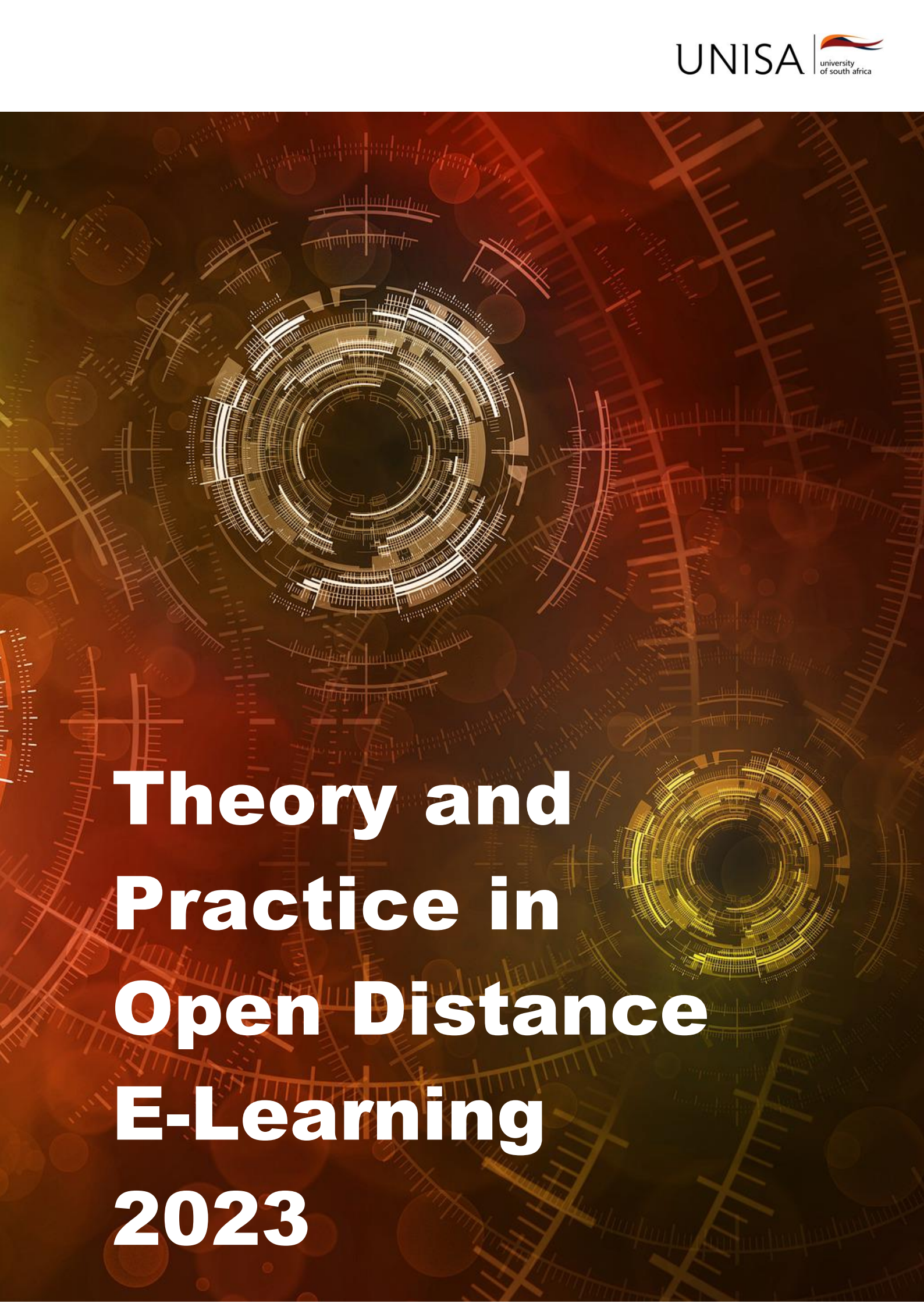




Theory and Practice in Open Distance E-Learning 2023

THEORY AND PRACTICE IN OPEN DISTANCE E-LEARNING

WELCOME MESSAGE

This open education resource (OER) is meant for anyone interested in learning more about the theory and practice of open distance e-learning on all levels of education.

Please note that this is a non-taught OER and that working through the information and doing the activities do not amount to credits. The purpose of the activities is for you to gain an in-depth understanding of the content and, in so doing, reflect and enrich your thoughts on the subject. Although not contributing to credits, it may still enhance all formal studies concerning theory, practice and research in ODeL.

The OER is theoretical in nature and requires the application to different applicable contexts.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the OER is to provide practitioners and students with knowledge and skills to have a better understanding of the theory and practice of ODeL.

TARGET GROUP

Practitioners and students who would like to learn more about the field of ODeL.

DURATION

Working through this OER should take you between eight and ten hours.

ONLINE ACCESS

This OER is available at <https://ir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/32493>

TERMINOLOGY

- The term “facilitator” is used as it aligns with constructivist approaches to teaching and learning. The term refers to teachers, lecturers, instructors and facilitators at all levels of education.
- The term “students”, as used in this OER, refers to students and learners at all levels.

REFLECTION ACTIVITIES

We present learning activities in this OER. They are reflective, but also practical. Please remember that the purpose of the activities is for you to deepen your understanding of the content, not to gain credits for any formal course.

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UNIT 1 DEFINING OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODeL)

1.1 Introduction

Open and distance e-learning, where the student and facilitator are separated by place (and sometimes by time), is currently one of the fastest growing forms of education. What was once considered a special (even marginalised) educational approach for its supposed lack of theoretical grounding and non-traditional delivery systems, is now an essential concept in mainstream education. Notions such as connected learning spaces and virtual learning environments have enlarged the scope and changed the nature of earlier (correspondence) distance education models.

It is important to properly understand the concept of open and distance e-learning (ODeL) to conceptualise it in its entirety. There are numerous definitions of open distance learning and multiple perspectives about it.

This unit aims to interrogate the definition of open and distance learning, and address key concepts in the definition.

1.2 Defining ODeL

Open and distance e-learning (ODeL) can be described as “learning/studying at a distance” (Saykili, 2018).

Adebayo (2007) defines open and distance learning as the type of education that takes place outside the conventional school system; it is imparted without, necessarily, having personal interaction with students.

Creed (2001) defines distance learning as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone far removed from the students in space or/and time.

“Open learning as a philosophy or a set of beliefs about teaching and learning, and distance learning as a method/s or a set of techniques for teaching and learning. Open learning is an arrangement to enable a person to learn at the time, place, and pace that satisfies their circumstances and requirements. The emphasis is on opening up opportunities by overcoming barriers that result from geographical isolation, personal or work commitments or conventional course structures which have often prevented people from gaining access to the training they need.” (Rowntree, 1992).

According to Keegan (1980), the definition of ODeL contains the following elements:

- the separation of facilitator and student, which marks its difference from face-to-face (F2F) teaching/learning
- there is the involvement of an educational organisation involved in ODeL, which distinguishes it from private study
- the course content is delivered through technology, from print media and other forms of technology
- there is two-way communication between the student and the course facilitator

- there is the possibility of some contact meetings between the student and the course facilitator for teaching and socialisation purposes
- through ODeL, the student participates in an industrialised form of education (Keegan, 1980, p. 6).



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 1:

What do you understand by Open Distance Learning?

1.3 Common issues in ODeL definitions

There are common issues in most of the definitions of open and distance learning, as captured in the figure below:

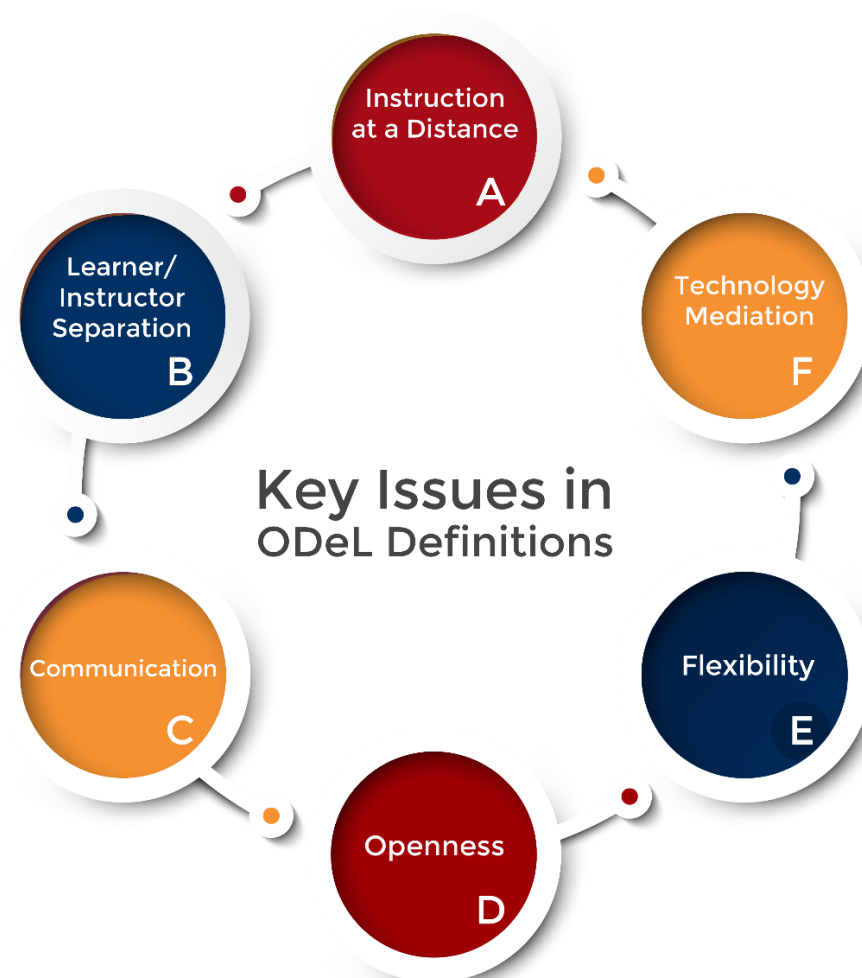


Figure 1: Key issues in ODeL definitions

1.3.1 Instruction at a distance

Learning is not restricted to the walls of the classrooms, but often happens away from the learning institution. It is important to note here that there is instruction delivery in ODeL.

1.3.2 Student/facilitator separation

This entails the separation of the students from the course facilitator. Learning occurs when the students and facilitators are separated in terms of geographical location and time.

1.3.3 Communication

There is communication from the course facilitators to the students and from the students to the course facilitator. Such communication sustains the teaching and learning process, and reduces the pedagogical distance between students and course facilitators. Technology is often utilised to enhance communication.

1.3.4 Openness

ODEL is an open educational delivery system that enhances access to education, without the restrictions of entry points, age, gender, disability, affordability, among many other hindrances. Openness includes admission, assessment, cost, teaching and learning material, and learning activities.

1.3.5 Flexibility

ODEL is associated with flexibility regarding entry routes, teaching and assessment approaches. The epitome of flexibility is that learning is not restricted to some physical space and regulated timetable, but it can happen anywhere and at any time.

1.4 Technology mediation

The availability of technology has revolutionised ODeL, resulting in its evolving to ODeL. Different technologies are utilised to enhance distance education delivery, and teaching and learning now happens entirely online, synchronously or asynchronously. This has marked a huge departure from the traditional print-based approaches.



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 2:

In your view, is ODeL truly open?

1.5 Critique on aspects of ODeL definitions

Bates' (2019) view that open, distance, flexible and online learning are rarely found in their purest forms, is tenable because open, distance and e-learning cannot be truly open in terms of open admission. Cronin (2017) states that open admission alludes to eliminating entry requirements for institution-based learning and, hence, maintains the true definition of an "open university". However, it is impossible to eliminate entry qualifications into higher education programmes. Such elimination would be risky as universities would end up admitting students who may not cope with the academic requirements of the different courses. A certain degree of literacy and numeracy is mandatory in entry requirements. It is important to note that such requirements should not be too stringent so that potential students would be denied access to higher education. Openness in ODeL is evidenced in the removal of hindrances to access to learning (UNISA, 2018). The convenience and flexibility of ODeL have enabled millions of people to access higher education, which would

have been impossible without ODeL (Sharma, Kawachi & Bozkurt, 2019). In South Africa, many people study at ODeL institutions, such as the University of South Africa, because of the openness that ODeL provides. Openness and flexibility, in terms of entry requirements in ODeL, can be seen when institutions may use flexible entry routes for students or even consider the recognition of prior learning.

Potential students may use prior learning and work experience as entry requirements if they do not meet the minimum entry requirements, proving the openness of entry qualifications to ODeL programmes. In South Africa (or other countries with similar contexts), access to education was not equal and ODeL provides an opportunity for those groups of people with little or no prior access to education before, to be included in the education that ODeL systems provide. According to Jain (2013), cited Rupande and Nyenya (2014: 24), the difference between ODeL and the conventional education system is that “ODeL provides adequate flexibility in terms of “entry” and “exit” points to a student”. The students’ flexibility of entry and exit points to the element of openness. Openness, in terms of entry requirements, does not mean that there are no basic requirements for access. To successfully study for a university qualification, a certain level of numeracy and literacy is required. ODeL institutions in South Africa set entry requirements for the different programmes, so there are expectations of some form of academic requirements for entry into the programmes.

An important issue of the openness of open and distance learning is in its ability to increase access to higher education for students who, because of various factors, may not be able to access it if it were only provided in the full-time conventional mode. Providing educational opportunities to people who experience different hindrances is important for empowerment. Bordoloi (2018: 25) asserts that:

Providing opportunities for education to the people also means that a country can protect them against all sorts of discrimination, provide them with the required opportunities, and empower them in every aspect of life in the true sense.

Indeed, as observed above, openness and flexibility become important attributes of ODeL, as it ensures increased access. However, this openness is not found in its “purest” form. Students have to pay for their education and some may not afford to pay, although Rupande and Nyenya (2014) contend that ODeL is both highly inclusive and affordable. Openness and flexibility are compromised whenever education provision is tied to some costs. On the other hand, ODeL students are generally working adults and have to multi-task and aggregate, and some may fail to give adequate attention to their studies as independent students and may end up abandoning their studies. ODeL programmes have high dropout rates (Fozdar, Kumar & Kannan, 2006).

ODeL can be deemed open and flexible due to technologies employed to enhance teaching and learning processes, and communication. Turow (2016) observes that various technological tools are used for delivering ODeL, including radio, television, computers, mobile devices and satellite services. Selvaras (2019) further points out that technology is vital in the modern world, even in education and especially in ODeL, where the student is physically separated from the facilitator. Teaching and learning processes are, thus, not fixed in the four walls of the classrooms, hence the flexibility and openness. This aligns with

the popular view of ODeL as having the ability to ensure that students learn anywhere, anytime and at their own pace. The issue of flexibility is consistent with the view that open and distance learning (ODeL) delivers students from the limitations of time and place, and offers flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of students (UNESCO, 2002: 7). However, this openness and flexibility, in terms of technology use, do not come in the purest form. Some students may not have access to the required technological devices and internet connectivity, negatively affecting their learning. In some instances, lecturers and tutors may be unable to utilise available technologies and learning platforms. In South African higher education, the Covid-19 pandemic exposed serious inequalities in society, making online learning a serious challenge to students from some sections of society.



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 3:

In your opinion, is ODeL a flexible education delivery system?

1.6 Conclusion

There are numerous definitions of and perspectives on ODeL. However, some issues are common in the definitions of ODeL, including the separation of the student and the course facilitator, communication, openness and flexibility. There are also contentious issues in the definition of ODeL, as issues such as openness and flexibility may be contested.

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UNIT 2 OPENNESS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODeL)

2.1 Introduction

Discussions around open and distance e-learning (ODeL) are often associated with the concepts of openness and flexibility. This unit's purpose is to explore the issue of openness in ODeL. Understanding what openness in ODeL entails and ascertaining if ODeL systems are truly open are essential. Furthermore, it is vital to explore issues that promote or hinder openness in ODeL.

2.2 The concept of openness in ODeL

Open and distance learning systems are known for their remarked differences from conventional face-to-face education systems. Openness is a feature of ODeL systems, which makes the system responsive to the needs of many who seek to acquire education through an alternative system, yet this feature is highly debated and contested. As noted by Maphosa and Bhebhe (2020), the concept of “openness” in ODeL is very fluid, often misunderstood and, therefore, it is always important to establish the nature and extent of openness in ODeL. Similarly, Naidu (2017) notes that while open access to learning opportunities makes ODeL attractive, there is a need to critique the openness associated with the system.

2.3 Aspects of openness in ODeL

Openness in ODeL should be viewed from the different aspects of the ODeL system. The issue of openness in ODeL is summarised in the figure below.

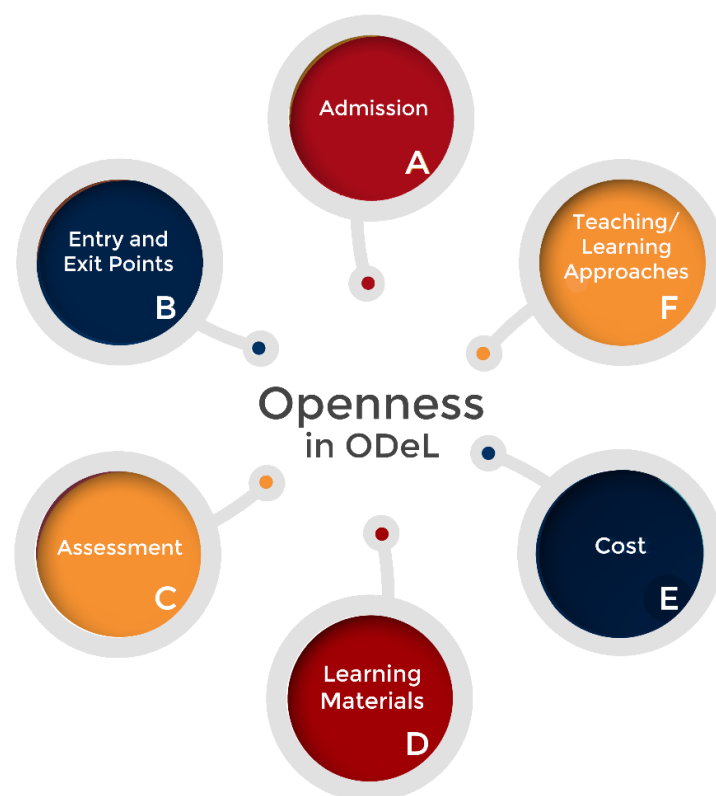


Figure 2: Aspects of openness in ODeL

2.3.1 Admission

Open and distance learning (ODEL) systems should not restrict student admission into programme study. Such restriction is associated with conventional systems of education, which normally restrict the number of admitted students due to space constraints. Openness in student admission, in ODeL programmes, involves abolishing those admission requirements (Harris, 1987). However, it is not always possible for ODeL systems to completely abolish entry requirements into programmes. There is always a need to have some entry requirements, though such requirements may not be as rigid as those for conventional systems. An ODeL system may consider flexible and alternative entry routes, such as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). RPL considers the applicant's work experience and any other formally and informally acquired professional development qualifications as requirements for entry into programmes of study (Garnett & Cavate, 2015). Openness, in terms of admission, therefore, necessitates that entry into ODeL programmes is flexible, to accommodate potential students.

2.3.2 Teaching and learning approaches

The openness of teaching and learning approaches in ODeL is associated with the flexibility of the approaches. As noted by Sharma, Kawachi and Bozkurt (2019) in ODeL, learning can occur at any time and anywhere, enhancing openness. To this end, ODeL addresses the rigidity associated with teaching and learning in the conventional face-to-face set-up, where this is restricted to the classroom and fixed timetables. ODeL systems now embrace digital technology to enhance teaching and learning. Online learning allows students to access learning materials and engage in learning activities synchronously and asynchronously (Anderton, Vitali, Blackmore & Bakeberg, 2021). However, while technology has significantly contributed to the openness of teaching and learning, ODeL has issues relating to digital technology that works against the openness. Students should have access to the required technology, which may not always be the case in developing contexts. Students and facilitators should be competent in using digital technologies in pedagogically sound ways. The use of digital technologies has resulted in the digital divide, negating ODeL systems' openness.

2.3.3 Cost

ODeL systems are supposed to significantly reduce the cost of education, because students do not need to stay on campus or travel to campus every day for classes. According to Bates (2000: 127), the cost of providing online student-teacher and student-student interaction could be lower than the cost for conventional face-to-face support, since students interact with the pre-prepared multimedia material in online learning. However, the cost issue is contested, since the digital technology utilised in ODeL comes at a cost. The students should possess the required digital devices, which are costly, and there is also a need for reliable internet connectivity – costs that students have to bear.

2.3.4 Learning materials

The student's learning material required in ODeL is accessible in different multimedia formats, hence the openness. The student does not have to rely on the shelves of a physical library to access learning resources, but can access material on the go through digital devices with internet connectivity. The issue of Open Educational Resources (OER) makes

the availability of learning materials open to ODeL students. OER “is the freedom to share knowledge, and that knowledge should be legally, socially, and technologically open” (Torres, 2013: 82). The challenge with accessing OER, however, is with the student’s possession of the appropriate devices and internet connectivity, which may negatively affect their access to the free materials available over the internet.

2.3.5 Assessment

ODeL systems should embrace different forms and ways of assessment to enhance openness. As Maphosa and Bhebhe (2020) noted, openness in ODeL should be concerned with adopting and utilising new and diverse forms of assessment, focusing on understanding student performance, enhancing the learning process and not merely judging students. Types of assessment, such as self and peer assessment, should be embraced as they assist in developing reflective and critical thinking skills in students and boosting their self-confidence in learning (Ndoye, 2017). There is also a need for ODeL systems to utilise portfolio and e-portfolio assessments as evidence-based types of assessment that empower students in the learning process (Makokotlela, 2020).

2.3.6 Entry and exit points

Students learning through the ODeL system should be free to enter and exit learning programmes. Such flexibility is consistent with openness in ODeL. Abude (2021) introduced a modular approach to distance learning, which allows students to progress with learning without any challenges. This is an example of how learning in the distance education context can have flexible learning methods through multiple entry and exit routes.

2.4 Conclusion

While ODeL systems are renowned for their flexibility and openness, there is a need to fully integrate the concept of openness. Such an integration allows distance education scholars to fully understand the concept of openness and discuss contentious issues around openness in ODeL. The ODeL systems’ features of openness and flexibility may not always present themselves in the purest forms, due to multiple factors affecting ODeL.



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 4:

What is your understanding of openness in ODeL systems?



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 5:

In your opinion, are ODeL systems truly open? Give specific examples as you motivate your answer.

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UNIT 3 TEACHING AND LEARNING THEORIES AND PRACTICES IN ODeL

3.1 Introduction

Learning and acquiring knowledge are significant activities throughout our lives. Researchers and psychologists have suggested different theories to establish how and why we learn. The following section will examine some of online and distance education's most prevalent learning theories. When you first delve into them, it is easy to start comparing and feel pressured to choose among the different learning theories. However, they all have significant aspects that can be incorporated and used in learning environments. The most student-friendly environment can be created by using and combining different theories and principles to deliver the content.

3.2 What are learning theories?

Firstly, learning theories are perceived as lenses that give us a diversified approach to acquiring knowledge, in addition to explaining how students learn. When students learn, the following are in sync: the student's social groups, environment and cognitive processes (Siemens, 2005).

Secondly, one can compare a learning theory with a tool used in identifying and solving a problem in learning. Furthermore, a learning theory makes us understand how people learn and acquire knowledge, since theories describe the conditions and processes through which learning occurs.

Thirdly, the theories provide a framework that can be used to develop instruction sessions.

Lastly, these theories are like x-rays, because they reveal the processes people engage in when interpreting and integrating information into their mental models to become new knowledge (Torraco, 1997; Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

Anderson and Dron (2011) categorise learning theories for distance education into three distinct generations: the cognitive-behaviourist, the social-constructivist and the connectivist.

Sharma, Kawachi and Bozkurt (2019: 267) assert the interconnection between DE and ODeL, since they are "interdisciplinary in nature and subject to constant changes". Therefore, rather than sticking to a fixed theoretical approach, facilitators should benefit from different theoretical approaches to enrich their views where a philosophy of openness, in general, guides them. On the other hand, shifting to an online delivery mode impacts on education quality and authenticity. Owing to this, Sahu (2020) advises that once the quality issue becomes debatable, "new learning theories are bound to be born". In addition, Andrews (2011) highlights the influence of the social-cultural context and the need for facilitators and students to adapt within the patterns of interaction and learning. In this regard, theories also change the context and length of interaction. It is imperative to look at transformative pedagogies to decolonise learning spaces, since e-learning may affect epistemic concerns.

Facilitators have a variety of theories at their disposal and a fit-for-context theory or theories is of utmost importance. Some of these theories are discussed next.



LEARNING THEORIES IN eLEARNING:

Before reading the text below, feel free to listen to the following video:

 [Learning theories in eLearning.mp4](#)



3.3 Behaviourism

Behaviourism can be seen as a learning theory based on a stimulus-response principle. Behaviour changes due to external stimuli are believed to occur when learning occurs. The theory ignores the mental processes of learning and focuses solely on the environment in which learning is facilitated. Therefore, the educator must create the learning environment and stimuli (Woollard, 2010).

The student passively receives information from the educator, who shapes the student's behaviour/learning through positive and negative reinforcement. Learning occurs when unwanted behaviour is removed and the desired responses are increased to confirm that the learning objectives have been mastered (Harasim, 2017).

Behaviourism may not be the appropriate approach for e-learning activities requiring users to develop higher-order skills, such as decision-making or problem-solving through analysing, synthesising or evaluating the information presented (Keramida, 2015). Although the attention of behaviourism may not be to observe what is going on in a student's mind during learning activities, it does not mean that it refutes cognition.

In e-learning, behaviourism divides the curriculum into manageable chunks (Weegar & Pacis, 2012), which enables conditioning through feedback on the accomplishment (Keramida, 2015) of measurable learning outcomes and relating those measurements to basic reward systems.

3.4 Cognitivism

Cognitivism concentrates on the internal mental processes that underpin learning. This theory views the student as an information processor (like a computer). It focuses on uncovering the “black box” of the student’s mind to be able to understand how learning takes place. In addition, cognitivism is concerned with how students can be supported in making schemata changes (Bates, 2019).

Learning happens internally and the role of the educator is to help students remember and recall new information. Just as in a physical classroom, students learn by interacting with the content and others online (Sattar, 2017). This can be difficult to facilitate when students learn at their own pace. Although critics argue that the theory’s teaching techniques might be obsolete for e-learning, one needs to remember that how people absorb, make sense of and remember information stays the same. Therefore, e-learning can create opportunities to use technology to improve learning (Sattar, 2017).

New learning technologies and online learning environments can parallel a face-to-face setting, particularly when the e-learning is facilitator-led and offers real-time online classes. Self-regulation is one of the essential features of cognitive learning that applies to distance learning. The higher a student’s self-efficacy and motivation to study, the higher their chances are of successfully meeting the outcomes of the online curriculum (Sattar, 2017).

3.5 Constructivism

Constructivism emerged in the information age, characterised by technological advancements and the prioritisation of knowledge. Constructivism is a student-centred learning process, where knowledge is constructed from previous knowledge and experiences, rather than those just acquired. The student actively contributes to the learning process, while the educator facilitates a learning environment that offers opportunities to engage with significant problems and challenges, to build on existing knowledge (Amineh & Asl, 2015).

Three main types of constructivism exist, namely, cognitive constructivism, social constructivism, and radical constructivism. Cognitive constructivism is based on the work of Jean Piaget and focuses on the idea that knowledge is constructed through the student’s active involvement in the learning process. Social constructivism is based on the work of John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky and emphasises the importance of the social environment in the construction of knowledge. Radical constructivism, developed by Ernst von Glasersfeld, emphasises that knowledge is a subjective construction based on the individual’s experience.

A solid sense of community is vital in constructivist e-learning, where student interaction is essential for constructing new knowledge. However, utilising a learning theory that relies on shared meaning-making can be difficult when delivered through an online learning environment (Harasim, 2017).

The student is not a blank slate, therefore, constructivism uses “real-world” examples, reasoning, different viewpoints, interaction and insight, and guides students in learning (Ertmer & Newby, 1993, as cited in Edmunson, 2013).

Synchronous and asynchronous communication technology within LMSs, e-mails, podcasts, vodcasts, instant messaging and phone calls are used to counterbalance the distance aspect of e-learning and forms an interconnected and collaborative online classroom. The collaboration can be achieved and managed using online discussion forums, WebQuests and jigsaw groups (Smith, 2019).

3.6 Connectivism

The main idea of this theory is that students need to connect new knowledge to existing knowledge, to form complex networks of understanding. Connectivism is rooted in the premise that we learn and make conclusions based on rapidly gaining further information in an interconnected world (Ritter, 2014). Collective connections result in new knowledge that no one can control, although everyone can access it to conclude the chaotic and interconnected information flow (Bates, 2019).

According to the theory, students must steer their learning to form suitable links between existing understanding nodes. However, facilitating connections is only part of the solution. Learning has shifted away from an internal process, and students are now required to arrange and make correct associations between different sources of information, using meta-learning skills (Siemens, 2004).

Internet technologies allow students to access and share information through the World Wide Web, using channels such as YouTube, wikis, browsers, social media and other communication technologies. According to Siemens (2004, as cited in Bates, 2016), “The pipe is more important than the content within the pipe.” Connectivism is, thus, not what you know, but knowing where to find what you are searching for.

Connectivism sees the lecturer as a provider of the learning environment. Kizito (2016) further proposes that each student should be supported and guided to create, develop and utilise their network connections through learning experiences and by directing them to appropriate resources, to inspire continuous learning in this learning environment.

Providing access to education and training that positively impacts students’ lives ensures employment relevance, and adaptable teaching and learning methodologies that suit diverse students. Due to the distance delivery modes, students are expected to take responsibility for their learning. Therefore, the mode of instruction is self-paced, where students are expected to work through the course materials independently using the learning content, activities or assessments and discussion forums. Additionally, asynchronous learning activities allow students to spend time on different topics, as per their interests or learning needs.

To ensure that students progress and sustain a personal learning network, they are supported by lecturers, non-human mechanisms, and each other, through the four phases of interaction:

- **Operational interaction phase:** Students learn using social media, social networks, wikis, YouTube, and blogs.
- **Wayfinding phase:** By interacting with the content, other students and online sources, students learn to navigate the chaotic networking landscape to identify accurate and reliable sources of information.
- **Sensemaking phase:** During this phase, a profound interaction occurs among students, content and resources, where students sort, reflect, debate and create a collective meaning and understanding of the collected data.
- **Innovative interaction phase:** At this stage, students can use reasoning skills to participate in profound discussions, while forming connections between concepts and theories (Kizito, 2016).

Even though technological pedagogy is still in its early stages, we can see how connectivism can change the acceptance of online learning activities in the digital age. At the tip of their fingers, students have a world of information and connections to acquire knowledge from human and non-human sources. Moreover, students are no longer only reliant on the information given to them by the lecturer. Therefore, institutions should adopt the view of technological inclusion in designing and developing learning environments. Connectivism enhances learning environments by making content relevant, practical and aligned to each student's needs, while encouraging mental and intellectual stimulation (Kizito, 2016).

3.7 Collaborativism

Collaborativism (earlier known as online collaborative learning) is a way of constructivist teaching focusing on facilitator-led online group learning. In collaborativism, students are encouraged to solve problems collaboratively through discourse, instead of merely memorising correct answers. The three phases of knowledge construction through the discourse in a class include:

- idea generation (brainstorming)
- idea organisation (analysing)
- intellectual convergence (conclusion) (David, 2015).

Discussion forums are, thus, not a supplement to teaching materials but rather the main factor of the teaching process. OCL promotes learning through discussions at a higher level than in traditional classrooms and develops critical and analytical thinking, and evaluation (David, 2015).

The educator plays a crucial role as a facilitator and member of the knowledge community under study. Therefore, for OCL to be successful, facilitators must be highly skilled subject matter experts to facilitate learning (David, 2015).

Students are stimulated and encouraged to collectively gain the knowledge needed to solve problems, rather than just being able to narrate what they think the correct answer is. The theory defines learning as a necessary conceptual change in constructing knowledge.

However, the theory is not an inquiry or problem-based learning method and consequently, is less successful in science and engineering (Harasim, 2017).

Table 1: A summary of learning theories

Learning Theories and Founders	Characteristic	Key components	Instructor role	Student role
Behaviourism Ivan Pavlov, John Watson, Burrhus Skinner	Learning through observable behaviours, not mental processes.	Classical/Operant conditioning Positive/Negative reinforcement stimulus and response	Teacher-centred. The facilitator shapes the student's behaviour/learning through positive and negative reinforcement.	The student is passively receiving information.
Cognitivism Jerome Bruner, Albert Bandura	Learning through internal mental processes.	Uncovering the "black box" of the student's mind to understand how learning takes place.	Teacher-centred. The facilitator guides the problem-solving process; allows students to use their own mental capacities to find solutions.	The student actively participates in the process and interacts with the content and others in the learning environment.
Constructivism Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget	Learning is active and builds up on existing knowledge and experiences. Knowledge is socially constructed.	Values the process more than the result. Zone of proximal development (ZPD)	The facilitator designs learning objectives.	Student-centred. The student is the subject of learning; student interaction is essential for constructing new knowledge.
Connectivism George Siemens, Stephen Downes	Knowledge is actuated when a student connects to and feeds information into a learning community.	Connectivism knows where to find relevant information: inside (such as the facilitator and fellow students) and/or outside humans (such as the WWW).	The facilitator provides the learning environment. The construction of knowledge depends on the facilitator's expertise plus the student's ability to make appropriate connections.	Student-centred. Connectivism promotes group collaboration and discussion, allowing for different viewpoints and perspectives.
Collaborativism Linda Harasim	Students are encouraged to construct knowledge and solve problems collaboratively through discourse, instead of merely memorising correct answers.	The three phases of knowledge construction through the discourse in a class include idea generation (brainstorming), idea organisation (analyse) and intellectual convergence (conclusion).	The facilitator must be highly skilled as he/she plays a crucial role as a facilitator and member of the knowledge community.	Student-centred. Students become the agent of learning: they are stimulated and encouraged to collectively gain the knowledge needed to solve problems, rather than just being able to narrate what they think is the correct answer.

3.8 Conclusion

Learning theories, indeed, will always influence teaching and learning, which will change or adapt as the environment and related needs change. So, to keep students engaged, facilitators need to move with the times and create theories to match trending technology

and the new environment to motivate students. Adapting old theories will not be relevant, because the premises on which those models were built have changed significantly. Theories that speak to the current students and their environment must be created. The post Covid-19 reality will lead to new learning theories underpinning teaching and learning, because of the need to adapt to the virtual environment.



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 6:

Which learning theories have been created post Covid-19 and how do you think they relate to the current learning environment?



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 7:

In South Africa, when we use technology in the classroom, we must be wary of our sociocultural context and its influence on technology. Discuss which theory or theories you will adopt to match the sociocultural context without reducing the quality of learning.

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UNIT 4 ONLINE PRESENCE IN ODeL

4.1 Introduction

In ODeL environments, students can easily feel isolated and demotivated, because they do not have physical contact with fellow students. For this reason, research has emphasised the importance of establishing a learning community. This community is necessary to create, negotiate and confirm meaning, and is essential for achieving effective critical thinking. Swan, Garrison and Richardson (2009) argue that building community is particularly important in online teaching and learning, because neither community nor inquiry can be taken for granted. While the construction of meaning is possible, because of individual critical reflection, ideas are built and knowledge is constructed through collaboration, dialogue and interaction within a critical community of inquiry.

Garrison, Archer and Anderson (2000) developed the Community of Inquiry framework, a process model for use in ODeL environments and will be discussed next.

4.2 The Community of Inquiry framework

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is a dynamic model, having the needed core elements to develop a community of inquiry in any online education environment. These core elements, which should be seen as multidimensional and interdependent, are cognitive, social and teaching presence (Garrison, Archer & Anderson, 2000), and can be presented as follows:

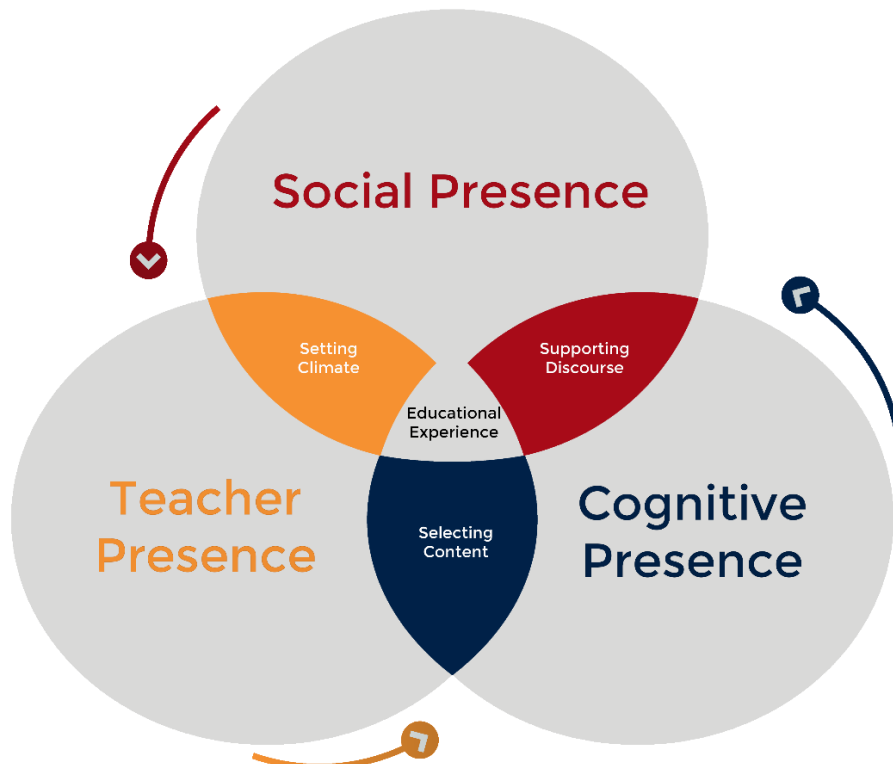


Figure 3: The Community of Inquiry Framework

(Source: pressbooks.com – an online book-publishing platform that makes educational resources free and accessible. This image can be adapted and customised).

4.2.1 Cognitive presence

In the Col framework, cognitive presence refers to how students construct and confirm meaning through exploration, application, reflection, feedback and discussion (Boston et al., 2009). It involves deep engagement with the learning material, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. For this reason, this presence can be seen as the process of collaboratively constructing meaning and understanding in a sustainable community of inquiry. Cognitive presence is fundamental to learning, as it concerns the extent to which students can construct and confirm meaning through reflection and discourse. This type of presence is essential for students to develop higher-level critical thinking skills and gain a better understanding of the material. Cognitive presence is typically facilitated by activities such as group discussions, debates, online conversations and tools such as forums, wikis and blogs. These activities and tools allow students to engage in meaningful dialogue, allowing them to exchange ideas, develop and refine their knowledge, and come to a better understanding of the material. Additionally, cognitive presence can be enhanced by providing a supportive learning environment, and promoting active and reflective learning.

Below is a list of possible ways to promote cognitive presence:

- **Design authentic learning activities:** Use authentic learning activities that simulate real-world problems and require students to apply knowledge in context. This can help to promote higher-order thinking skills and engage students in meaningful learning experiences.
- **Encourage critical thinking:** Encourage students to think critically by asking open-ended questions and challenging them to analyse and evaluate information. Provide feedback, encouraging students to reflect on their thinking and consider alternative perspectives.
- **Facilitate discourse:** Facilitate online discussions and collaborative activities promoting dialogue and exchanging ideas among students. Encourage students to share their ideas and challenge each other's thinking.
- **Provide timely and meaningful feedback:** Provide timely and meaningful feedback on assignments, discussions and other activities, to help students reflect on their learning and improve their performance.
- **Use multimedia** such as videos, animations and simulations, to help students visualise complex concepts and processes. This can help to promote a deeper understanding of the course content.
- **Promote metacognitive awareness:** Encourage students to reflect on their personal learning processes and develop metacognitive awareness. This can be done through self-assessment activities, reflection prompts and metacognitive feedback.

4.2.2 Social presence

Social presence is the degree to which students in ODeL feel connected and is the most researched presence (Swan et al., 2009). This presence creates a sense of belonging and allows for open communication and effective expression. Moore (2016) refers to the concept of making personal connections between students, and between students and lecturers, while Swan et al. (2009) describe social presence as purposeful communication in a trusting

environment. The social presence of facilitators shows that they are real people rather than just anonymous entities behind a computer screen. Social presence profoundly influences both students' and facilitators' accounts of their online experiences. Promoting social presence in online learning can lead to improved learning outcomes, greater engagement, and higher levels of satisfaction and wellness among students. To promote social presence, online facilitators can use strategies such as welcome letters, personalised introductions, timely e-mail responses and collaborative tools. Also, below is a list of more ways to promote social presence:

- **Create opportunities for social interaction:** Encourage students to interact with each other through discussion forums, online chat or other online tools that facilitate social interaction.
- **Use video conferencing:** Video conferencing allows students to see and hear each other, which can help to establish a sense of presence and connection. Facilitators can use video conferencing for live lectures.
- **Foster a sense of community:** Encourage students to share their experiences, interests and perspectives. Facilitators can create online communities where students can connect and build relationships.
- **Use multimedia:** Incorporate videos, audio recordings and other multimedia into your online course content to make the learning experience more engaging and interactive.
- **Provide timely feedback:** Provide feedback to students on time to keep them engaged and motivated. This can be done through online discussions, assignments, quizzes or other interactive activities.
- **Encourage peer review:** Encourage students to review and provide feedback on each other's work. This can help build a sense of community and promote student social interaction.
- **MODEL social presence:** Facilitators should model social presence by being responsive to students, participating in online discussions, and providing feedback in a supportive and constructive manner. This can help to create a positive learning environment that fosters social presence.

4.2.3 Teaching presence

Teaching presence can be described as the online environments design, facilitation and direct instruction. The design includes activities such as determining the curriculum, while facilitation refers to setting the course climate and acknowledging course contributions. It involves creating a supportive and engaging learning environment, and actively engaging with students to promote learning and ensure that learning objectives are achieved. In other words, teaching presence is the ability of facilitators to create and maintain a sense of community and support for students in online learning environments. Teaching presence also involves direct instruction, which refers to presenting content, asking questions and contributing to online discussions (Van den Berg, 2022). For this reason, this "presence" emphasises the shared responsibility of facilitators and students, where the latter can be facilitators themselves. Additionally, teaching presence is achieved by supporting and guiding students throughout the course, helping them stay motivated and engaged in learning.

The following activities can assist in promoting teaching presence:

- **Set clear learning objectives:** Facilitators should set clear learning objectives and communicate them effectively to students. This helps students understand what they are expected to learn and how their progress will be assessed.
- **Provide regular feedback:** Facilitators should provide regular feedback to students on their progress and performance. This helps students stay on track and improve their learning outcomes.
- **Encourage interaction:** Facilitators should encourage interaction among students, and between students and the facilitator. This helps to build a sense of community and support among students.
- **Use multimedia resources:** Facilitators can use multimedia resources such as videos, podcasts and animations to explain complex concepts and engage students in learning.
- **Use discussion forums:** Facilitators can use discussion forums to promote interaction among students, and between students and the facilitator. This helps to facilitate collaborative learning and peer-to-peer learning.
- **Provide timely support:** Facilitators should provide timely support to students struggling with the course content. This can be done through one-on-one sessions, online tutorials or group discussions.

4.3 Conclusion

Online presence is important in education, because it can help to create an engaging and interactive learning experience for students. It also helps create a sense of community, which is essential for effective collaboration. Furthermore, having an online presence allows educators to reach a broader audience, leading to better learning outcomes. Online presence is critical for any effective educational experience and the Col framework has, at its heart, the creation of the different kinds of presences necessary for creating such an experience. A balance between the cognitive, social and teaching presence is needed for an effective learning experience in an ODeL environment. For academic and conceptual development, teaching and learning have to be well-organised and the facilitator needs to provide the needed support to develop new knowledge.



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 8:

Having read the information on online presence in ODeL (also refer to additional sources for more information), do you regard one of these presences as more important than the others? Why?



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 9:

In practice, what do you think a facilitator can do to create a community of practice at the beginning of a new course or module?

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UNIT 5 MANAGING TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT IN ODeL

5.1 Introduction

In contemporary times, open distance learning (ODeL) has enabled the exploration of 21st century skills such as collaboration, critical thinking and knowledge sharing between both facilitators and students. Besides, ODeL has provided a useful avenue for addressing key global challenges to accessing and funding education. However, changes in the ODeL ecosystem, such as funding and leadership regimes, advanced technology, economic downturns resulting from pandemics and changes in student profiles have resulted in questioning, reshaping, and redefining teaching, learning and assessment in ODeL. Moreover, challenges associated with teaching, learning and assessments constitute barriers that threaten the smooth operation of ODeL, especially in developing economies. As teaching and learning keep evolving in the ODeL space, assessments are impacted by formats, strategies and timing. It is, therefore, worth mentioning that the old notion behind assessment has shifted. As Chaudhary and Dey (2013) postulate, assessment in recent times is not only used for grading and certification, but is intrinsically linked with students' skill development.

In the spirit of the above, Herrington, Reeves and Oliver (2010) developed the authentic learning design framework demonstrating the intersections between tasks, supports and resources. The model is discussed further in the following section.

5.2 The extended authentic learning framework

The authentic learning design framework was developed by Herrington et al. in 2010. Though it proved formidable, it was expanded to include learning objectives and identify course elements that must be located in a secure environment (for confidentiality reasons) (Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2014). In the extended authentic learning framework, instructors are urged to ensure that tasks or assessments are congruent with learning objectives. The motivation behind this is that students' assignments should encourage them to think and act like the professionals they anticipate to be in the future and not only learn to pass assessments. Herrington et al. (2014) further assert that an engaging and authentic learning environment situates learning in the context of future use and enables students to develop vital knowledge that blends theory with real-world situations. The expanded framework also incorporated general guidelines for developing and delivering academic programmes (see the model below). In essence, the expanded framework provides a holistic approach to providing authentic learning experiences to students. It prepares them not only for assessments but, ultimately, for them to be useful to society and the world of work.

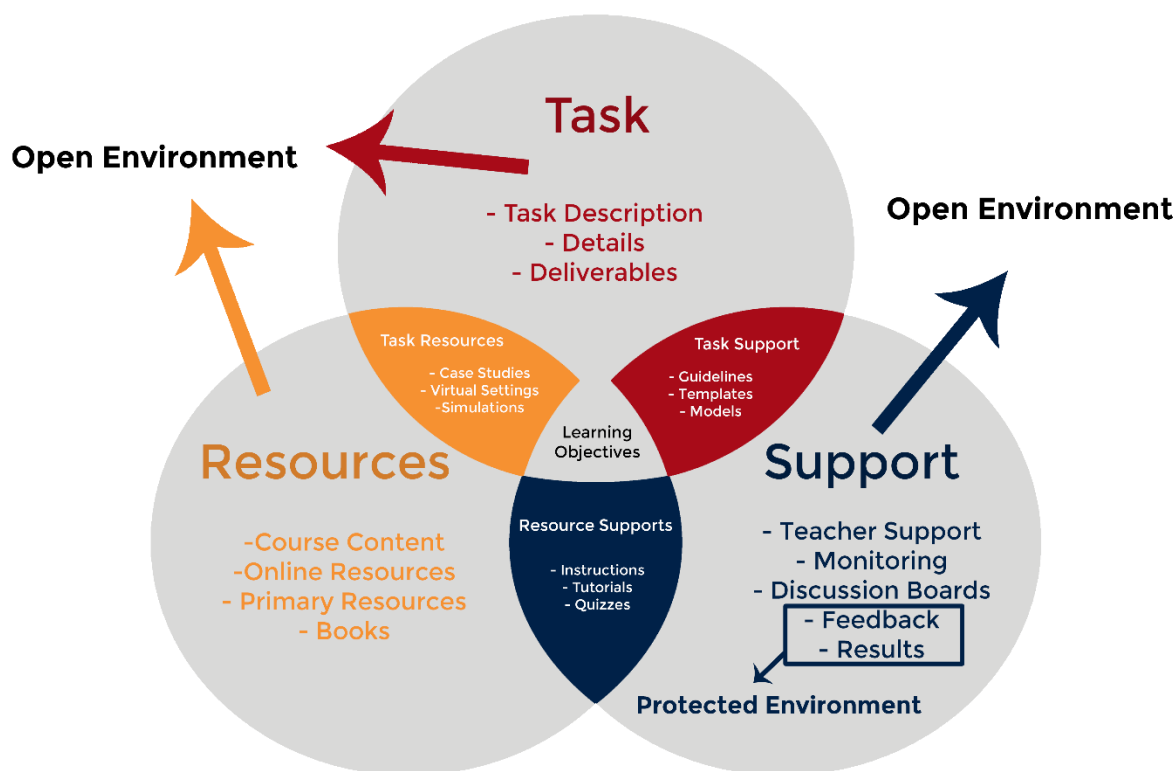


Figure 4: An extended authentic learning design framework

Source: Herrington et al., 2010. *A guide to authentic e-learning*

5.2.1 Task resources

Parker et al. (2013) explain that existing studies have highlighted the need to support real work and tasks with technology. This invariably calls for access to the internet and the huge collection of free educational resources it presents, to increase the quality of learning in ODeL environments. The authors highlight case studies, virtual settings and simulations as instrumental in providing ODeL teaching, learning and assessment resources.

5.2.2 Task supports

Guidance is touted as the most important authentic learning feature, whilst game interaction serves as a crucial design element that affects how learning outcomes are believed to have been achieved (Safiena & Goh, 2022). In this light, the task-supporting elements of guidance and game interaction should be the fulcrum around which ODeL's teaching, learning and assessments evolve. This can be attained when ODeL institutions provide the needed guidance, which could be presented as guidelines, templates and mODELs for instructors and students.

5.2.3 Resource supports

Lastly, the amalgamation of various resources in the ODeL environment, as depicted by the model, could aid instructors in making resources readily available to students. With this in

place, instructors and ODeL institutions are better positioned to support and monitor teaching, learning and assessments. Thus, students are given substantial instructions on how to go about their tasks and they are offered tutorials better to understand the content, as well as tasks and quizzes. In this way, the students are adequately prepared and offered the necessary guidance throughout their studies and during assessments. Thus, evaluation of teaching, learning and assessments can be effectively implemented.

5.3 Conclusion

Managing teaching, learning and assessment are key activities interconnected in ODeL environments. However, for learning objectives to be met, there is a need for tasks, supports and resources to be directly aligned, to acquire skills relevant to real-world situations. These are imperatives in ODeL, given the myriad of factors that necessitate rapid changes in processes and activities in ODeL environments. ODeL institutions stand to provide their students with the best teaching, learning and assessment experiences through its openness, technology integration and philosophy, which hinges on humanism. The key elements and intersections provided in Herrington et al.'s (2010) authentic learning design framework also provides a blueprint for managing teaching, learning and assessment in ODeL.



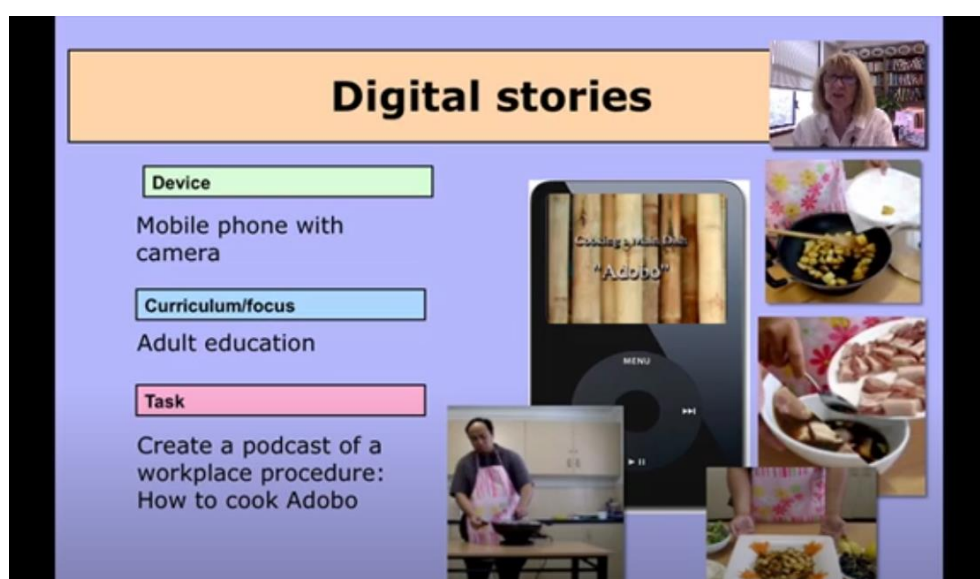
REFLECTION ACTIVITY 10:

Evaluate the management of teaching, learning and assessment in your institution, and proffer strategies for ODeL institutions to manage these important processes more efficiently.



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 11:

Watch the video to reflect on authentic learning and collaboration at your institution: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=coY91ZncCsY&t=139s>



Recommend ways your institution's management can enhance the practicality of teaching, learning and assessment.

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UNIT 6 MANAGING STUDENT SUPPORT IN ODeL

6.1 Introduction

Studying at a distance can be challenging without any support from the institution. Thus, student support is important to students' success in the ODeL environment. Student throughput is often dependent on the effective support of students. Ensuring that all student support systems work together to create a learning community that enables our students to succeed is essential. During the earlier phases of distance learning, when correspondence was the main communication channel, the interaction and support a student received were limited to study material and, maybe later, some audio and video material. With the advent of the internet and mODELs, such as e-learning, the interaction between lecturers and students, the availability of tutors and other support systems have become essential in the learning process. Moreover, student-to-student interaction has enabled more effective learning.

6.2 Student support in ODeL

Effective student support services are an important means of enabling students to cope with the academic and personal pressures of distance learning. Tait (2000) identified two main factors determining the direction of open and distance learning (ODeL) development, and the way student support is delivered: the revolution of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) and the marketisation of education. The ICT revolution has provided many options for ODeL institutions in offering student support, regardless of time and place, through virtual environments. In the meantime, the marketisation of education has shifted the old perspective on how to deal with students in ODeL into a new perspective as a "customer" (Simpson, 2013; Bates, 2015). Admitting a customer culture in ODeL inevitably leads to speeding up the delivery of student support services.

Tait (2000) describes three primary interdependent functions of student support in ODeL programmes:

- **Cognitive functions:** all learning support services through various media, such as delivering high-quality learning materials, learning resources and timely feedback on students' assignments.
- **Affective functions:** pivotal in providing a supportive environment in enhancing students' motivation, self-commitment, self-esteem and self-efficacy.
- **Systemic functions:** establishing administrative processes and information management, i.e., a friendly administrative process for students, and effective and transparent information management systems.

The three primary functions should be supported by the transformation of institutional attitudes that involves all staff, at all levels, to set retention goals and develop the strategies, motivators and rewards to achieve them. Empowering institutional change requires considerable energy and is linked to institutional learning and feedback, planning processes, resources, willingness to challenge entrenched attitudes and rewards for individual endeavour (Johnston & Simpson, 2006; Dron & Anderson, 2014).

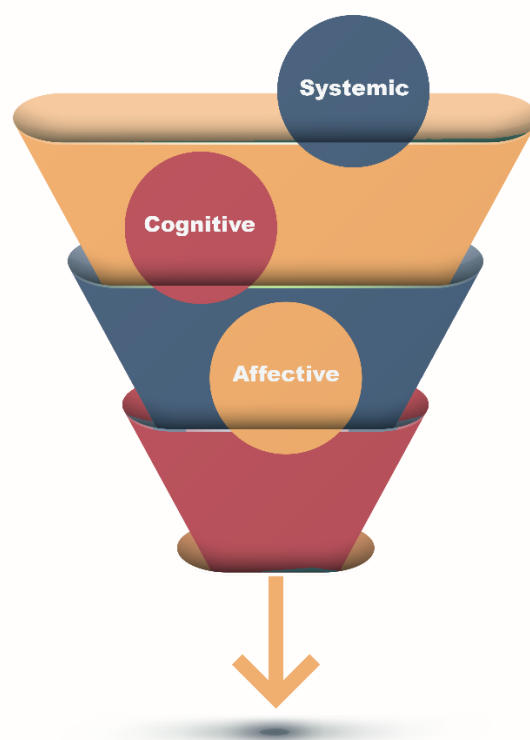


Figure 5: Three independent functions of student support in ODeL (Source: Tait, 2000. Interdependent functions of student support in a ODeL. This image can be adapted and customised.)

6.3 Student support services in ODeL

Student support services in ODeL include registration, counselling, learning support (academic), guidance, tutoring, learning advice, feedback on assignments, interaction with teaching and administrative staff, career services and provision. Rampa and Mphahlele (2016) suggest the following ways to help students succeed in their studies:

- Hold designated online meetings to communicate and share information about the course(s).
- Encourage active learning by providing hands-on activities.
- Provide generous feedback.
- Promise a prompt response to e-mails. Even more important than feedback on assignments is a quick response to e-mails.
- Be lenient when possible. Consider a specific set of factors that affect student learning.
- Show a sense of responsibility. Indulgence and accountability are not mutually exclusive, although it may sometimes seem that way.
- Be vigilant and proactively reach out to students to identify those struggling with learning and intervene as soon as the problem is identified.
- Rethink grading and consider different types of grading, depending on the type and intensity of support you provide to students.
- Teach students self-management by equipping them with the necessary skills to make their learning more effective and efficient.

6.4 Conclusion

As we can now see, distance learning organisations are often very complex systems that require active management of processes and sub-systems. These systems enable effective learning if they all work together in synergy. The three functions include cognitive, affective and systemic supports. Empowering institutional change requires planning processes, feedback, resource, a willingness to challenge entrenched attitudes and rewards for individual endeavour.



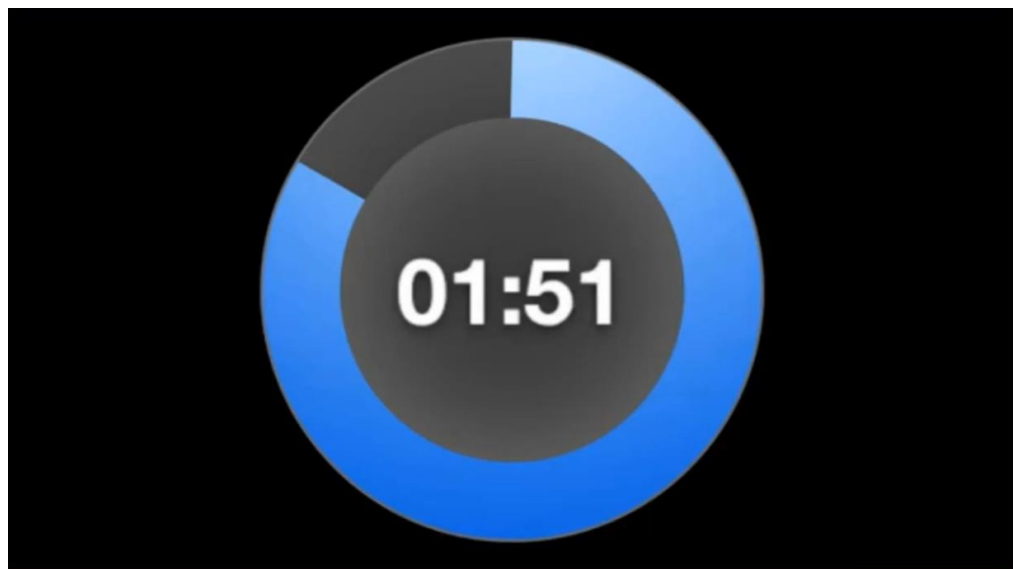
REFLECTION ACTIVITY 12:

Evaluate the student support services of your institution and provide recommendations on how to improve student throughput using cost-effective student support services.



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 13:

Watch the video to reflect on your student services at your institution:
<https://youtu.be/EcD1N2g-2KI>



Make a list of the different services available at the institution in line with the video, in comparison with your institution.

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UNIT 7 STRATEGIC PLANNING IN ODeL

7.1 Introduction

One of the key management processes for any organisation is strategic planning. It is the process to move the organisation forward. The process includes establishing the sequence in which those goals and objectives should be realised so the organisation can reach its stated vision.

7.1.1 Definition of Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is the process by which an organisation establishes its purpose and objectives, formulates actions designed to achieve these objectives in the desired time scale, and establishes monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess progress and results (Banna, 2021). A strategic plan in place allows the institution to track progress towards operations to achieve an end goal. Addie (2019) argued that strategic planning is used as a policy instrument by university leadership to direct long-term institutional priorities, establish internal benchmarking indicators and reorganise wide-ranging ways of operating in response to changing external drivers, relations and societal expectations.

An open and distance learning (ODeL) institution must have a strategic plan understood by its staff, students and employees (Minnaar, 2013). When the stakeholders in each department and team understand the organisation's overall strategy, their progress can directly impact its success, resulting in a top-down approach to tracking key performance indicators (KPI) (Levy, 2003). KPIs are used to evaluate a company's success in strategic planning.

To have a good strategic plan that serves as a community of the institution, an institution must conduct a strategic planning review, examining what worked, what did not work, suggestions and new projects for the future. This is where the institution gathers management, representatives from each department and student representatives to review the implementation of their strategy and develop a new strategic plan for the coming year, as is customary (Panda, 2008).

7.2 Components of strategic planning

Contemporary strategic plans have multiple components and each component serves a specific purpose. These components are planning tools used separately or in groups, but their development is usually linear (Cheng, 2019). Challenges affecting the planning of ODeL are globalisation, joint course development, material sharing, and information and communication technology (Nicolaou, Matsiola & Kalliris, 2022). When large ODeL institutions lack proper strategic planning, it can be difficult to implement their teaching and learning programmes fully. The recent Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated that institutions without a plan can encounter difficulties when attempting to address problems, such as online teaching and learning (Kara, 2022).

According to Moore and Kearsley (2012), strategic planning entails:

- Defining a vision and a mission, goals and objectives for the institution or programme regarding distance education

- Choosing among options so that the priority goals can be achieved with acceptable quality and with the available resources
- Continuous assessment of changing trends in student, business or societal demands
- Tracking emerging technological options that might make for greater efficiency
- Projecting future resources and financial needs, and taking action to meet them.

When the organisation's general direction is stated in its mission statement, it strongly indicates that the organisation will realise its vision. A strategy will inevitably fall short of realising the vision without ways to use the mission. The organisation should be able to achieve its objectives and put the strategy into action by having what needs to be done or achieved. Timelines must be considered in the strategic planning process' plan for achieving the objective.

The strategic plan must always be continuously assessed or reviewed to determine what worked and what did not, and to develop new projects by allowing all stakeholders to propose fresh ideas for the future. Emerging technologies must be considered in strategic planning in the digital era, to enable more innovative and interesting teaching and learning techniques. Utilising emerging technologies can also be accomplished by increasing the institution's financial and resource requirements.

The flowchart below summarises the strategic planning components, including the mission statement, values, institutional goals, vision, goals and objectives, and the implementation plan.

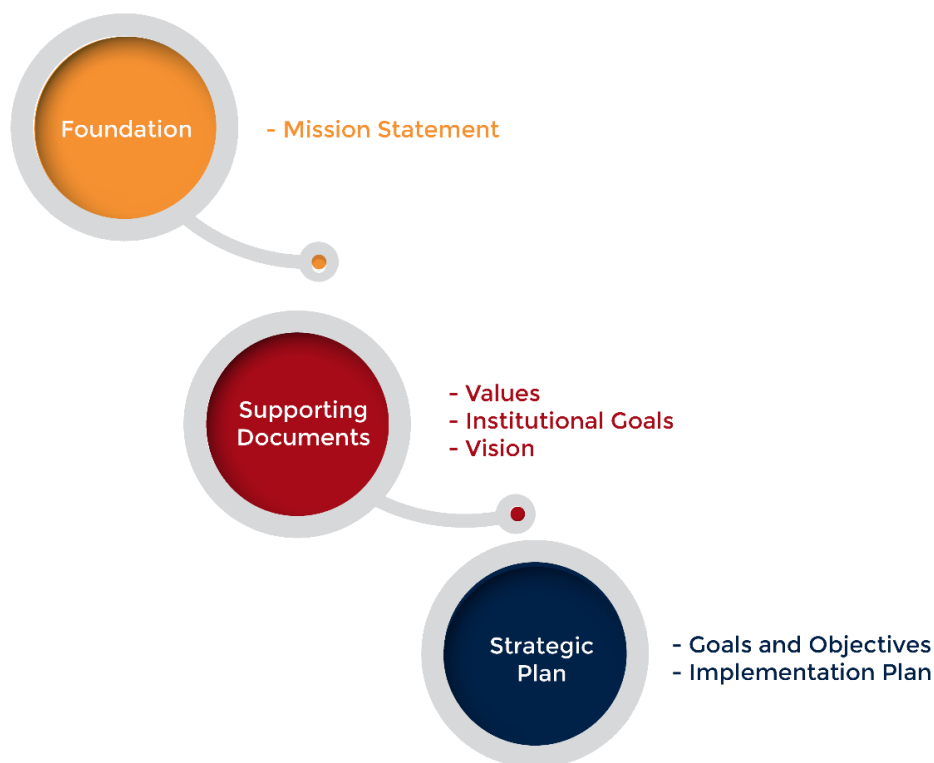


Figure 6: Components of a strategic plan (Panda, 2008)

However, strategic planning may fail if it neglects to address the components mentioned above. The reasons that can cause the failure of strategic planning are discussed below.

7.3 Reasons that can cause strategic planning failures

Some strategic plans succeed, while others fail. The reasons for the success and failure of a strategic plan are complex, as it depends on the nature and context of the organisation. The major causes of strategic planning failure may be categorised into internal and external factors (McMillan, 2009).

Table 2: Internal and external planning failure factors (McMillan, 2009)

Internal strategic planning failure factors	External strategic planning failure factors
Lack of political/top management commitment and support	Policy changes
Poor leadership	Political factors (instability, new elections, etc.)
Poor strategic planning process	Economy challenges
Operational plans are not well developed	Lack of local knowledge and understanding of the community
Unrealistic or idealistic operational plans	Dependency on external funding (donor interference, etc.)
Lack of skills, knowledge and experience	Intergovernmental power struggles and politics
Bureaucracy / organisational structure / red tape/inflexibility	Difficult stakeholders: unions, community

7.4 Conclusion

Strategic planning is a dynamic process that helps an organisation to formulate a shared vision and direction for the future. It is, however, a process that needs to include as many people in the organisation as possible and should help to create a common vision for and by all. If everyone has the same future vision, the organisation will have greater unity and resistance to change will be less.

It can be concluded that for educational institutions to survive the difficult times ahead or complex issues, a clear focus on strategic planning is required. It is critical for higher education institutions to have a strategic plan in place to avoid impediments to meaningful teaching and learning.



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 14:

Reflect on your institution's strategic plan and share what you think the strategic plan says about where your organisation plans to be in 20 years (maximum of 300 words).



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 15:

In your context, what do you believe strategic planning can do to help ODeL institutions track progress toward their goals? Motivate your answer.

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UNIT 8 TECHNOLOGY IN ODeL

8.1 Introduction

The world is evolving and the rate of IT and technology developments is moving fast. Therefore, online learning and teaching practitioners must stay abreast of these developments and the newest trends, to stay relevant and competitive in the education market. In this unit, we will look at some of the most widely used technologies in education, and the challenges and advantages of using technology in an online learning environment.

8.2 Technologies used to create online learning experiences

Kerr (2007a, as cited in Kop & Hill, 2008) states, “We are entering some sort of period of radical discontinuity.” Different online technologies are incorporated into courses to improve the student experience. Innovative educational environments establish current and impending trends in shaping universal learning networks. This has inspired finding new, inventive and diverse methods of creating and acquiring knowledge (Kop & Hill, 2008). The following are some of the most widely used technologies used in e-learning (with examples). Although this list gives the reader an idea of the technologies that can be used, it is not exhaustive.

- **Learning Management System:** A learning management system (LMS) is software or web-based technology used to organise, deliver and assess learning activities. It is used for e-learning and consists of two components in its most basic configuration server that handles the essential functions and a user interface controlled by facilitators, students and administrators (Brush, 2019).
 - **Moodle:** This is an open source learning management system used as a portal for students to log in to find their study materials and other relevant information.
- **Authoring Tools:** e-Learning and other digital content creation software are referred to as authoring tools (Hassey, 2018).
- **Articulate Rise:** Articulate Rise is a rapid and responsive authoring tool designed to author online content. Articulate Rise allows content to be responsive to the device the student uses.
 - **Articulate Storyline:** Articulate Storyline is a more advanced and diverse authoring tool than Rise, but not as rapid in development. Articulate Storyline develops the interactions and interactive activities used in Articulate Rise.
- **Media and Visual Tools:** Visual aids are resources that make a topic or course clearer or simpler to comprehend (Shabiralyani, et al., 2015).
 - **Videos and GIFs:** Using videos and GIFs, messages can be conveyed understandably, and cater better for visual and audible students.
 - **Images and Infographics:** Infographics work well when summarising or giving a high-level topic overview. Images are used to enhance the learning of the students.
 - **Embedded YouTube Videos:** With millions of YouTubers creating highly informative and relevant videos, it is a way to get students interested and searching for more.
- **Tools for Self-Directed Learning:** Through the internet, students search for specific topics to broaden their understanding of that topic.

- **Social Media, Wiki and Blogs:** Connecting with and following game changers in a field will enhance the student's networking ability and critical thinking skills. In addition, this online delivery method gives students access to useful online tools and various online resources to further investigate the topics and subjects that interest them (Bell, 2009).

8.3 Learning activities in an online learning environment

In the design and development of the learning activities, the objective is to disperse the learning activities across different resources that are permitted in the online learning environment (Kizito, 2016).

When learning activities are designed to encourage student interaction supported by technology, students can form cognitive, conceptual and social networks (Kizito, 2016).

Online or paper-based learning activities are offered asynchronous, allowing students to work and learn online or offline at their own pace. The short course integrates interactive media, e-learning activities and traditional didactic components, such as written notes. The students also have opportunities for collaborative learning through discussion forums.

The following activities form the overall learning path:

- **Reading activities:** These are text and documents that students must read throughout the units and topics of a course, and may contain external links to various sources.
- **Multimedia activities:** Some units might contain video clips and/or podcasts.
- **Online announcements:** These are updated as often as necessary and are used to remind students of activities and assessments, to share new information and to share ideas or suggestions.
- **Discussion forums:** Topics can include questions for discussion to increase student engagement with the course materials online and to facilitate student collaboration.
- **Self-reflection:** Activities designed for students to reflect on their learning progress.
- **Course activities:** Contain all activities or formative assessments, including practise activities, case studies or scenarios and quizzes.

8.4 Challenges in the use of technology

Although technology can aid institutions, students and educators to teach and learn using various online tools, there are challenges associated with technology in education.

8.4.1 The digital divide

The digital divide is the most prevalent challenge affecting students in an online context. Molawa (2009, as cited in Matthew & Iloanya, 2016: 3) points to the obstacles that underdeveloped areas face due to poor infrastructure. Furthermore, accessing computers negatively affects teaching technology acceptance and increases the inequality among the different socio-economic groups (Usun, 2004, as cited in Mahlangu, 2018: 25). By not making their information needs visible to students, these students are further marginalised (Oladokun & Aina, 2011, as cited in Matthew & Iloanya, 2016: 3). We, thus, need to decrease the digital divide through ethical leadership and educating the students on the different types of technologies available to them (Mabena, 2019). As an institution, it is

crucial to constantly develop new strategies and tutorial videos to increase student and lecturer digital literacy. However, we forget that even if students are completely literate, without access to technology, their literacy does not mean much.

8.4.2 The cost of using technology in teaching and learning

Information and communication infrastructure costs and the shortage of technical expertise pose challenges in distance learning (Martey, 2004, as cited in Mahlangu, 2018: 22). The high data costs in South Africa deny the majority of South African citizens access to technology and the ability to participate in the digital economy (Mabena, 2019). Therefore, the development of online programmes needs to be data-lite, without compromising the learning experience of the student body.

8.4.3 Digital literacy of students and lecturers

Digital literacy can be a barrier to effective teaching and learning. Digital literacy applies to the students and the institution's academic staff. "New technologies should not be imposed without enabling lecturers and students to understand these fundamental shifts" (Odero, 2017, as cited in Mahlangu, 2018: 22). To decrease the problem of digital literacy in an institution, academic staff should receive regular training, so as to increase their pedagogical and technical skills in online learning, to better their engagement as well as the learning experience of their online students (Matthew & Iloanya, 2016: 3).

8.5 Advantages in the use of technology

Although there might be countless other advantages of using technology in ODeL, technology's flexibility and economic benefits in education are the two most agreed-upon advantages.

8.5.1 Flexibility

The great part about remote education is that you may learn anywhere and at any time. It makes no difference where you live in the country; you may enrol in the course and begin learning. Moreover, even if you study through an international institution, you still have easy access to course materials if you are a citizen of a different country (Sadeghi, 2019: 83).

8.5.2 Economical

The cost of a distance education degree (online or otherwise), for any particular programme, may be substantially lower than that of a traditional on-campus degree. Therefore, students seeking cost-effective choices might enrol in a distance learning programme. You do not need to live in the same city or country to attend the educational institution of your choice. You may study from any location with a computer and an internet connection. The most economical aspect of online learning is the absence of commuting, since you save time, money and energy (Sadeghi, 2019: 83).

8.6 Conclusion

As practitioners in ODeL, we are responsible for staying up-to-date with the developments in online learning environments and being actively involved in setting the trends and best practices with the use of technology in the online classroom. It is also vital to be aware of the advantages and challenges that students experience, to enable our institutions to maximise

the effects of benefits, and plan for and manage the challenges students experience when using technology in the learning environment.



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 16:

What type of learning management system (LMS) and authoring tools do you use in your institution? What are the benefits and disadvantages of your current LMS and authoring tools?



REFLECTION ACTIVITY 17:

Do you think the benefits of using technology in a distance learning environment outweigh the disadvantages? Please provide reasons for your answer.

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