



NOVEMBER 2010/ISSUE **31**

IMAGINING FUTURE UNIVERSITY (AND CONSEQUENTLY FUTURE TEACHING AND LEARNING)

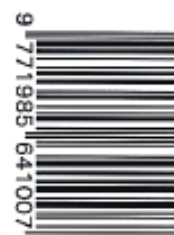
As cultural practices, teaching and learning are never static in pattern or impetus. In the face of epistemic (knowledge) shifts and turns, they are subject to ageing, becoming 'old-fashioned' as newer approaches displace them, only for the same fate to befall the 'new' in 10, 20, 50, 100 or more years down the line. Similarly the role of the university is often governed by forces beyond the university itself. Transformations in university teaching and learning may be glacial in pace but they are inevitable. The question that TCX31 poses is: What will the future university look like, and how different are teaching and learning likely to be then? More importantly, for our purposes, in which direction would you like to see the university evolve, particularly in the ODL context? The focus here is not simply to speculate on what might be but to critically reflect on our practices today and on the future we want realized, as ODL tutors-stakeholders in higher education.

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ABOUT TCX

TCX (Tutor Connexions) is a non-profit OUM e-newsletter that provides a dedicated link between the University and its tutors. It serves as a channel for news and updates on tutor-related events and as a platform for the sharing of views, experiences and tips on best practices in university teaching and learning.

TCX is published electronically twice every semester.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Change, it appears, is the only constant, including in education where knowledge is continually expanding and occasionally turned on its head to produce new knowledge that subverts what in the past was considered (unshakeable 'sacred') knowledge. If nothing can be expected to stay the same in perpetuity, what then can we say about the role of the university now and in future?



With this leading question in mind, TCX 31 ventured out to solicit views from a range of external tutors and internal academics. The results, which are set out in this issue, are certainly encouraging. The unanimous belief is that the future lies in open, distance and online learning, or ODOL, to coin a term.

ODOL, with built-in learner-centred flexibility, is held up as a model that will become dominant in the near future, as information and communication technologies (ICT) develop in predictable and unpredictable ways that are likely to make us look back in 10 to 20 years from now, only to wonder how we ever managed with today's narrow broadband and other nascent technologies.

The future is bright for university education that breaks from the conventional full-time face-to-face mode of teaching-learning. Of course, there are no guarantees that ODOL will supercede the conventional mode of learning, or that it will not be overtaken instead by something else altogether which has yet to be conceived at present. Nevertheless, we can take heart that ODOL is already changing lives today by opening up opportunities for adult learners and workers to upgrade their knowledge and skills as a lifelong pursuit.

As usual, we hope you will enjoy this issue of TCX. With the September semester coming to a close, we also hope that you have had a productive semester. We look forward to seeing you again with a new issue in January 2011.

Best

Dr David CL Lim

Chief Editor



CONTENT-BASED TEACHING IN TCX

I occasionally read TCX and I find the articles good with lots of discussions.

Nevertheless, I feel that the newsletter does not cater to all tutors because it focuses too much on online teaching. Although I am aware that online learning and technology play an important role at OUM, I believe that TCX should expand on what goes on in the dissemination of content knowledge as well.

As an English tutor, I would like to contribute articles relating to this type of knowledge, such as “How to develop a critical reader”. In fact, I am sure there are tutors who have a similar interest.

Hence, TCX can be further improved by giving room to content-based teaching.

*Kalminderjit Kaur A/P Gurcharan Singh
Negeri Sembilan Learning Centre*

Dear Kalminderjit,

Essentially TCX takes a broad-based approach that reaches out to all tutors irrespective of discipline but that does not mean we cannot have discipline-specific write-ups, be they content or skills related. So yes, do send in your article for consideration; we would be very happy indeed!

TCX Editor

A PLACE TO SHARE TUTOR VIEWS

Although TCX has been in circulation for some time, contributions from tutors seem lacking. Perhaps, most tutors find it unimportant or are even unaware that it exists. This is unfortunate because tutors should fully utilize the newsletter as a channel to air their views and opinions.

Here, I would like to make a few recommendations. Firstly, there should be more promotion on TCX. Learning centres should be in the loop and the Directors should occasionally identify tutors to contribute articles and stories about their teaching experience. Next, TCX could increase readership by creating columns for various fields, for instance, education, management and so on.

Thank you.

*Abd Razak Mohd Yusoff
Negeri Sembilan Learning Centre*

Dear Abd Razak,

Many thanks for writing in. While there has not been an avalanche, there has nonetheless been a steady flow of contributions from OUM tutors from across the country, including those roped in by the directors of learning centres. TCX is distributed in the PDF format by email to all internal staff and external tutors each time a new issue is released, so there should not be any problems with access. In case our target readership accidentally deletes the email, there is always the TCX website serving as backup. Your suggestion regarding discipline-specific columns is great – do send us an article or two to kick-start the column!

TCX Editor

MCQ AND QUALITY EVALUATION

Currently, I am teaching Consumer Behaviour and one of the complaints that I hear from learners relates to their dissatisfaction with the multiple-choice question (MCQ) format for the mid-term and final exams.

As a tutor, I know that it is beyond my power to change the assessment format at OUM. Yet, I feel that at the degree level, essay-type questions may be more appropriate to assess knowledge and understanding. With the latter, learners may feel more confident with the quality of evaluation at OUM and this may help in retaining them as learners.

*Mahadir Ibrahim
Mentakab Learning Centre*

Dear Mahadir,

You will be pleased to know that new assessment structures will be introduced from the January 2011 semester. Faculties will have the latitude to adopt particular combinations

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of formats to suit the kinds of courses that are offered. Contrary to popular misconception, MCQ tests, which are among the available formats, are no poor cousin to essay-type questions; they are considered by educationists as the strongest predictor of learner performance in comparison to other instruments.

*Prof Dr Shaari Abd Hamid
Deputy Vice President,
Institute of Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA)*

E-TUTORS: A GOOD IDEA?

I have not been tutoring at OUM for some time and only recently did I become a tutor again. I find the system of tutoring different compared to the past.

Currently, face-to-face tutors are no longer interacting with their learners online. Instead, learners are assigned different tutors known as e-tutors. I believe this new system is causing hardship to learners. Perhaps we can have two forums: one with the e-tutor and another with their actual face-to-face tutor?

*Jennifer Duarte
Perak Learning Centre*

Dear Jennifer,

Thanks for your query. OUM introduced e-tutors as it was found that a significant number of face-to-face tutors who were tasked to lead online discussions either did not show up online (either because they were too busy or did not enjoy online facilitation), or were inadequately equipped to handle online discussions in a way that added value to learners' learning. E-tutors are trained to actively engage learners in online discussions (see the features in this issue for more on the topic). We are happy to share that, a result of the new e-tutor system, the quality of online discussions has improved. This is particularly helpful to learners residing in areas where it is difficult to source for locally-based qualified and experienced tutors. In addition, as a result of pooling learners into larger discussion forums moderated by proactive e-tutors, learners are mingling more with their peers, leading to better quality peer learning. Of course, none of this should deter face-to-face tutors from keeping in touch with their learners by email or other means for updates or even side discussions.

*Prof Dr Shaari Abd Hamid
Deputy Vice President,
Institute of Teaching and Learning Advancement (ITLA)*

TUTOR REMINDER



IMPORTANT NOTE

Note On Course Assignments

Most course assignments are now to be submitted online for grading. Tutors handling these courses are not required to mark the assignments or input marks into OMES. Assignments which are not entirely text-based will still be graded by the learners' respective tutors. These assignments will need to be submitted to tutors by Tutorial 4.

ENVISIONING FUTURE UNIVERSITIES

By Oh Ee Teik (ohet@oum.edu.my)

Looking at present teaching-learning trends and how technology is being used in this area, I believe there will be radical changes in future universities whose existence will definitely be different from present-day universities.

Traditional universities that exist today as large campuses with many faculties will likely still stand in future but universities of tomorrow will have a very different setup – firstly because distance learning is becoming more workable as a practice due to significantly improved electronic communications technology and lifestyle changes resulting from the information revolution contributed mainly by the internet.

I would thus speculate that future universities, while still maintaining and preserving their main role as institutions of higher learning, will be physically much smaller in real estate size in comparison to their traditional counterparts, which have many small branches or specialized schools scattered across various geographical sites.

If electronic communications continue to improve at the present rate, very soon fast and efficient connectivity will make distance learning even more easily realized. When that happens, there will no longer be any need for traditional classroom lectures. The latter may still remain but will likely be significantly reduced in importance.

Instead of attending 40 hours of lectures for a particular course, this can be reduced to perhaps eight hours of classroom lectures. In reality, the concept of flexi-hours can be adopted by future universities very much like how it is being implemented today in the work environment in advanced Western countries. This would thus reduce the need for classroom space and administrative offices in future universities.

It is amply evident that the teaching-learning process has changed significantly over the years. The last two decades have witnessed the following:

- In many instances, standard hardcopy textbooks for university/college education are no longer the main



“Tools are available today which have improved significantly or changed the way we teach and learn”

source of information. Most of these are now available in the electronic format. In addition, there is a wide range of articles and materials on the internet which can be used for teaching and learning, and which can be updated in minutes or hours instead of the months or years required to update hardcopy publications.

- Information and knowledge are definitely more accessible now compared to the past. Internet search engines make it possible for anyone to find out more about virtually any topic. Indirectly this has driven down the costs of accessing information and knowledge. For example, if someone wanted to learn a software application like MS Word twenty years ago, he or she would have had to invest in books in order to learn. Now, it is possible to find free “how-to” or “teach-me” articles on virtually any topic (academic or otherwise) on the internet.

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- Delivery time of information and knowledge has also been shortened drastically. If a new technological invention or a new academic theory is discovered, it can be easily published on the internet and made accessible to all within a matter of minutes.
- Tools are available today which have improved significantly or changed the way we teach and learn. For example, if a learner were to read a traditional textbook and after reading a chapter of twenty pages, he may end up with ten unfamiliar key terms and has to invest more time in cross-referencing them against other texts in order to understand their meanings. The same book in the electronic format will significantly reduce the time and effort for the learner to do the same. Interactive e-books have definitely eased cross-referencing and searches. Referring to other related texts is as simple as clicking on given links and in a matter of seconds the reader will be taken to the related material. Compare this to manually searching through the appendix or index of a hardcopy book.
- Learning will arguably become more affordable in future. Instead of spending a small fortune buying hardcopy textbooks, the learner can perhaps subscribe to e-books as a member of an e-library at a fraction of the usual cost.
- Study-related travel and accommodation costs for learners could be reduced. In the distance learning model, the learner would not need to be physically close to the university to follow a programme. Occasional stays rather than long term permanent ones will reduce learning costs significantly.
- Finally, with the amount of information and knowledge available, learners will also have more flexibility to choose the courses relevant to the preferred field of specialization or interest, instead of having to select only the “package” offered by universities today.

Aside from the above, there will also be key changes in the way teachers teach. These are outlined in the points below:

- Due to changes in the teaching-learning process, the roles of the learner and teacher have also changed. For the learner, the biggest change in learning can perhaps be set out in the points below:
- The amount of knowledge that can be learned is definitely greater today. This is due mainly to the easy availability of information as well as to the fact that knowledge and information are now available almost immediately after discovery or publication.
 - While the internet is an indispensable tool for learning, it is crucial to recognise that there are also many errors or half-truths out there. The ability to discriminate between what is right and wrong or what is relevant and irrelevant has become a critical skill for the learner to acquire.
 - The learner has to be a much better manager of his or her own time as teaching-learning becomes more flexible. Gone will be the days when it is mandatory for the learner to attend a fixed number of lectures in order to pass examinations. Self-discipline is extremely important to ensure that time for learning is well spent.
 - In future the duration for learning may be even more flexible than it is now. A quick learner can complete a programme in a shorter time while the less-quick may take longer. Also, there may not be a need for university intakes to occur only at fixed times during a year. Learners should be able to register for any course or programme at any time convenient to them. Among other benefits, this flexible arrangement will allow learners to better manage their lives.
 - The number of face-to-face learner-teacher meetings will decrease dramatically due to the reduction of the number of classroom lectures. Teachers will have to find new ways to interact effectively with their learners, perhaps through instant messaging tools, video-cameras, and so on.
 - Like learners, teachers will also have more flexible working hours and would not need to be physically present at the university for long hours any more. Working from home will be a very workable concept.
 - Also, like learners, teachers will be exposed to more information and knowledge and would thus need to spend time to learn or relearn.

Finally, there will be changes in the way universities operate:

- In future teaching and learning, ICT will be a great enabler. Thus all universities will need to have state-of-the-art ICT infrastructure and this must be a mission critical component.
- Smaller universities may not be able to offer certain courses as the costs involved may be prohibitive. With distance learning, they can pool their resources by sharing the costs of hiring the required teaching staff and by offering shared programmes to all learners as a combined effort. In general, the sharing of academic and teaching staff will become a very workable concept. 

THE SHAPE OF UNIVERSITIES TO COME

By AP Dr Tan Toh Wah (tantohwah@oum.edu.my), with input from
Dr Kuan Soon Lye, Dr K. Kuperan Viswanathan, Oh Ee Teik, and Teo Chuen Tick

All the tutors with whom I discussed the issue agree that universities of tomorrow will continue to be centres for generating and acquiring knowledge, and that the amount of new knowledge will grow exponentially, making knowledge management a basic skill required by all.

Learning to Learn and Solve Problems

There will be fundamental changes in the setup and mode of delivery and learning. According to Dr K. Kuperan Viswanathan, a facilitator for Managerial Economics at the Penang Learning Centre, “knowledge on any subject is already readily available to all who have access to broadband connection and some computer literacy skills. Teaching will have to move away from just providing knowledge to learners to providing opportunities and encouragement for learners to teach themselves.”

Problem solving and decision making will continue to be key. As knowledge will be in abundance, it is vital that learners know how to gather, filter and then use the relevant knowledge for particular purposes. Dr. Kuperan adds that the challenge will be in teaching learners how to learn by themselves and not to depend on teachers alone.

In short, future universities will be focused more on teaching learners problem-solving skills than on providing them content knowledge. Tutors will have to be more active in providing examples and developing learners’ capacity of learners to use knowledge to solve problems rather than spending most of the time in providing learners with facts and information about a particular subject.

Technologies Bridging Time and Space

Oh Ee Teik, a tutor in IT at the Penang Learning Centre, feels that with the current advancement of electronic communications technology, high speed and efficient connectivity will make remote learning even more effective. The new technology will enable new knowledge to be disseminated almost instantaneously. Knowledge will be available ‘on-demand’ – when and where it is needed without the need to go through the print media, thus becoming more economical and instantaneous.

Oh also opines that future universities will no longer depend on traditional face-to-face classroom lectures. Conventional face-to-face interactions will be significantly reduced and



will be used only to add a ‘human’ touch to the learning process. Lecturers and learners will interact with one another virtually using new technologies yet to be developed. Remote or distance learning will become the norm. Distance and space will no longer be a challenge and university education will be accessible to all. This will enable more universities to be set up as they will only require minimal space with several administrative offices and space for state-of-the-art ICT infrastructure.

Openness and Flexibility

Dr. Kuan Soon Lye, a lead tutor at the Penang Learning Centre, feels that ‘open’ and ‘flexible’ will be the keywords to describe the structure and learning environment of future universities. Other than flexibility in terms of entry requirement and courses of study, learners will be able to choose and take control of how and when they want to learn and to be assessed. They will take control of their own learning. This is further reiterated by Mr. Teo Chuen Tick, a tutor in Mathematics Education, who foresees that universities of the future should be a place where learners are empowered to learn at their own pace.

Conclusion

From the above, it is evident that OUM is already on-track to be the university of the future. Tutors are thankful that they have been exposed to the fundamentals underlying the technologies and methodologies that will be utilized by universities in the future. What they need now is to further develop their attitudes and skills in learning how to learn for they will need to be facilitators for subjects and knowledge that have yet to be discovered. [TCX](#)

DISCIPLINES & CHANGING BOUNDARIES THE CASE OF ENGLISH STUDIES

By Dr David CL Lim (david@oum.edu.my)

Demystifying 'English'

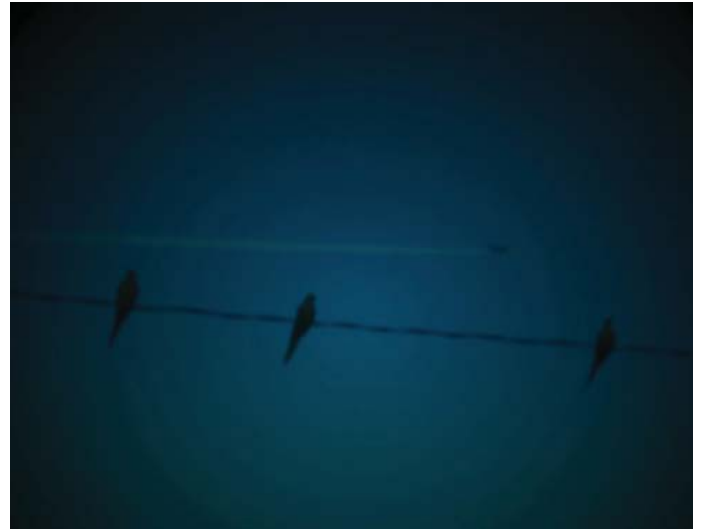
English is a highly misunderstood discipline, no less in Malaysia where studying English at tertiary level is, to many, equivalent to studying to improve one's proficiency in the English language, in the way that one would in high school, for example.

Others tend to collapse English into the study of literature or linguistics, the latter being a 'scientific' or 'clinical' study of the English language as speech sounds, grammar, and meaning. There are yet others who reduce English to TESL (Teaching of English as a Second Language), as though the only thing one could do with English is to teach the language in schools.

Few realize that English is much more than what it has come to be seen as, that it is in fact an evolving intellectual discipline that has become highly interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary (as will be explained). That English continues to be constricted in the commonsense understanding in Malaysia is not helped by the conventional ways in which English is taught in most local universities, where English is commonly broken into discreet subfields and taught in relative isolation.

There are no doubt benefits to be reaped from studying English purely as proficiency, linguistic, literature or the like. Many English graduates who majored in one of the many subfields of the discipline in their pure form have successfully ventured into a broad range of professional fields. Among these include journalism, professional writing, research, editorial, advertising, media, public relations, teaching, consultancy, the arts including theatre, and management.

However, the shortcoming of this traditional 'pure' approach to English in the 21st century is that it leaves learners with knowledge of parts of the proverbial elephant instead of the necessary skills to apprehend the elephant as a whole. It leaves them with a less-than-holistic understanding of language and the lifeworld it produces and in which we live. The whole of language cannot be grasped from the perspective of one subfield alone. It takes multiple perspectives that draw from a range of seemingly disparate



“Will traditional disciplines remain as they are? Will their boundaries dissolve away in future or, rather, are they not already dissolving?”

disciplines to allow us to see that language is not just the words we speak or study in isolation from everything else, it is also, ultimately, and more critically, the foundation of our very being and thought. Language, in Jacques Lacan's parlance, is the hammock that simultaneously receives and imprisons us.

A dominant intellectual paradigm of the 21st century is the understanding that we can never hope to properly understand a phenomenon from the perspective of one discipline, let alone from one subfield within that discipline. To believe otherwise is to demonstrate hubris, at best.

In progressive universities across the world, artificial disciplinary boundaries are being demolished to produce *interdisciplinary* studies which seek a more active integration between subfields (e.g., linguistics and literature) and *multidisciplinary* studies which involve the study of two or more disciplines in parallel (e.g., literature, film

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studies, sociology). This applies beyond such commonplace couplings as language or any other conventional discipline with education.

The radical dissolution of traditional disciplinary boundaries is not exclusive to English but affects just about all disciplines, producing such creative hybrids as psychoanalysis with quantum physics; film and literature with politics; ecological studies with popular culture. The possible but seemingly incompatible combinatory potential is endless and exciting, presaging the disciplines-to-come.

The changing paradigm of monodisciplinary to radical interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary is far from an exclusive ivory tower phenomenon. The world outside the academe is fast coming to realise that, just as one perspective cannot unveil the elephant as a whole, so too one perspective cannot adequately prepare learners to face the complex demands and challenges of the hitherto turbulent 21st century.

Radicalising 'English Studies' at OUM

OUM's Bachelor (BEST) and Masters in English Studies (MEST) Programmes break from the conventional way in which English is usually taught in local institutions. Instead of limiting the discipline to one subfield or the other, they dissolve the divisions that have artificially divided English. Of the two, BEST is strategically more broad-based. It introduces learners to English through the latest in advanced literacy and communication skills, literary studies, cultural studies, film studies and professional writing. Learners following the programme have the opportunity to first upgrade their literacy skills to advanced levels through courses like Critical Reading, Critical Writing, and Listening and Speaking at Tertiary Level. Thereafter, in varying course combinations, learners are exposed to the multiple dimensions of English as a discipline. Through all these courses, learners are brought to the forefront of knowledge as it is evolving.

OUM's newly minted Masters of English Studies (MEST) is more specialized than BEST, as is expected of a higher degree. While BEST enables learners to develop core proficiency in the English language and to acquire fundamental knowledge and understanding of the ways in which language serves as the condition of possibility for the emergence of thought, being and reality across traditional disciplines, MEST builds on BEST by emphasizing depth over breadth in its focus on language and cultural production. Among the cutting-edge courses in the MEST's advanced curriculum are Language, Power and Society, Film and Society in Contemporary Southeast Asia, Malaysian Fiction, and Critical Theory. [TCX](#)

WANTED: GREAT ENGLISH TUTORS

OUM is currently pre-screening great tutors with the right expertise to deliver BEST and MEST core courses.

For full listing of BEST and MEST core courses, visit OUM's website.

If you have research and teaching experience in interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary English and would like to be considered, please email Dr David CL Lim at david@oum.edu.my your full CV.

CHANGE & THE WAY FORWARD

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROF DR ZAKARIA ISMAIL, DEAN OF FACULTY OF BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT

By Jimmy Teo Hui Thian (jteo@oum.edu.my)

Prof Dr Zakaria Ismail has more than 30 years' experience in teaching, researching and consulting with many public and private universities prior to joining Open University Malaysia as Dean of Faculty of Business and Management (FBM). He obtained his bachelor's degree in agriculture from the University of New England, Australia. He completed his MBA at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia before leaving to pursue his doctorate at the Kent State University in the United States. Prof Zakaria's areas of expertise include organizational behaviour, management and human resource management.

Jimmy Teo: Prof, what would you consider as your biggest responsibilities as Dean of FBM?

Prof Zakaria: Right now, I would say there are three main ones. The first would be to ensure that the Faculty serves its external customers (learners, learners' sponsors, potential employers and so on) and internal customers (assessment unit, registry, and others) well by meeting or exceeding their expectations in terms of quality, timeliness and dependability where our academic programmes and services are concerned.

The second is to ensure that FBM academic programmes remain relevant to market needs and become the first choice in business management, human resources and accounting for working adults. Finally, it is to ensure that our faculty members and staff talents are optimally developed, harnessed and recognised so that a strong culture of belonging and ownership takes root in the faculty.

JT: What has been your greatest challenge up to this point?

Prof: I think, the greatest challenge up to this point has been developing our academic staff expertise to a level where every one has the necessary knowledge and competencies to do high quality academic work independently or the least with minimal supervision. Academic work here includes tutorial delivery, course assessment, mastery of knowledge, and research and writing ability. We also want to develop and get external tutors involved in these areas.



“Our programme structures have to be updated regularly so that they are not outdated and become irrelevant to the industry.”

JT: What can you say about the programmes offered by FBM?

Prof: The faculty offers many programmes which are industry-relevant. Programmes such as the Bachelor of Business Administration, Bachelor of Human Resource Management and Bachelor of Management have been

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selling well. These are what we call the STAR programmes of the faculty. Apart from these, I think our Bachelor of Accounting is a potential STAR, even though we have yet to receive MQA accreditation for it. As for postgraduate programmes, our MBA is a hot favourite. It is also offered in Yemen, Ghana and Bahrain.

JT: *Aside from the quality of the programmes, what other pull factors do you think would attract potential learners to OUM?*

Prof: Quality is one thing but the more important question potential learners should ask is: Is the programme relevant to the demands of their present and future jobs? This is to say that programmes must not only have accreditation from MQA and recognition by professional bodies, they must also be industry-relevant and up-to-date in curricula.

The other reason for potential learners to come to OUM is of course our flexibility, accessibility, and affordability. Our reputation speaks for itself. You can find many positive testimonies, written articles and glowing word-of-mouth from friends or relatives of learners who have studied at OUM.

JT: *Has the business environment changed much since your student days? How so?*

Prof: Yes, the business environment has not only changed since my student days, it has been revolutionised in all aspects such as ICT in business (process and networking), globalisation, demographics (age, gender, education level), regionalism, the influence of WTO and so on.

JT: *Are these changes reflected in the programmes offered by FBM? Can you give us an example?*

Prof: As I mentioned earlier, our programmes are very relevant to contemporary times. During my early days, there were no specific programmes in business or management. At that time there were only economics and commerce. But now, you not only have many types of business, management and related programmes but also many areas of specialisation within these programmes. There are too many examples to mention but I will name a few: e-commerce, logistic and supply chain, international business, international finance, Islamic finance, Islamic management, hospitality and tourism management, forensic accounting, green accounting, and so on.

JT: *Information technology has changed almost everything. How have these changes shaped the programmes offered by FBM?*

Prof: (Laughs) I knew this question would pop up. It is a very popular but relevant question. Indeed, ICT has created a very dynamic environment where innovations and new processes and management techniques are being introduced within a very short span of time. This is why our programme structures have to be updated regularly so that they are not outdated and become irrelevant to the industry. The courses also need updating because of these changes. For example, business practices can no longer be taught within the local context; they need to go global. This is why learners must be taught to be resourceful and IT savvy in order for them to be able to seek information through the internet and to ultimately widen their thinking, perspectives and decision-making capabilities.

JT: *What do you think is the way forward for FBM?*

Prof: To me, it's simple. The faculty must be sensitive to changes in the business environment and be aware of market and industry needs in order to improve on the existing programmes. We need to constantly update our learning materials, content delivery, assessment instruments and learning support. We also need to plan and introduce more innovative and market relevant programmes, apart from developing faculty-industry relationships especially with the relevant professional bodies and industry captains.

JT: *How do you propose to meet the challenges of the 21st century?*

Prof: The 21st century poses many new challenges. One of them is meeting the rising demand and expectations of the customers (learners and sponsors). With globalisation and the free flow of information, learners and the general market will be better informed about what their needs are and from whom and where they can get the services to fulfil their needs. Therefore, for the faculty and OUM generally, we need to fulfil our learners' and stakeholders' expectations and aspirations so that they are satisfied with their experience with OUM, thus becoming our willing ambassadors. I think the winning formula could be to constantly develop the talent of our academic staff and external tutors, and to be closer to our customers by understanding and meeting their changing needs. **TCX**

(TCX would like to thank Prof Dr Zakaria, more fondly known as Prof Zack among faculty members, for taking time to do this interview.)

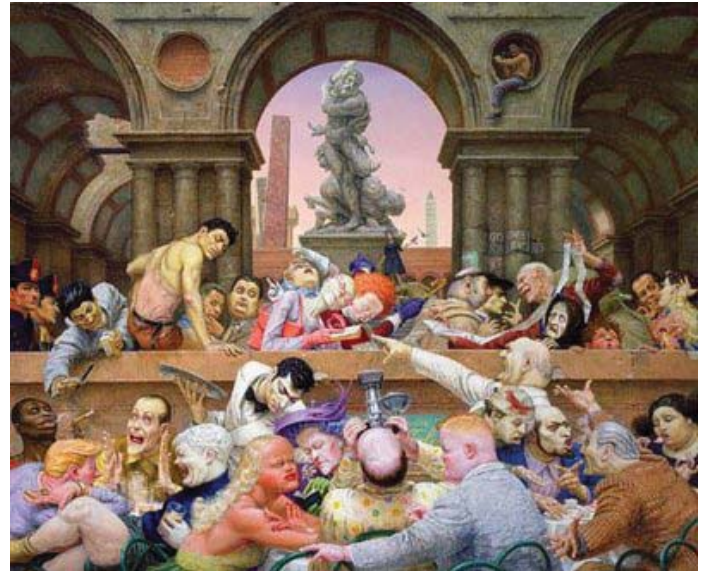
DOES LEARNING REALLY OCCUR IN THE ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUM?

By Prof Dr Latifah Abdol Latif (latifah@oum.edu.my)

Advances in all fields of knowledge and the explosive growth of information at the beginning of the 21st century have affected human lives and their ability to cope with changes. In the education sphere, Knowles (1980) identified four forces which have influenced educational practices:

- *Purpose of education:* The main purpose of education is to produce educated persons, which is an end in itself. But education is also, for most countries, the route to development. The educational mission is to produce a competent workforce that is able to adapt to change and continue learning on its own.
- *Shift from teaching to learning:* The teacher's role has changed from a knowledge transmitter to a learning facilitator; that is, from one who controls and directs all aspects of learning to one who gives learners more options and responsibilities for their own learning. Today, learners are no longer seen as recipients of knowledge but active participants in the learning process and co-constructors of knowledge. Solitary learning, too, has been replaced by collaborative learning.
- *New delivery systems:* Delivery of education must be flexible (non-traditional, continuing education, online learning, networked learning, etc.) and need not be housed in an educational institution. The task of a learning organization is to link learners with learning resources.
- *Lifelong learning:* Learning is a lifelong process, whereby compulsory education must be concerned with the development of inquisitive skills, while tertiary education must be concerned with the provision of resources and support for independent/self-managed learning.

OUM, just like any other educational institution, has to adapt to the aforementioned forces. The inherent nature of distance education has given it the extra edge; it provides a more flexible and accessible delivery of education to all who are interested in improving their knowledge and skills, even to those who do not meet the conventional minimal entry requirements.



“The question is how do we ensure that the online discussions are vibrant, active and engaging?”

In catering to working adults, who are naturally more diverse compared to conventional on-campus learners, OUM has built in elements of creativity and innovation in coming up with ways and means of effectively delivering education to the masses.

The successes of OUM over the past 10 years have been attributed, among others, to the blended delivery mode, in which courses are delivered via a blend of face-to-face tutorials, online learning and self-managed learning. However, the successes did not come easy; various issues had to be addressed, and the experiences have provided useful lessons on how best to improve and move forward.

The time has come, though, for OUM to leverage on the various possible combinations of the blended mode, which stretches from the fully face-to-face mode at one end of the continuum to the fully online mode on the other end.

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In order to provide greater flexibility, to better cater to the diversity of learners, and also to reach out to more learners, OUM has decided to move away from the standard blend and to introduce various blends ranging from less face-to-face and more online right up to the fully online mode. The criteria for selecting a course to be offered fully online are based on the “stability” of that particular course: the module must be of good quality; the passing rate for the course and the course completion rate must also be high.

In moving closer towards fully online teaching-learning, one of the most crucial factors that requires attention is the online discussion forum, which actually replaces real-time interactions that typically occur during face-to-face tutorials. The online discussion forum can be a great way for learners to enrich their learning. Discussing topics online asynchronously can be just as beneficial, if not more so than the traditional, synchronous, in-class discussion.

In an online environment, learners can thoughtfully add to a discussion and think, deliberate and reflect on other learner contributions – something that learners may find difficult to do in a conventional classroom situation. Learners will benefit from discussions initiated by other learners, seek clarification from other learners and build a sense of community through the vibrant exchange of ideas and comments on certain topics of the course.

Now, the question is how do we ensure that the online discussions are vibrant, active and engaging?

In order to make effective collaborative learning possible for learners, online discussions must be appropriately planned and moderated. Learners cannot simply be “given” an online forum and told to use it. Such an approach may just result in very little collaborative learning.

During the planning stage, the following three factors should be considered: the *organization of the forum*; the *motivation of learners to participate* and the *ability of learners to participate* effectively. The forum discussion should be organized by topics, which works well for OUM learners, since that is how their learning materials are structured.

However, there appears to be some confusion in terms of tracking their posted questions and answers; at times the discussions appear repetitive. Perhaps it would be useful to have, within each topic, pre-established threads within which arguments could be clustered. This will allow for a more focused and in-depth discussion, thus engaging the learners. Concerning motivation, learners need to be made aware of the goals and purposes of online forums. As well, they should



“Online discussions can be a valuable way of assessing learners’ learning, particularly when the course is offered fully online. However, this can only be valid if the discussion forums are carefully structured and managed.”

be provided useful feedback. Inputs should be rewarded, negative feedback should be avoided, and communities should be developed to avoid lurking.

To ensure that learners are able to participate productively in forum discussions, the *scaffolding approach*, wherein learners are led through the different stages of learning, should be used. The first stage is *access and motivation*, followed by *online socialization*. This will then be followed by the *information exchange* stage, *knowledge construction* and finally *knowledge development*. After having gone through these various stages, learners should be more comfortable and better able to take full responsibility for their learning.

An equally important and crucial matter requiring consideration is the assessment of online discussion forums. Rightly learners’ participation in the forum should be evaluated, as it enables intensive feedback to be provided to learners. This means that the purpose of the assessment, the criteria for assessment and the intended outcomes must be established.

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Since the purposes of online discussion forums are to enable learners to demonstrate their learning, to enhance reflective learning and to promote collaborative learning, then these elements ought to be assessed. The techniques used for assessing the discussions could then include a reflective summary, online survey, self-tests, peer assessment and problem solving scenarios. Whichever technique is used, it is important that it is fair and reliable.

In conclusion, online discussions can be a valuable way of assessing learners' learning, particularly when the course is offered fully online. However, this can only be valid if

the discussion forums are carefully structured and managed. Ultimately, the success of online discussion forums lies in the active roles played by learners, tutors, e-tutors, academic staff, IT personnel and administrators. [TCX](#)

FUTURE OF ODL

By Prof Dr Maheswari Kandasamy (maheswari@oum.edu.my)

Open and distance learning (ODL) has provided learners, especially working professionals, with more opportunities to further their studies. As a result, workers of today have become much more open to career changes as compared to past generations.

ODL is now moving towards increasing automation in teaching and learning processes, using an application known as the Learning Management System (LMS), which runs on the internet platform. In addition, a growing trend in ODL is the use of "hybrid", "blended" or "multimodal" instructional approaches that replace or supplement in-class instruction with technologically enabled teaching and learning known as e-learning, which in many cases utilizes the many tools bundled with the LMS.

Demand for ODL is increasing with the advent of new innovations and enhanced use of information and communication technology (ICT). As ICT becomes more sophisticated, demand for new knowledge will increase for both the ICT literate and illiterate. As technologies become more affordable and readily available, educational options will continue to expand.

In future, ODL will capitalize on network technologies running on smartphones and as video conferencing. Thus, m-learning and virtual learning may be options to consider. In future, too, corporations will consider entering into partnerships with learning institutes and ODL providers.



“As ICT becomes more sophisticated, demand for new knowledge will increase.”

In addition, a major part of formal learning will take place online, freeing learners from the constraints of the conventional classroom. The role of teachers will become more diversified with the demand for better instructors. Consequently, competition in the education markets as well as corporations will increase. [TCX](#)

EMBEDDING THE CULTURE OF ONLINE LEARNING

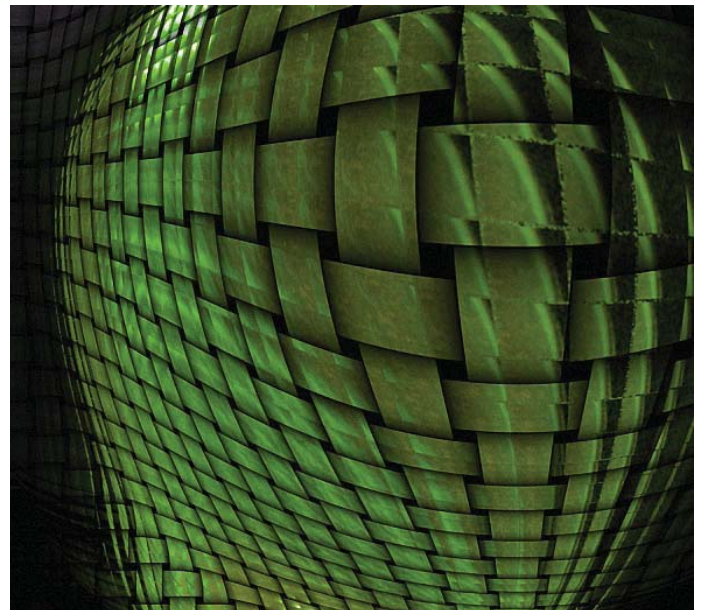
By AP Dr Safiah Md. Yusof (safiah_md Yusof@oum.edu.my)

According to Senior Vice President, Prof Dr. Mansor Fadzil, from the January 2011 semester, OUM's practice of blended learning pedagogy will shift more towards online learning. The challenge, then, will be for OUM to ensure that quality and meaningful online learning takes place. Steps in that direction include but are not limited to the following:

- making sure that the myVLE platform for online learning is tip-top, user-friendly, easy to navigate, and functioning with no major hiccups that will disrupt the learning process;
- training and preparing e-tutors so that they will be well-equipped with the skills and know-how to work in an online learning environment and to effectively manage their virtual classrooms (i.e., forums);
- preparing learners for the online learning environment and increasing their technological awareness;
- developing courses that utilize technology and encouraging learners to explore and engage in online discussions;
- developing learning materials with suitable content for online learning, taking into consideration the different learning styles of learners; and
- providing continuous support to learners and tutors.

The key players in OUM's push for deeper and more extensive online learning are the online tutors, now known as OUM e-tutors. They play a critical role in helping to build a learning environment that is meaningful, enjoyable and rewarding for learners. The e-tutors must be able to manage and facilitate their online forums well, participate in rich discussions with learners, and guide, motivate, engage and stimulate learners to construct knowledge.

The myVLE discussion platform cannot be left to run on its own. E-tutors must be active and should be role models since not all learners are familiar with how the online environment works in an educational setting. Some may think the forum is merely a chat room, which it is not. With plans to offer more courses fully online, OUM must have a



“From the January 2011 semester, OUM’s practice of blended learning pedagogy will shift more towards online learning. The challenge, then, will be for OUM to ensure that quality and meaningful online learning takes place.”

pool of e-tutors who are not only qualified, but who are also skilled online facilitators.

To be realistic, not all courses can work fully online in the OUM context, at least for the time being. The reality is that not everyone can be successful online learners. Although gaining momentum, fully online courses are relatively new in our country compared to other universities abroad with a head-start. Nonetheless, OUM is taking steps to embed the culture of online learning now, ensuring that, when the future arrives, it is in a position to take full advantage of the promise of online learning. [TCX](http://tcx.oum.edu.my)

TAKING PRIDE IN TUTORING

Interview with Basil Jude Surin

By Dr David CL Lim (david@oum.edu.my)

Dr David CL Lim: Tell us briefly about your background as an OUM lead tutor.

Basil Jude Surin: I started off with OUM at Kolej MARA Kulim in May 2003 as a part-time tutor handling undergraduate courses in TESL. In May 2004, I tutored for OUM at Politeknik Seberang Perai until September 2005, when I moved to the Kedah Learning Centre, where I have been to this day. I was appointed a lead tutor in September 2005.

Dr David: What are the main challenges of tutoring at OUM, from your personal perspective?

Basil: One major challenge is meeting learners' high expectations. Of course, learners expect, as they should, that I am always well prepared for tutorials and on top of my subject. They expect me to lecture, tutor, guide and counsel them all at the same time. Apart from that, they also expect me to be non-condescending and understanding when they voice their reasons to explain missed deadlines or poorly written assignments.

As a result, tutorials are often centred on me, since some of my learners are often unable to engage meaningfully in discussions. Reasons often cited include the complexity of certain concepts they have to study, difficulty in engaging with modules written in English, and hectic work schedules.

The onus, then, is on me to give a lecture on the module rather than to facilitate tutorial discussions. The scenario has not really changed much since I started tutoring. This truly goes contrary to the necessity of learners taking control of their own learning, of them being autonomous learners.

Another challenge that I face as a tutor is that learners expect higher marks than what can reasonably be awarded for their assignments. As a tutor, I understand that it is important for learners to get good marks for their assignments and research papers which will be reflected in their academic transcripts. Oftentimes, I have to work hard to discriminate poor work



“Learners expect, as they should, that I am always well prepared for tutorials and on top of my subject.”

from the better ones in a fair manner. I sometimes earn negative remarks from learners who do poorly but expect to be rewarded highly. In the main, it is quite a challenge to get some learners motivated enough to want to read more and do more on their own.

Dr David: You have been an OUM tutor for several years now. What would you say are the key areas of improvement in terms of teaching and learning that you have noticed?

Basil: Although some may disagree, I would say that the recent initiative to appoint different tutors to conduct face-to-face tutorials, mark assignments, and facilitate online discussions seems quite useful. This move not only lightens the burden of tutors, it may even spur learners to work harder

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to produce better assignments, all with the knowledge that their assignments will be marked by anonymous markers whom they cannot hope to influence. Also, having dedicated e-tutors will only see the more serious learners going online to participate in meaningful discussions.

The raising of the standard and quality of assessment methods is also positive. Vigilance against all forms of cheating in examinations needs to be applauded. Continuous effort and seriousness shown in tackling plagiarism is the best way forward for any university of good repute.

The Learning Management System, now called myVLE, has seen tremendous improvements since the time I started with the university. It is so much more user friendly now and is an enhanced avenue for interaction and learning to take place.

Introducing five tutorials instead of three is a good move as it allows learners more time to study, digest and discuss learning content.

Dr David: *What are the most memorable moments that you have had as an OUM tutor?*

Basil: I would say that they include playing my part in seeing certain OUM programmes successfully getting MQA accreditation, and being able to contribute to the smooth running of my learning centre all this while.

Dr David: *How do you see tertiary education, including ODL, evolving in Malaysia over the next decade or more?*

Basil: The mushrooming number of tertiary education providers will hopefully see the provision of more and better programmes at lower costs.

Universities must make important decisions on whether to emphasise teaching, research or both. Whatever it may be, the move towards excelling in research is inevitable. Academics have to excel in both teaching and research in order to remain relevant.

More university initiatives will become commercially oriented and profit driven. Flexible learning initiatives and learning from home will be key features in internet driven environments. Quality assurance and degree accreditation are here to stay.

Dr David: *What changes would you like to see implemented in OUM in the near future?*


Basil: OUM graduate attributes should be clearly spelt out. All efforts by the university should be focused on aiding learners to acquire and demonstrate these attributes.

A reading culture should be emphasised. Resource rooms at learning centres need to be upgraded and their functionality ought to be reviewed. Compulsory reading should be introduced in a serious way – reading lists should be introduced and more emphasis should be given to ensure that learners read serious books and academic articles.

The quality of research papers and assignments produced at all levels should be taken more seriously. There should be stringent measures to ensure that papers and assignments submitted to the university fulfil academic standards. This should be strictly enforced to ensure quality work and to encourage learner excellence. Teaching and assessment methods should challenge learners to analyse and critique what they are studying. Mere regurgitation of knowledge should be entirely discouraged.

Tutor welfare needs to be given serious consideration. Tutor rooms and facilities need to be upgraded at learning centres. Long serving tutors should be commended and recognised for their contributions. Tutor remuneration should be revised.

Dr David: *Any advice you would offer new tutors at OUM?*

Basil: Take pride in your appointment. Be honest and fair in your dealings. Solve problems in a professional manner. Strive diligently as members of a very large team to uphold the ideals of the university and to keep the university at the forefront of quality education. 

THE IMPORTANT THINGS IN LIFE

A philosophy professor stood before his class with some items on the table in front of him. When the class began, wordlessly he picked up a very large and empty mayonnaise jar and proceeded to fill it with rocks, about 2 inches in diameter. He then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was.

So the professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly. The pebbles, of course, rolled into the open areas between the rocks.

He then asked the students again if the jar was full. They agreed it was.

The professor picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else.

He then asked once more if the jar was full. The students responded with a unanimous “Yes.”

“Now,” said the professor, “I want you to recognize that this jar represents your life. The rocks are the important things – your family, your partner, your health, your children – things that if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full.

The pebbles are the other things that matter – like your job, your house, your car.

The sand is everything else. The small stuff.”

“If you put the sand into the jar first,” he continued “there is no room for the pebbles or the rocks. The same goes for your life.

If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that are important to you. Pay attention to the things that are critical to your happiness. Play with your children. Take your partner out dancing. There will always be time to go to work, clean the house, give a dinner party and fix the disposal. [TCX](#)

Drawn from <<http://selfhelphouse.com/moral-stories/the-important-things-in-life.html>> (accessed 13 October 2010)



“If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that are important to you.”



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