

## Towards a reflexive teaching and learning framework in Open Distance Learning (ODL)

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*Open Distance Learning (ODL) modes are usually blended and comprise multiple strategies, so as to mediate learning for students. In the context of, for example Unisa, team work in the operationalisation of its multiple methodologies for student learning is encouraged in order to support students who are spread throughout South Africa and beyond. Emerging trends in higher education suggest a growing interest in the development of reflexive and reflective thinking skills. In this article we argue that, for Unisa's ODL to be compatible with the emerging trends in the development of reflexive and reflective thinking skills, it should create learning environments that can provide an enhancement to learning that goes beyond normal real-life encounters, contributing to a new kind of critical thinking framework. The purpose of this article is to explore the plausibility of the designing of learning activities underpinned and guided by the principles of reflexivity. Central to this article, is the assumption that reflexive skills are fundamental to effective learning in an ODL setting. We perceive situated learning to be noteworthy towards the understanding of reflexive teaching and learning in ODL. Drawing from situated learning theory and Bourdieu, and Freire's theoretical frameworks, this article explores reflexivity and its implications for Unisa and ODL. It also reflects on the emerging trends in, and challenges facing situated learning theory and practice*

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**Keywords:** reflexive practice, reflexivity, open distance learning, situated learning, apprenticeship learning theory

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### INTRODUCTION

Globally, there is a growing interest in the development of reflexive and reflective thinking skills in higher education. Research (Coombs, 2000) indicates that reflective learning and self-organisational thinking processes can be achieved via either real-life or virtual learning environments. It notes that virtual learning environments have the ability to simulate real-life environments, which is very convenient for instructional technology designers wishing to emulate a diverse range of rich, social learning encounters from within an institution. For Unisa's ODL to be compatible with the emerging trends in the development of reflexive and reflective thinking skills, it should create learning environments that can bring an enhancement to learning that goes beyond normal real-life encounters and contributes to a new kind of critical thinking framework. It should furthermore consider designing teaching and learning activities within a reflexive inquiry framework.

Cole and Knowles (2000:5) assert that theorists of reflective practice are interested in helping teachers understand, question and investigate their own learning practices and take these seriously. They argue that professional education has taken a wrong

turn in regarding the role of practitioner as interpreter, translator and implementer of theory produced by academic thinkers and researchers.

Central to this article is the assumption that reflexive skills are fundamental to effective learning in an ODL setting. For practitioners and academics to encourage critical and analytical thinking and enhance collective learning, the designing of learning activities (in the modules) should be underpinned and guided by the principles of reflexive teaching and learning. This article argues that, in an ODL context, students must constantly question themselves as to whether they are being unreflexive or uncritical about their position in the world, and that effective virtual learning environments should be created for "situated learning" – that is learning in which students engage with others. Situated learning plays a critical role towards the understanding of reflexive teaching and learning in ODL settings.

Against this background, the question, "How could ODL practitioners/academics develop reflexive and reflective thinking skills in teacher education in an ODL context?", is crucial. The purpose of this article is to explore the plausibility of the designing of

learning activities underpinned and guided by the principles of reflexivity. In the understanding of effective reflective and reflexive practices, we will draw mainly from the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu and Freire. This article is structured in four sections. The first section explores reflexivity as ontology, epistemology, methodology and method. The second section reflects on the emerging trends in, and challenges facing situated learning theory and practice. The third section explores the implications of reflexivity for Unisa's ODL. The fourth section focuses on teaching and learning in an atmosphere of reflexivity.

### **Reflexivity as the Ontology, Epistemology, Methodology and Method**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described questions of ontology (What is the form and nature of reality and what can be known about it?); epistemology (What is the nature of the relationship between the one who knows and that which can be known?); and methodology (How can the enquirer go about finding out whatever he/she believes could be known?), as essential in reviewing and conducting research. Ontology is required in order to clarify the resulting issues of reflexivity and epistemology, without getting tied up in strong constructivism (Olsen, 2008). Ontology is furthermore not just a series of foundational statements. For instance, ontological statements largely deal with hermeneutics and contested meanings.

The concept, "reflexivity", is very broad, it boasts a very rich history and carries diverse meanings. Along this continuum, there are many interpretations with a common thread linking them – namely applying one's experience to oneself, while reflecting upon it, examining it critically, and exploring it analytically. It is seen as an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge construction, especially with regard to the researcher, and at every step of the research process. For some scholars it is a concept used in the social sciences to explore and deal with the relationship between the researcher and the object of his/her research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007:60).

On the other hand, reflexivity in research design affords one the "space" to decolonise Western research methodologies (Nicholls 2009:117) and challenges us to take ownership of our shortcomings, misunderstandings, oversights and mistakes, to reclaim our lives and to bring about strong changes to our current realities. Being reflexive ensures that we do not compromise our identity whilst undertaking research (Karen & Booran, 2003:212). Reflexivity may engage the process of questioning the enlightenment/modernist prioritisation of reflectivity; erasing it at the same time as acknowledging its pulsing course through the veins of metaphysical enquiry in the present.

From an historical point of view, the principle of reflexivity was first enunciated by William Thomas in the early 1900s. He maintained that the situations that men define as true actually become true for them. By the 1980s, reflexivity was interpreted in terms of mapping research activities against a linguistic background. The researcher was still invisible and there was no analysis of the interaction between the two frames of meaning production.

Literature indicates that, in 1971, Alvin Gouldner pointed out how ethnographers could be regarded as normalising cultural fields - a criticism that threatened to reveal the interests behind Western constructions of knowledge and, resultantly, destabilise the dominant world-view. Its proponents, among others, include Bourdieu, Woolgar, Foucault and Bhabha. Bourdieu argued that the social scientist was inherently laden with bias, and only by becoming reflexively aware of such bias, could social scientists free themselves from it and aspire to practising an objective science. For him, reflexivity is an epistemological principle that advises sociologists, as "objectifying subjects", to turn their objectifying gaze upon themselves and become aware of the hidden assumptions that structure their research (Karakayali, 2004:352). In addition, he held that reflexivity is part of the solution, not the problem.

The importance of reflexive practice has been attracting increasing attention from a variety of academic disciplines, and from researchers whose theoretical convictions range from realism to post-modernism. However, teacher education has not run away from this trend. With the growing influence of post-modernism and post-structuralism on teacher education theory and practice, reflexivity is considered by many supporters to be an excellent phenomenon, as it involves recognition of the problematic nature of research, the dubious position of the researcher, the crisis of representation, the constructive nature of language, as well as an admission of the fact that there is no "one best way" of conducting either theoretical or empirical work (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

In this article, we will draw mainly from Bourdieu's framework. Bourdieu consistently argued that his conception of epistemic reflexivity provided, not only a means of developing richer descriptions of the social world, but also the basis for a more practically adequate and epistemologically secure social science. Bourdieu's reflexivity takes two forms, namely methodological and epistemic. Epistemic reflexivity focuses on researchers' belief systems and is a process aimed at analysing and challenging metatheoretical assumptions. Methodological reflexivity is concerned with the monitoring of the behavioural impact on the research setting as a result of conducting the research (Brannick & Coghlan,

2007:60). Flowing from this, Bourdieu's reflexivity seems to be essentially a methodology that may produce the ironic outcome that a theory, essentially of social reproduction, may not be able to reproduce itself. For Bourdieu, reflexivity does not mean that one reflects upon one's theories, but rather on one's practices. It is an attempt to relate social experiences to theoretical constructs.

Of note is the fact that experiences are situated in time and place, and experiences are contextualised (St. Clair, Rodriguez & Nelson, 2005:142). The notion of the teacher as a reflexive practitioner, and the teacher as a researcher of own classroom practice, is widely promoted in teacher education literature of recent years (UNESCO, 2007). This involves using reflexive practice as a teacher development tool – both in a pre-service/novice and in an in-service context of professional teacher development. Being reflexive means much more than being critical of a field or aspect/component of teaching practice. It means that one must know how the field is organised and how it is practised (St. Clair, Rodriguez & Nelson, 2005:146).

In this article we examine reflexivity as a meaningful way of approaching the discipline of learning about teaching so that a better understanding of teaching, as well as teaching about teaching might be developed. For reflexivity to lead to valuable learning outcomes, both for teacher educators and their students, we argue that it must be an effective reflexivity practice. Against this background, reflexive practice is seen by many teacher educators to be at the very heart of effective teacher preparation programmes and the development of professional competence. Teachers cannot be reflexive without reflecting on the modes of teaching and learning involvement. Therefore, reflexive practices can be viewed as essential in accounting for various subjective preconceptions and distortions that infiltrate the decision-making process.

### **Emerging Trends in and Challenges Facing Situated Learning Theory and Practice**

Many scholars differ in their clarification of that which is termed "learning", and often descriptions are driven by contextual imperatives. The plethora of explanations for one concept is usually seen as an advantage that allows different perspectives to describe one phenomenon. We, therefore, note that some education researchers describe learning in terms of its functionality (Taylor 1997). Yet, others describe learning as a process emerging from activity in a subjective and socially constructed reality world, perceived as situated learning (Rambusch, 2006), rather than describing it as entirely taking place in people's minds. Rambusch goes on to claim that situated learning has been less successful in gaining support from teachers, educators and educational researchers (1998), arguing that situated learning

theories are closely related to the philosophies of situated cognition, and that these have emerged in objection to cognitivist conceptions in educational thinking (Brown, Collins & Duguid 1989; Lave & Wenger 1991; Nicholls 2009). Rogoff (1990) and Lave and Wenger (1991) advance another contention about situated learning - namely that of the plethora of different views regarding its conception as illustrated by various scholars.

For the purpose of this article, we concentrate on similarities in the various views on situated learning in the literature consulted. We also argue that situated learning does pose challenges to learning, but we furthermore argue that it provides enormous opportunities for meaningful learning – namely learning that emerges from context. In order to illustrate this argument, we start off by examining some of the challenges of learning in general, followed by challenges experienced in the situated learning paradigm. Many educators and education researchers tend to separate "knowing" and "doing", because they treat knowledge as an integral, self-sufficient substance, which is theoretically independent of the situations in which it is learnt and used (Brown, Collins & Duguid 1989). This tendency is extremely short-sighted, because it marginalises social interaction that occurs in communities where learning is embedded. Research positively proved that learners first learn by observing members of a community "doing" or acting upon their needs, and thereafter add new knowledge to what has already been learnt. The challenge advanced here is that educators need to be knowledgeable about this crucial fact and they need to reaffirm the experiences "learnt" by learners from their communities by integrating these into what is being taught at school.

Rambusch (2006) posits that various scholars have argued that it is impossible to understand how people learn and how they make use of knowledge, both from within and outside schools. This is a strong reaffirmation that "knowing" and context are irreducibly co-constituted, and that there exists a relationship between learners and their specific context (environment). In other words, there is an existing relationship between what learners know and what they do not know (what they are about to learn and do at school). Our argument is that education scholars and researchers need to consider learning and knowledge appropriation in terms of interaction and the construction of meaning within a broad socio-cultural context. Because situated learning perceives learning as a result of social activity in context, it is grounded in the notion that cognition and learning are culturally and socially mediated (Vygotsky 1932). Situated learning and situated cognition are not necessarily exclusive to each other; they are not opposed to dualistic assumptions. It is affirmed that the mind cannot be described and understood in

isolation to its context (Rambusch 1998). Rambusch further indicates that cultural-historical conceptions of activity, learning and development had important implications for the situated learning framework.

Subsequently, the notion of activity is essential for situated learning theories that are reflected in concepts such as participation and apprenticeship (Rambusch 1998). This reaffirms the centrality of peer interaction, scaffolding and modelling as important ways to facilitate cognition growth and knowledge acquisition. Attesting to Rambusch's observation espoused above, Freire (2005:102), focusing on the role of teachers, says that:

*... our relationship with the learners (students) is one of the roads that we can take to intervene in reality over both the short and long term. ... our relationship with the learners demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them. To try to know the reality that our students live is a task that the educational practice imposed on us: without this, we have no access to the way they think, so only with great difficulty can we perceive what and how they know.*

What Freire is pointing to is the fact that learners are shaped by their home culture (you may call it home environment or community environment). But when in school, they are shaped by the classroom culture and the classroom culture is shaped by the learners' community culture. Since the learners do not necessarily leave their community and home culture outside the school culture, it is obvious that their learning will be influenced by the social, cultural and historical conditions of the context in which they speak about and testify about.

### **Implications of Reflexivity for Unisa's ODL Context**

Bourdieu systematically used the term "reflexivity" during the 1990s, with the emergence of a new analytic conflict between rationalism and relativism (Tsekeris & Katrivesis, 2008). According to Bourdieu, reflexivity must include the social dimension of knowledge production, as well as the various effects of intellectual fields and interests. Bourdieu's reflexivity objectifies objectification but needs development to help achieve objective knowledge. Reflexivity enters the social sciences via phenomenology and often rejects the traditional meaning of validity because, as social constructivists, these researchers do not subscribe to the idea that an objective reality exists external to their research. On the other hand, it is valued and central to many researchers' examination of their own subjectivity and its impact on the research process – more in particular, analysis and interpretation

The recent discourses about reflexivity are partly due to a shift away from the concept of reflection, tarnished as it is by its affiliation with modern philosophy's decontextualised subject matter. Reflexivity has also been identified as one of the defining features of the post-industrial society and of 'new' social movements. For Habermas, modernisation is, in part, the realisation of the reflexive potential inherent in the communicative rationality of the real world. In addition, reflexivity was introduced in opposition to cognitivist or moral-practical interpretations of modernity. If reflexivity therefore dramatises the situated nature of reflection, the interest it awakens today is more than just a festive wake occasioned by the demise of the philosophy of the subject. At philosophical level, reflexivity involves the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of embodied subjectivity, thus providing rich material for analysis. As an essential human capacity, reflexivity is responsible for the mobilisation of personal experience towards subjective orientation at an interactional level. Therefore, reflexivity is regarded as an essential ability that assists the actors to adjust to situations or to the specific contexts of social phenomena.

Reflexivity is compatible with the Freirean framework – it negates the "banking" concept of education. Implicit in the "banking" concept is the assumption of a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely *in* the world, not *with* the world or with others; the individual is spectator, not re-creator (Freire, 1999). At the heart of this article is the assumption that education is the practice of freedom - as opposed to education as the practice of domination. According to Freire (1999), liberating education comprises acts of cognition, rather than transferrals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognisable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates between the cognitive actors – the teacher on the one hand and the students on the other.

Accordingly, at the outset, the practice of problem-posing education entails that the teacher-student contradiction be resolved. Dialogical relations - indispensable to the capacity of cognitive actors to cooperate in perceiving the same cognisable object - are otherwise impossible (Freire, 1999). Therefore, we argue that the contemporary "banking" approach to teacher education, for example, will never propose to students that they critically consider reality. In the "banking" approach, reality is seen as motionless, static, compartmentalised and predictable.

Furthermore, in the "banking" concept of education, knowledge is a gift, bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable, upon those whom they consider to know nothing (Freire, 1999). The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian

dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teacher's existence but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher. For this reason we hold that education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of this contradiction so that both can simultaneously be teacher-education practitioners and students.

Although the discourses of reflexivity remained tied to a number of essential developments in contemporary sociology, little attention, if any, has been paid to its implications for ODL. Reflexivity has a number of significant implications for Unisa's ODL and, more specifically, for teacher education theory and practice. Teaching and learning in a reflexive setting are strongly shaped by the context in which the teacher practises. This is usually the classroom which, in turn, is strongly influenced by the wider school culture and the community and society in which the school is situated.

Teachers' daily experiences in their practice context, shape their understanding and their understanding shapes their experiences (Timperley, 2008:6). Therefore, the fluid nature of teaching and learning in teacher education demands a revitalised framework of effective teacher education, which is consistent with research into teacher learning, Freirean pedagogy and the emerging paradigm of teaching as an ongoing intellectual pursuit focusing, not on the mastering of static content, but rather on the construction of meaning within a collaborative environment. Flowing from the above, we argue that teaching and learning in teacher education should shift from the "banking" concept of education to the Freirean framework.

### **Teaching and Learning in an Atmosphere of Reflexivity**

Reflexivity grounds reality in the interconnectedness of varied socio-cultural activities and interactions, which are shaped by learning where, in the process of learning, learning is shaped by reality. Freire (2005) locates the whole process of learning in the social interconnectedness of dimensions of human activity which, in turn, lies in the economic, political, cultural and environmental dimensions of human inter-relationships. This observation is evidence that learning is always situated in a social context and must be understood and analysed as such.

Freire (2005:102), arguing for a progressive educator discourse on learning, had this to say: "(O)ur relationship with the learners demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them. To try to know the reality that our students live is a task that the educational practice imposed on us: Without this, we have no

access to the way they think; so only with great difficulty can we perceive what and how they know". Of note is that the concrete conditions of the learners' world are not necessarily certain, straightforward and static, but they could be uncertain, complex and dynamic as well. It is therefore imperative that learning addresses real-life uncertainties, complexities and dynamic situations. But to provide such learning-in-context or situated learning, students must be taught how to learn, how to be critical and how to be both reflective and reflexive in their learning.

Affirming Freire's view, Torres (1996) argues that uncertainties, complex processes, disruptions and confusion in concrete life situations, could form part of criticising processes during learning if educators are progressive (meaning that they must be democratically literate educators). Attesting to this observation, Stevenson (as cited by Le Roux 1996), sees the notion of acknowledging uncertainties, complexities, disruptions and confusion as processes that need to be embraced in learning as being enriching and as a means to provide alternative ways of learning rather than allowing the learning process to be rendered ineffective and unfulfilling to both educators and learners. We seem to concur with Popkewitz and Fendler (1999) that learning, which allows learners to criticise their way of learning and doing things, is an acceptable pedagogical process that allows reflexivity in learning.

Vincini (2003) says that the theory behind situated learning or situated cognition arises from the fields of psychology, anthropology, sociology and the cognitive sciences. In a seminal paper, "Situated Cognition and the Culture of Learning" ([www.ilt.columbia.edu/ilt/paper/johnBrown.html](http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/ilt/paper/johnBrown.html) 16 August 2010) by Brown, Collins and Duguid criticise public schooling for separating "knowing and doing" and for treating knowledge "as an integral, self-sufficient substance, theoretically independent of the situations in which it is learned and used".

The social interaction that takes place in communities of practice or in learning involving teachers and learners, is important to the theory of situated learning. Lave and Wenger (in *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, 1991) emphasises that "novices begin learning by observing members of the community and then slowly move from the periphery of the community to fully participating members". Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) state that situated learning is a new paradigm of learning, which emphasises apprenticeship, coaching, collaboration, multiple practices, the articulation of learning skills, stories and technology. Although not specifying all the aspects indicated by Brown, et al. (1989), Vincini (2003) seems to concur

with Brown, et al. with regard to the following four instructional design factors:

- Learning is driven and best presented through realistic and complex problems that allow learners to learn to think and practise like experts in the field.
- Content is learnt through activities that assist in solving the problems, and not from “packages” of information organised by instructors.
- The instructor’s role moves from providing and structuring the information and knowledge by means of lectures and presentations to modelling, coaching and scaffolding learners as they use information and create knowledge to solve contextual real-life problems.
- Situated learning environments must support active engagement, discussion, evaluation and reflective thinking (as well as reflexive learning). Activities and assignments are often collaborative and group-based.

We note that the above learning pedagogical and ontological nuances are not proposed and implemented for the sake of modernising situated learning, but to provide progressive learning environments that allow active, participatory and scaffolding learning spaces for all learners. Genevieve Haas (Article Review: “Smart People or Smart Contexts? Cognition, Ability and Talent Development in an Age of Situated Approaches to Knowing and Learning” by Sasha Barab) argues that cognition is situated or viewed in terms of the “relationship between learners and the specific environment”. He further argues that cognition is a collective idea, distributed across individuals and resources, that is, “knowing and context are irreducibly co-constituted”.

What does this mean for teaching and learning in an ODL context? It means that students, learning via an ODL mode, will have to be provided with modelling, coaching and problem-solving learning activities, in order to learn better (based on the activity theory). Teachers and learners should be cautioned that carrying out activities during learning is not just focused on the end result, but also on the process and social context of the activity performed. The learning is not just about the accomplishment of the task, but also about learning about the tools and the environment in which it is accomplished (Haas 2003), and deliberately criticising the whole learning process to avoid the perception that knowledge is “complete”.

By also looking at the Legitimate Peripheral Participation or Apprenticeship Learning Theory, it can be revealed that the “learner is motivated to go

from being a novice, working at the periphery, to an expert, working at the centre, by the authenticity of the task” (Haas 2003). Vygotsky’s Social-cultural Theory seems to concur with the social interaction that occurs in communities of practice or in social learning environments. Vygotsky argues that the social environment can influence students’ learning and thinking. In Vygotsky’s view, peer interaction, scaffolding, and modelling are important ways of facilitating individual cognitive growth and knowledge acquisition ([www.edb.utexas.edu/csclstudent/Dhisiao/theories.html](http://www.edb.utexas.edu/csclstudent/Dhisiao/theories.html). 23/04/10).

He further posits that there are two phases in the social process. Firstly, in the initial phase of problem-solving, students who are encouraging, supporting and guiding each other are often observed. In the second phase, students come to their own conclusions, based on experimental evidence, and resolve their conflict by articulating their argumentation. Freire (2005) puts this idea differently when he says that educators’ mediation of learning should “be so much more effective as they lucidly and objectively make clear to the learners, (1) that changing one’s position is legitimate, and (2) the reasons that made them change”. However, Freire cautions “that the relationship between educators and learners is complex, fundamental and difficult; it is a relationship about which we should think constantly” (p107).

However, we concur with Lave (1991) that learning is the function of the activity, context and culture in which it takes place, and that situated learning, which is embedded in the community of practice paradigm (emphasising sharing and doing; constructing of meaning in a social unit), takes place when learners work on authentic tasks that take place in a real-world setting (Winn 1993). Although some scholars of situated learning practice seem to think that this type of learning cannot be intentional, Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that this is legitimate peripheral participation. This, however, is an indication that Lave and Wenger (1991) reject the view that the subjects operate on object structure, as “they see learning not in the acquisition of structure, but in the increased access of learners to participating roles in expert performance”.

The reflexive teaching approach has the potential of fostering a practical consideration of social transformation among learners, which can humanise the experience of people who work for organisations. Among others, these are the guiding principles for a reflexive approach to teaching and learning:

- Acknowledging social constructivist epistemology as foundational to knowledge construction and meaning-making in situated learning.

- Rejecting conventional conceptualisations of organisations as “rational”, static entities.
- Encouraging a conceptualisation of organisations as complex, dynamic entities, constantly (and actively) transformed by human beings with a view to their own growth and advancement.
- Seeing human behaviour in organisations as fluid, complex and often contradictory, but acknowledging that this nature of human behaviour is not necessarily bad.
- Involving the use of Experience-Based Learning (EBL) techniques, hence recognising prior learning experiences of learners.
- Being open to multi-dimensional perspectives and multidimensional technologies, so as to enable and support learners in diverse contexts.

These principles provide students with the necessary tools to interpret the multiple perspectives and world views of the complex world they live in.

## CONCLUSION

Reflexive practice is critical in ODL teaching and learning. It offers the potential to create “reflexive teachers”, who will be able to make informed choices in their schools and act more effectively, so as to make workplace practices more ethical and equitable; while stimulating the possibility of *praxis*. It is in *praxis* that theory becomes an emancipatory guide that will empower students to be positive agents of change when they are “out there in the real world”. Given the fluid nature of teaching and learning in teacher education, reflexive practice, among others, has the potential of providing the basis for situated learning in an ODL context – focusing, not on the mastering of static content, but rather on the construction of meaning within a collaborative environment.

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