OPEN, BLENDED, AND ENGAGED LEARNING
AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
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1. INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of terms such as open, blended, and engaged learning (and other related concepts) varies depending on the context. This document seeks to develop a common understanding by examining what these terms mean from the perspective of the University of the Free State (UFS). Both nationally and internationally, open, blended, and engaged learning concepts are interpreted in different ways, since no single definition appears to satisfy the various role-players involved. This document will also explore the theoretical underpinnings of various aspects of these types of learning, contextualising them where possible by looking at practical examples of interventions in different higher education institutions (HEIs). For the sake of clarity and general understanding, it is necessary to explain the meaning of open learning, blended learning, engaged learning, flexible learning, computer-supported learning (distance education, on-line learning, e-learning and web-based learning), resource-based learning, mobile learning, and other main educational principles such as student and learning centeredness.

2. OPEN LEARNING

The Working Group on Distance Education and Open Learning (WGDEOL 2002:19)\(^1\) defined Open Learning (OL) as;

\[\ldots\text{a philosophy of learning that is based on the principle of flexibility to increase access to and equity in education. An open learning philosophy implies that HEIs provide a variety of ways to open access to learning opportunities to a diverse range of students. In this context, students are allowed to determine what they want to learn, how they}\]

want to learn, when and where they want to learn and what they want to do next in terms of career direction.

2.1 Open learning in a South African context

A programme for the transformation of higher education (DoE 1997)² outlined specific goals for the transformation of the higher education system. The goal concerning open learning states that the development of a flexible learning system, including distance education, resource-based learning, and all of the preceding forms of learning based on open learning principles, should be promoted at both national and institutional levels. The Ministry of Education anticipates that, in reaching the goals of equity and development, HEIs should expand the range of learning programmes and increase enrolment based on open learning and distance education. In addition, learning needs to play a fundamental role in meeting the challenge to expand access, diversify the body of students, and enhance quality in a context of limited resources. Open learning thus enables learning to take place in different contexts, at a multiplicity of sites, and at the student’s own pace, while using many media and a variety of learning and teaching approaches.

In 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) document A Policy Framework for Education and Training saw open learning as an approach that would contribute to increased access to South Africa’s previously disadvantaged majority and, in addition, afford opportunities for redress (ANC 1994:78)³. This document defines open learning as follows:

Open learning is the philosophy of educational practice that is a precondition for success in restructuring the educational system to provide lifelong learning in our country. Open learning describes an approach which seeks to remove all unnecessary restrictions to

learning. It enjoins us to provide education in a flexible manner, so that as many people as possible, throughout their lives, are able to take advantage of learning opportunities. To do so, we must stop thinking of education as something that occurs within the walls of a school and can only be done by the talking teacher. It requires that we set up the structures and conditions which enable learners to learn where, when, what and how they want to. Importantly, it is not only a matter of access. It must offer quality learning that brings a reasonable chance of success.

The 1995 White Paper (DoE 1995)⁴ places great emphasis on the value of education and training based on the principles of open learning and states as follows:

*The Ministry of Education is anxious to encourage the development of an open learning approach, since it resonates with the values and principles of the national education and training policy which underpins this document and has applicability in all learning contexts.*

*Open learning is an approach which combines the principles of learner centredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision, the removal of barriers to access learning, the recognition for credit of prior learning experience, the provision of learner support, the construction of learning programmes in the expectation that learners can succeed, and the maintenance of rigorous quality assurance over the design of learning materials and support systems. South Africa is able to gain from world-wide experience over several decades in the development of innovative methods of education, including the use of guided self-study, and the appropriate use of a variety of media, which give practical expression to open learning principles.*

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2.2 Types of learning that resort under open learning

Open learning is seen as the umbrella term for learning that offers students the opportunity to be in control of their own learning and that includes the following modes of learning.

2.2.1 Blended learning

Blended learning is a learning method that appropriately combines online instructional resources and face-to-face facilitated activities. This learning approach includes, among others, formal academic instruction, group and individual study, tutoring, resource based learning, service learning, and cooperative learning that involves both online and in-person activities. The online component can include e-learning techniques, such as online delivery through web-supported learning or discussion boards and email, while the face-to-face component can vary from traditional forms of learning such as formal lectures, seminars and tutorials to practical sessions. Flexible blended learning is the ideal approach, supported by many HEIs on a national and international level. This flexibility is created in terms of entrance to academic programmes; modes of delivery; methods of assessment; and time, place, and pace of study. In general, this mix of contact sessions and other delivery media is used to enhance and optimise learning.

According to the Institutional Quality Assurance Manual, Section 3, blended learning is accepted at the UFS as a teaching-learning strategy for both on-campus and off-campus academic programmes. On-campus teaching and learning (utilising different innovative approaches, strategies, and methods) are at the core of operations at the UFS. A blended learning model is one that incorporates a variety of delivery styles and accommodates different student and organisational needs to achieve the most effective learning. The blended model, currently being phased in at the institution, implies presenting modules with a blend of the traditional face-to-face method and incorporating a variety of delivery techniques, specifically an online presence, i.e. computer-supported learning (CSL) for each module. The exact nature of the proposed blend will differ from module to module. For example, theoretical modules may tend to have a larger face-to-face component, while modules that have a stronger emphasis on the application of
theory may have a more dominant online component which supports problem-based and resource-based approaches. The blended model further supports the sharing of human and educational resources across campuses by making courses available to students on satellite campuses via the communal learning management system. The UFS offer two modes of learning, namely, a blended mode for on-campus students and the distributed mode of learning for off-campus students. The blended mode involves a blend of face-to-face and online learning. Each programme or module determines its own proportion of blend. The distributed mode entails a fully online programme for off-campus students (distance education).

2.2.2 Engaged learning
Engaged learning (EL) entails the use of active and interactive engagement methods. These methods aim to support conceptual understanding and involve heads-on and hands-on actions that provide direct feedback to the student. The term “engagement” has been used to express a myriad of student actions and thoughts which are believed vital to a high quality undergraduate learning experience. It is widely accepted that active engagement in the learning process encourages students to learn more successfully. Kuh (2002:1 of 26)\(^5\) emphasises the fact that who the student is or which HEIs he/she attends is less important than what the student does, which is the cornerstone of a meaningful learning experience contributing to academic performance. EL involves the use of knowledge gained during class contact in real-life situations. Working in a two-way manner, the experience enhances the learning whilst the learning enhances the experience. Traditional teaching methods are less successful than active and interactive teaching because of the passive role that students play during formal lecturing, with no interaction. Active and interactive learning differ in the following ways:

- Active learning is seen as a dynamic process in which the student plays an active role. Students who actively take part in learning activities would learn more than students who are passive in the learning process since knowledge is constructed through active involvement "Active learning", according to Boyer

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could include many "avenues" of education and allows students to become lively participants who can direct their own learning in contrast to the formal lecture that creates a passive or superficial approach to learning.

- Interactive learning differs from active learning in the sense that it entails an increased interchange among lecturers and students. Students are thus encouraged to work cooperatively in a social environment. The use of interactive lectures can encourage active learning. Interactive learning can thus be seen as an educational strategy that increases student participation, increases attention and motivation, and gives feedback to the teacher and the student by moving away from one-way content delivery to increasing interaction.

Methods that facilitate active and interactive learning suggested in the literature include, among others, case studies, demonstrations, peer engagement, simulations, peer instruction and presentations, reflective teaching, problem-solving, discovery, inquiry, and online learning. The following approaches to learning also resort under engaged learning:

- conceptual learning (encourages understanding rather than memorisation);
- discovery learning (students construct their own knowledge through discovery);
- experience-based learning (learning in which the student is directly in touch with the realities being studied);
- group learning, also called collaborative learning (groups of students work together to reach a shared goal and contribute to one another’s learning);
- problem-based learning (an instructional method that challenges students to seek solutions to real world problems);
- reflective learning (reflection which gives time for the student to process the learning);
- resource-based learning (learning through exposure to diverse resources);
- self-directed learning (a decreased emphasis on the use of lectures and an increase in the use of self-directed teaching/learning strategies); and

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• service-learning (applied learning directed at specific community needs integrated into an academic programme).

2.2.3 Flexible learning
Flexible learning (FL) is very much the same as the “student-centred” philosophy in that it recognises the diversity of learning styles and students’ needs. A range of approaches can be used to accommodate student diversity, giving students greater choice in terms of when, where, and how they learn. Flexible learning could include, among others, online learning (e-learning), distance education, self-directed learning, mixed-mode delivery, mobile learning, and self-paced learning.

2.2.4 Student-centredness
A concept that also needs clarification is student-centredness. It is a teaching-learning concept related to distance education and open learning. This approach is based on the notion that students should be the main focus of teaching-learning practices and should actively participate in decision-making affecting their learning, taking into account their experience and context. Student-centred educational practices are not unidirectional where information flows only from the source to a passive student. Instead, the fact that the student is actively part of the teaching-learning process encourages, among others, independent and critical thinking and analytical skills; in addition, it equips the student with other competencies. Student-centred education is thus an educational strategy in which it is expected of the students to accept responsibility for his/her own learning. The focus is on active involvement of the students in the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Student-centred approaches include among others:

2.2.5 Learning-centredness
The UFS, according to its Teaching-Learning Policy, strives to promote a learning-centred and knowledge-based teaching-learning environment. Teaching-learning activities primarily take place in academic programmes and guide students to attain specific outcomes. A learning-centred approach is one in which not only lecturers and students, but all sections and activities of the institution work together in establishing a
learning community that promotes a deepening of insight and a broadening of the perspective of learning and the application thereof.

2.2.6 **Computer-supported learning**

In the CSL environment, the terms *e-learning, online learning, distance education* or *distance learning*, and *web-based learning* are often used interchangeably. However, at the UFS:

- **E-learning** predominantly entails teaching or learning activities involving computers and interactive networks, i.e. via the internet and/or intranets.

- **Web-based learning** is the delivery of learning materials and activities with a Web browser in a Web format. Additional media like CD-ROM can also be included. Web-based learning material is usually retrieved from a web site by means of web browsing.

- **Online learning** is associated with learning where the learning content is readily available/accessible in a computer environment that may be on the web or the internet.

- **Distance education**\(^7\) or *distance learning* involves interaction between students and lecturers at a distance, that is, a teaching approach in which the students are detached by physical distance from the lecturer, either in space or time, for a considerable part of their learning. In the traditional approach, the lecturer and students are in a face-to-face situation. The remote or off-campus approach is facilitated by means of technological media, which is mainly computer-supported. SAIDE (2000: 52)\(^8\) regards distance education as:

  A set of teaching and learning strategies (or educational methods) that can be used to overcome spatial and temporal separation between educators and learners. These strategies or methods can be integrated into any educational programme and – and potentially – used in any

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combination with any teaching and learning strategies in the provision of education (including those which demand that learners and educators be together at the same time and/or place).

2.2.7 Mobile learning

The use of mobile devices in the teaching-learning process is referred to as mobile learning (m-learning). Mobile wireless learning is becoming more and more accepted in HEIs and is generally described as ‘learning anytime everywhere’. This type of learning entails the delivery of electronic learning material through mobile wireless devices both in verbal and/or visual format. These devices include, among others, mobile phones, iPods, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and palmtop computers. The short and medium-term planning for the UFS’s electronic network already reflects responsiveness to the consequences of mobile learning.

3. SUMMARY

To summarise – the UFS thus sees open learning as a student-centred teaching-learning approach that is flexibly designed to meet students’ individual needs and involve educational interventions in which many facets of the learning process are under the control of the student. The student is the focus of the educational process and is regarded as an active participant in an interactive process.