was constituted as a comprehensive ODL university after amalgamating with two similar educational bodies (Sonnekus, Louw and Wilson 2006). According to these authors the 'new' Unisa effectively became the fifth-largest mega-ODL education institution in the world, servicing approximately 300 000 students. Students at Unisa come from both rural and urban areas. Sonnekus, Louw and Wilson add that this geographical difference affects the service delivery of Unisa, which is exacerbated by the mandate given to higher education institutions to enrol 'a large and diverse student body'. Hence, not only is the infrastructure in these areas vastly different, but also the level of exposure to and availability of modern technology, which affects the level of technical support that can be given by the learner support system (Sonnekus, Louw and Wilson 2006).

In order to realise the objectives of this article, information regarding students' access to computers and the Internet was elicited as a starting point. Respondents were further required to provide information pertaining to their awareness of and

participation in *myUnisa*. They were also required to rate the effectiveness of *myUnisa* in assisting them in their studies. Lastly, respondents were required to provide suggestions for improving the effective use of e-learning at Unisa. This article is based on the assumption that e-learning facilitates and opens avenues for effective teaching, as a result of its potential to bridge the transactional distance among all stakeholders at the institution.

The significance of this article is the contribution it will make towards encouraging and increasing the use of e-learning at Unisa's Department of Communication Science, which may ultimately improve throughput and retention rates throughout the university.

The problem that was investigated in this article relates to students' inadequate engagement in the e-learning arena, as well as their superficial interaction with the e-learning forum. Unisa's vision, 'Towards *the* African university in the service of humanity', addresses its enhanced learner support methodologies, processes and facilities, all of which are underpinned by a focus on a service-oriented culture within the university. This includes the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the learning process. Unisa is accessible to all students (specifically those on the African continent) and the marginalised, by way of a barrier-free environment, while responding to the needs of the global market. This is further emphasised by the university's acknowledgement – in its *2015 strategic plan* – that it is vital to establish a leading-edge information and communication technology architecture in order to sustain a competitive edge in education (Unisa 2005).

E-learning at Unisa is conducted through the online forum called *myUnisa*, which intends to change the way students access and synthesise information. Furthermore, *myUnisa* is intended to align the university in the ODL context, where transactional distance is minimised. This will effect transformation at the institution by restructuring traditional models of distance learning in the areas of interaction with lecturers, courseware, associated resources and students. The introduction of *myUnisa* is not intended to replace printed material, but rather to enhance the learning process by creating a seamless learning experience for students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article is influenced by Paulo Freire's dialogic process of communication (1970), which focuses on the premise that in order for communication to be effective, it has to be participatory, dialogic and reciprocal (White, Nair and Ascroft 1994, 50).

Freire's concept of *conscientisation* focuses on bringing individuals to critical reflection about their own living conditions, wherein they actively participate in the communication process (Servaes, Jacobson and White 1996, 97). Thus, people become the subjects of their own development, and not simply objects of technology or processes (White et al. 1994, 49).

Rather than a 'banking' model in which the teacher makes deposits that the students patiently receive, memorise and reproduce (a form, Freire argued, that serves only to increase the recipients' dependence on the teacher and fails to provide lifelong learning, which is one of Unisa's primary goals), Freire suggested a model where education becomes a dialogue in which the teacher and student engage with each other. In this model, the student is enabled to acquire skills to equip him/her with knowledge to better his/her life, which Freire referred to as conscientisation or consciousness raising (Srampickal 2006).

Freire emphasised that the mere transfer of knowledge by an authority source to a passive receiver did nothing to help promote growth in the latter as a human being with an independent and critical conscience, capable of influencing and changing society. Freirean dialogue is relevant to this article because of its reference to the concepts of dialogue, reciprocation and participation in the learning process. These elements are necessary in Unisa's ODL context, in order to effect a deep and meaningful learning experience, failing which only superficial interactions will be achieved.

METHODOLOGY

A survey research design was used whereby questionnaires were administered to all COMSA executives and 50 per cent of Unisa Radio student employees, who were chosen using simple random sampling. This article focused on COMSA executives and Unisa Radio employees because these groups were able to provide valuable data emanating from their active involvement on the Muckleneuk and Sunnyside campuses in Pretoria, which form the hub of the university's activities. The instrument sought information pertaining to the personal characteristics of the respondents, student access to e-learning facilities, the use of *myUnisa* as an e-learning resource and recommendations to improve the use of e-learning at the university. The data collected were analysed through thematic categorisation and tabulation, and the findings were presented descriptively.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographic profile of the respondents

The respondents were BA Communication Science students from Unisa. There was a male dominance (75%) and most of the respondents (94.2%) were under the age of 29.

Computer access

The study sought to establish whether respondents had computer access. The respondents were provided with a list of five categories of computer access, and were required to choose the relevant option/s.

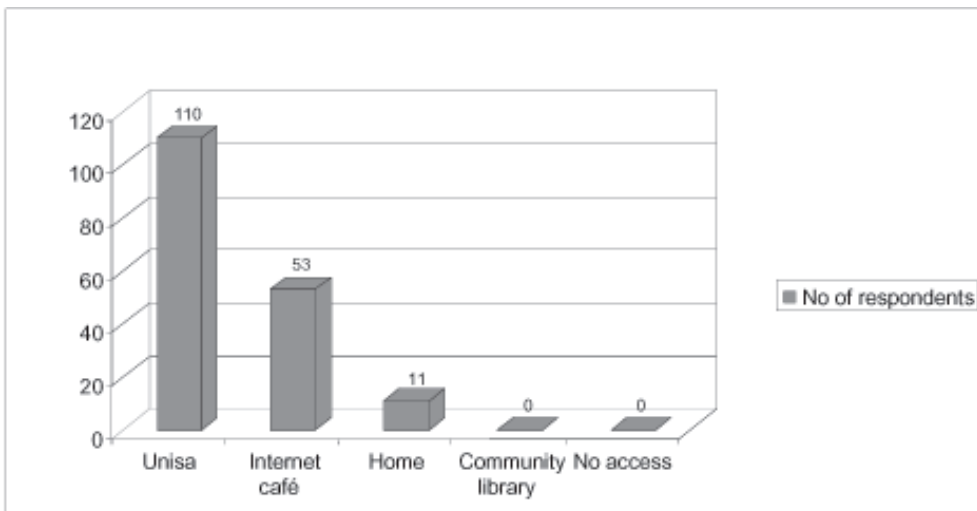


Figure 1: Computer access (N=110)

An examination of the data indicates that all respondents (110; 100%) have computer access at Unisa; 53 (48%) have computer access at an Internet café; 11 (10%) have access at home; and none have access at community libraries. Interestingly, the results show that all the students have computer access, which is encouraging because this indicates that active engagement is possible between the students and lecturers, through e-learning. This result could be attributed to the fact that most of the targeted students were based in urban areas and had physical access to information and communication technologies (ICTs). A study conducted by Van Brakel and Chisenga (2003) established that many people around the globe have personal computers in their homes. However, they point out that in Africa this is not the case; the rate of availability of desktop computers

in Africa is globally one of the lowest. Statistics provided by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) (2006) indicate that in 2002, Africa had 1.23 desktop computers per 100 inhabitants. The theory on which this study is based suggests that in order for meaningful communication to occur, there should be a change in focus, from information supply to meaning production. To view communication as a process of meaning production is to recognise revolutionary developments in communication technology. This is why access to ICTs at Unisa is critical in creating an e-learning environment that is conducive to active engagement.

Internet access

Figure 2 provides responses from the respondents to the question: ‘Do you have Internet access?’ Figure 2 summarises the responses, where respondents were provided with a list of five categories to choose from. Respondents could choose more than one option and were also given an opportunity to identify other sources that were not listed.

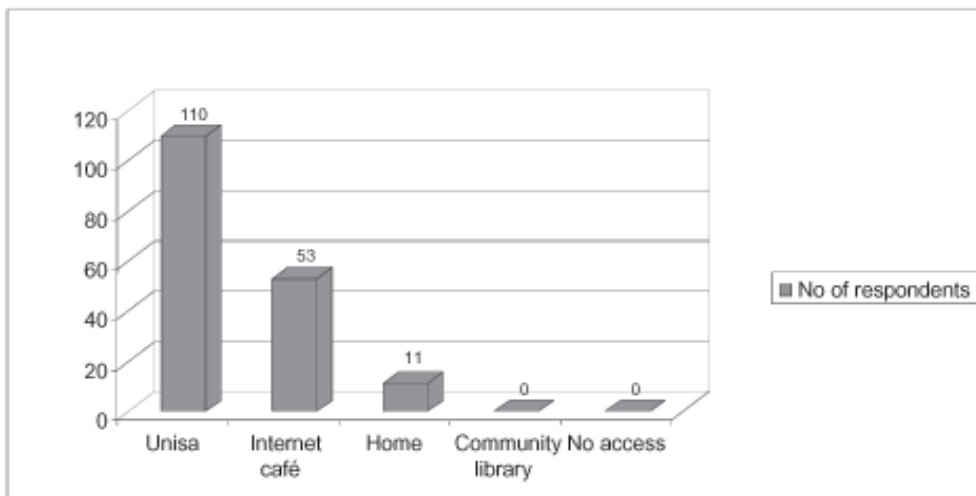


Figure 2: Internet access (N=110)

Figure 2 shows that all the students (110; 100%) accessed the Internet at Unisa; 53 (48%) occasionally accessed the Internet at an Internet café; only 11 (10%) accessed the Internet at home. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that Internet access is not problematic for Unisa students in Pretoria. This may be because Unisa’s head office is situated in Pretoria, which is where all activities originate. This is a positive reflection of the diffusion and adoption of e-learning resources, which is one of the aims of ODL. The results further show that none

of the students accessed the Internet at their community libraries. It is, therefore, evident from the study that students do not access their community libraries – for reasons not revealed in this study – despite being encouraged to do so. According to a study conducted by the Internet Service Providers Association (ISPA) (2009), Internet users in South Africa, for the year ending 2008, were estimated at 4 590 000. The document adds that for the year ending 2007, the number of Internet users in South Africa was 4 070 000; for the year ending 2006, the number was 3 830 000; and for the year ending 2005, the total number of Internet users was 3 600 000). White et al. (1994, 120) refer to this use of communication technology in cyberspace as a potential source of empowerment, both locally and globally. They note that modern electronic communication technology has greatly increased the power and speed of interactive communication and easy access to information sources, information transmission, storage and processing, which is the technical source of empowerment in cyberspace. The theory on which this study is based encourages dialogue, in terms of which e-learning enables students in cyberspace to connect and interact quickly and efficiently, to enter into regular discussions and dialogues, and to form virtual communities. According to the theory underpinning this study, the human interaction on networking is a potent source of democratic empowerment (White et al. 1994, 50).

Awareness of myUnisa

One of the objectives of the study was to focus on students' awareness of the university's online forum, known as *myUnisa*. In order to measure students' responses, a binary choice of 1 = Yes and 2 = No was used. The study established that all targeted students (110; 100%) were aware of *myUnisa*, which is encouraging – especially as the use of online resources is promoted by the university in an attempt to bridge the transactional distance in ODL. Upon closer examination of Freire's theory, it is observed that he places great emphasis on the educator as initiator of the conscientisation and dialogue process (Srampickal 2006). In this article, the initiator of the learning process is Unisa and, more specifically, the lecturer. Should the lecturer not initiate dialogue with students, then the learning process becomes linear, whereby tasks are given to students without authentic transactional communication occurring. However, it should be noted that this conscientisation and learning process cannot be totally dependent on the lecturer because of the dangers that such dependency may pose.

Participation in the discussion forum on myUnisa

The study sought to establish whether the students participate in the discussion forum on *myUnisa*. This is a tool intended to provide a forum for engagement

among students, as well as between students and lecturers. The respondents were provided with a list of three options, as illustrated in Figure 3.

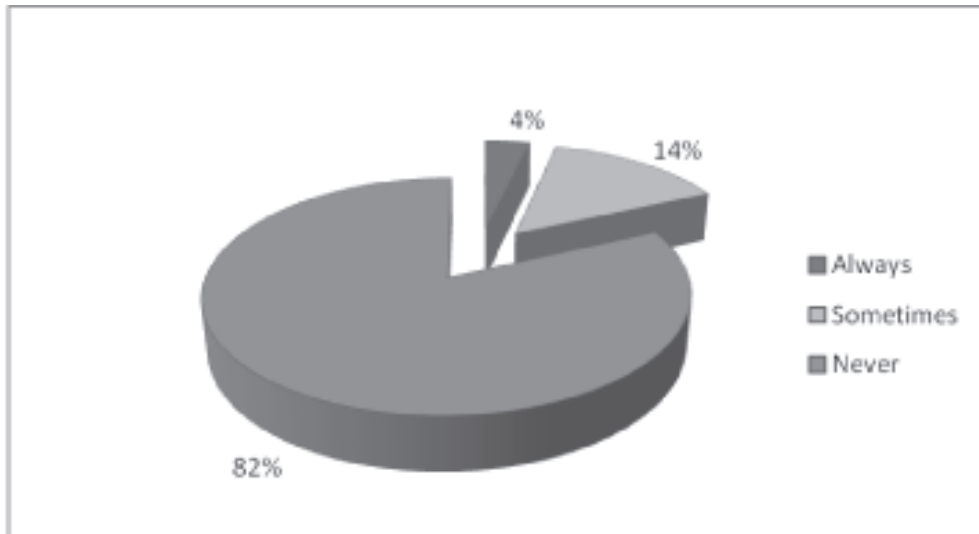


Figure 3: Participation in the discussion forum on *myUnisa* (N=110)

Figure 3 shows that a significant number of respondents (90; 82%) have never participated in *myUnisa*'s discussion forum; 16 (14%) indicated that they sometimes participate, while the minority (4; 4%) indicated that they always participate in discussion forums. Overall, the findings reveal that the majority of students do not participate in discussion forums, which could be attributed to a number of factors, including students' lack of the necessary skills to participate in e-learning. This article uses the concept of dialogue as the common and grounding factor and the basis for participatory communication. The theory underpinning this study states that only in terms of mutuality and meeting can human life achieve meaning and fulfilment (White et al. 1994, 52). Dialogic communication in the theory highlights the importance of students' participation in discussion forums in this study, since it is the dialogic encounter that has the potential to create meaning in the learning process.

Submission of assignments via *myUnisa*

Responses were required from the students to the question: 'How often do you use *myUnisa* to submit your assignments?' Respondents were provided with a list of possible frequencies (see Figure 4).

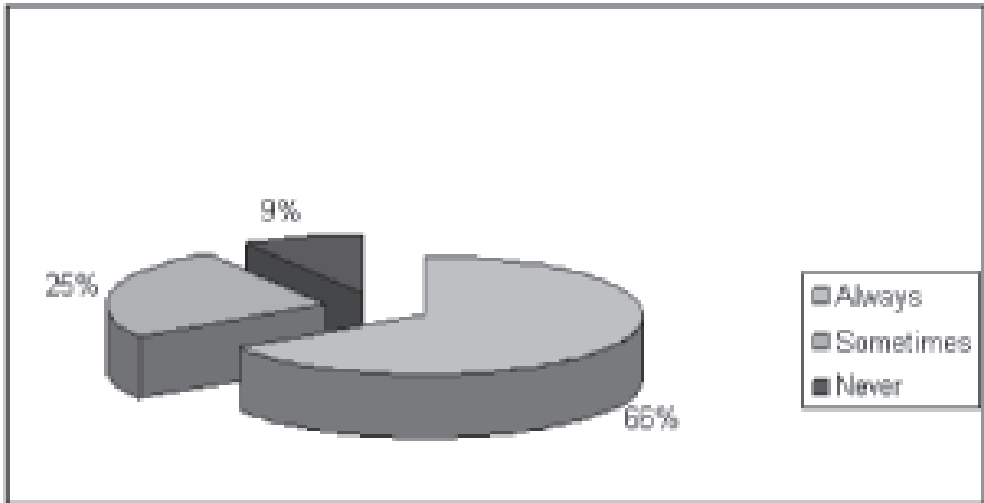


Figure 4: Submission of assignments via *myUnisa* (N= 110)

Figure 4 illustrates that a significant number of students (66%) indicated that they always submit assignments using *myUnisa*; 25 per cent indicated that they sometimes submit their assignments using *myUnisa*, and only nine per cent indicated that they never use the *myUnisa* resource to submit their assignments. The results reveal that the majority of students use *myUnisa* to submit their assignments, which demonstrates that students use *myUnisa* to perform tedious and necessary tasks. According to Freirean dialogue, for communication to be effective, it has to be linked not only to the process of acquiring technical knowledge and skills, but also to the awareness-raising, politicisation and organisation processes (*Major trends in development communication 2004*). In other words, although using *myUnisa* to submit assignments replaced the tedious task of having to post them, such use of *myUnisa* does not equip the student with the requisite knowledge for empowerment and lifelong learning.

The effectiveness of *myUnisa* in assisting students in their studies (N = 110)

One of the objectives of the study was to establish the effectiveness of *myUnisa* in assisting students in their studies. The students were therefore provided with a list of possible options and asked to rate them on the Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very effective) through to 3 (ineffective). Figure 5 summarises their responses.

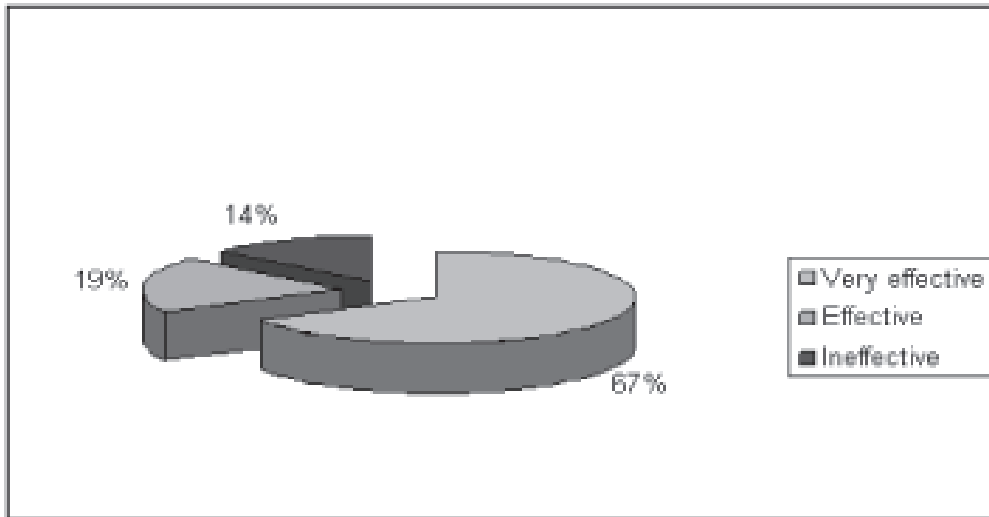


Figure 5: The effectiveness of *myUnisa* (N= 110)

When asked to comment on the effectiveness of *myUnisa* in assisting them in their studies, the majority (74; 67%) indicated that it was very effective, while 21 (19%) indicated that it was effective. A minority (15; 14%) felt that it was ineffective. It should be noted that *myUnisa* has been introduced by the university specifically as a platform to assist students in their studies. Bates (1997) asserts that over the past decade there has been an exponential growth in the use of ICTs, which has had a pervasive impact both on society in general, and on our daily lives, in particular. It is thus not surprising to find increasing interest, attention and investment in the use of ICTs in education on a global scale. In addition to efforts to employ ICTs to improve learning, the emergence of the knowledge economy has brought about a much greater emphasis on education. In strengthening the aforementioned argument, Daniel (1998, 12) is of the view that a number of master plans for ICTs in education have been produced in many countries. He adds that such plans reveal that educational innovations in ICTs have been increasingly embedded within a broader framework of education reforms aimed at developing students' capacities for self-learning, problem-solving, information seeking and analysis and critical thinking, as well as the ability to communicate, collaborate and learn.

Level of engagement with e-learning resources

In this item, students were asked to rate their level of engagement with e-learning resources. Respondents were provided with a list of e-learning resources and

asked to rate them on the Likert scale of 1 (none) through to 5 (very high). Table 1 summarises their responses.

Table 1: Level of engagement with e-learning resources (N = 110)

e-learning resources	5. Very high	4. High	3. Satisfactory	2. Low	1. None
Computers	88 (80%)	14 (12.7%)	08 (7.3%)	0	0
Internet	75 (68.2%)	21 (19.1%)	14 (12.7%)	0	0
Cell phones	110 (100%)	0	0	0	0
myUnisa announcements	87 (79.1%)	23 (20.9%)	0	0	0
myUnisa discussion forums	02 (1.8%)	02 (1.8%)	11 (10%)	05 (4.5%)	90 (81.8%)
Emails (myLife)	24 (21.8%)	16 (14.5%)	14 (12.7%)	29 (26.4%)	27 (24.5%)
Official study material	12 (10.9%)	02 (1.8%)	12 (10.9%)	36 (32.7%)	48 (43.6%)
Assignments	57 (51.8%)	16 (14.5%)	09 (8.2%)	18 (16.4%)	10 (9.1%)
Schedules	10 (9.1%)	15 (13.6%)	25 (22.7%)	44 (40%)	16 (14.5%)
Additional resources	0	0	0	0	110 (100%)

Table 1 shows that the students’ level of engagement with computers is very high (88; 80%). When asked to comment on their level of engagement with the Internet, once again a significant number of respondents revealed that the level was very high. Moreover, all the respondents (110; 100%) indicated that they owned cell phones. It should be noted that the Internet has become a mainstream form of media and an integral part of modern life globally. *The South African yearbook* (2008, 115) indicates that ratings of the Internet market research company Nielsen/Net show that South African citizens’ online registration has increased over the years. The latter document shows that South Africa is considered the fourth-fastest-growing mobile communications market in the world.

This information substantiates the theory on which this study is based, where Freire argues that the truly revolutionary project, enabled by the process of dialogue and mediated by the outcomes of conscientisation, creates a process in which the people assume the role of subject. Freire maintains that the word ‘subjects’ has the connotation of independence, status and integrity, reflecting

the preferred value system by which he consistently asserts that conscientisation, engendered by dialogue, is the means of ‘transforming’ objects into subjects (White et al. 1994, 50). This study regards engagement with e-learning resources as extremely critical in transforming students from objects into subjects who may develop a sense of conscientisation through e-learning.

Recommendations for improving the effective use of e-learning

The respondents were required to indicate and discuss contextual conditions that should be adapted in order to enhance the effective use of e-learning at Unisa. The following general themes were evident in their responses:

- All Unisa regional offices should have an Internet connection to enable students to use *myUnisa* for the primary purpose of submitting their assignments;
- Unisa must promote e-learning resources and make sure that students have Internet access in order to make effective use of these tools and services;
- Unisa must build a technology centre with e-learning resources in each region where students have access, to assist them in their studies.

The above recommendations by students bring to mind the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, which promotes a culture of dialogue and community, a culture of human rights. According to Srampickal (2006), one of the key rights is *the right to communication/expression*. Since all democratic relationships presuppose interactions that are mutual, there can be no relationship without dialogue. To enter into relationships, to establish communities, to survive, people must communicate. E-learning is the platform intended to achieve this end.

CONCLUSION

In this article we set out to present e-learning as a transformational educational tool among Communication Science students at Unisa. It should be noted that these results are not transferable to the entire Unisa community, because of limitations in generalising the findings. If Unisa is to continue to compete in a global higher education market, it must continue to embrace technological advancements and use these as a strategic tool capable of transforming its education delivery. This relates to the underpinning theory of this article, namely Freirean dialogue, which argues that for communication to be effective, it has to be participatory, dialogic and reciprocal – something which will only be possible once the issue of active participation is addressed by the initiators of the communication process.

Although technological growth and expansion are inevitable and necessary, there is a danger that technology could result in the widening of the knowledge gap. Rather than achieving widespread adoption, information then becomes power in the hands of the privileged few (White et al. 1994, 58). This is borne out by the issue of access to computers and the Internet: although students have indicated that they have access to these facilities, it is limited to facilities on campus only. This limitation therefore impedes students' engagement in e-learning. Based on the recommendations of the respondents, Unisa should therefore take a closer look at the service offerings at its regional offices, in order to satisfy a key objective in an ODL context, namely transcending transactional distance.

We further argue that although the majority of the respondents have access to e-learning, the results show that their interactions in the e-learning arena lack depth. Effective two-way communication is encouraged, with the aim of enhancing dialogue among all stakeholders in the learning process. However, the results of the study show that there is insufficient meaningful interaction at present.

It is recommended that Unisa maintain its e-learning initiatives, but also take into account the financial constraints of the students and the suitability of the technology as an educational tool. It is important to acknowledge that in higher education – and especially the ODL environment – e-learning is a means to an end, and not an end in itself.

The results of this article relate directly to Freire's theory in respect of authentic participation. Many development efforts have been undertaken in the past by focusing on effective communication and the enabling of action; however, this narrow focus leaves such efforts vulnerable to eventual failure. These efforts fail because people lack ownership and relevant in-depth knowledge to assume control of activities in the long term and, more importantly, because they lack a sense of community (Yoon 2006). It is, therefore, recommended that the Department of Communication Science form an advisory board to include students' inputs in the decision-making process on matters that affect them directly, including e-learning. This is supported by Freire's reference to the emancipatory experience of dialogue.

Freire (1970, 13) asserts that our advanced technological society is rapidly making objects of most of us, and subtly programming us into conforming to the logic of its system. To the degree that this happens, we are also becoming submerged in a new 'culture of silence'. The paradox is that the very technology that contributes to this culture of silence also stimulates a new sensitivity to our global environment.

Unisa should examine its current e-learning policies against the backdrop of the society in which we live. It is in this light that we recommend that a more in-depth study be conducted to ascertain core issues in respect of why students do not engage actively in what is meant to promote a deep learning experience.

We also recommend that a further investigation into each regional centre be conducted, for details pertaining to issues of access in respect of facilities provided and support rendered. This study focused on the Pretoria region – the hub of Unisa’s activities – as an initial study. It is, therefore, recommended that ongoing research be conducted at the regions, to ensure maximum geographic reach.

It is further recommended that a study be conducted into Unisa’s collaboration with community libraries and community centres throughout the country. These collaborations are key in providing free Internet facilities and other educational resources, which are critical components in transcending transactional distance. This study did not look for reasons why students do not use *myUnisa* optimally. Thus we see this as an area worthy of further research, as it will probably provide valuable information that will assist in the provision of both teaching and learning opportunities.

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