**The “Teaching Voice” in ODL materials: Teaching through**

**the Materials**

In the same way that a teacher in a classroom is required to mediate/ explain/ teach the requisite content/skills, in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) context the materials need to take on the role of the teacher and do the same. The “teaching voice” therefore needs to be *more* than just a friendly, social, ‘team-talking’ voice that says “*Welcome to Unit 1 of this Course…”; “ I am sure you have found Activity 1 quite easy*…”; or which announces a new topic, *“The next section is about prefixes and suffixes.”* The teaching voice needs to teach the content. Just about all the units submitted for the evaluation do reflect a friendly “voice” that makes the type of comments included above. This is necessary and good. However this notion needs to be taken much further and to a deeper level. The voice in the materials needs to***mediate*** or ***teach.*** Distance Education writers, like Lockwood, talk about ***unpacking the content***. A concern in many of the materials is that information is ***stated*** rather than taught and unpacked. This is why it is found, that many of the materials, in their current state, are not yet suitable for self study purposes.

### The article, *Learning a Learning Spiral and Materials Design* (emailed to everyone already) addresses itself to how people learn and consequently how best to design materials that enable learning. The extract below further elucidates the need for ODL materials to mediate learning.

### EXTRACT

### The Learning Spiral and Distance Education

…This is how people learn in any situation. So the concept of a learning cycle or spiral is not just about distance learning. The learning process is the same whether the guided reflection is immediate and face to face, or whether it is mediated through the materials.

In face to face tuition the learner and the teacher are able to have a conversation in which the teacher can respond very quickly in an ad hoc way to what the learner does or says and start to challenge and shift the conceptions that the learner is developing. In distance learning you, the writers, have to anticipate what the learner is likely to do and think and say. You cannot always anticipate correctly, but you can construct a set of activities that are likely to take that learner in the required direction in terms of the development; in other words in the direction of the learning pathway.

In a learning text, we know what is required to establish such a learning pathway. In the absence of a mediator (teacher), the **text must take over the dialogic role** of providing structured and systematic support to the learner as s/he moves from familiar activity (“the known”) to unfamiliar activity (“the unknown”). A designed learning text must consist of a series of learning activities, organised in a developmental sequence, which together require the learner to engage in thoughts and practices characteristic of what the course is trying to teach.

The question is how does a piece of text substitute for what a teacher does? Think about it: in an ordinary learner-centred context (one in which activities that the learner engages in are set up as the basis on which learning occurs), a teacher is constantly giving feedback to learners on the ongoing outcomes of what they are doing – Is you answer to the question accurate and well-developed? Is the essay that you are writing well-argued? Is the solution you have developed to a geometry problem mathematically sound? Is your reading fluent and accurate? Etc. – and how they might improve their performance. When one writes a learning text, the idea is to construct feedback in such a way that the reflection encourages students to think critically about what they have done, and provide a framework against which students might be able to discover and reflect on mistakes they may have made. The materials become a mediator or educator.

The text can also help people to come to understand for themselves how they come to learn something new, for example by asking a question or by reading something new so that they are more aware that they can learn and they can take their own learning forward.

**Establish and maintain a dialogue with the learners**

In the extract (above) it is stated that ***in the absence of a mediator (teacher), the******text must take over the dialogic role.*** Another Distance Education writer, Rowntree, conceptualises a learning text basically as ***a tutorial in print***. Having established the importance of the *teaching voice* that mediates learning and the *social voice* that motivates learners, he encourages writers of ODL materials to create and use opportunities to engage with the learners in a range of different ways. Here are some ideas for doing this.

* Introduction to the unit as a whole. Address yourself to the learners and build on their experiences in order to create an interest in the unit;
* In the introductions to the different sections, reflect briefly on what the learners have discovered in the previous unit and also provide them with an overview of what to expect;
* Link with any previous experiences or concepts that were learned in previous units or that will  be covered in subsequent units;
* Provide learners with a rationale for doing the activities and give them clear and unambiguous instructions;
* Comment on the activities and examples that were used to develop the concepts in the text where appropriate;
* Indicate to learners any problems that you think they might have and give them encouragement;
* Give the learners some guidelines and hints on how to approach the study of the unit or aspects of it;
* The feedback on activities is an excellent way of creating a dialogue with learners;
* Introduce the views of students and peers about certain topics and discuss these with the learners;
* Challenge the learners to be critical and not to accept everything they read.

A rule of thumb is to place yourself in the shoes of your learners and provide them with suitable in text support. Keep the learners in mind as you develop the concepts and ideas and respond to them in the text as you would if you were teaching them in a face to face situation. It is more difficult to do this in the text because you cannot rely on physical cues. Remember the learners cannot ask you for any clarification. This is why it is so important to anticipate problems and then to present the concepts and explanations as clearly as possible.

The table below, while not exhaustive, is intended to provide examples that illustrate both the ***function*** of the teaching voice or dialogue in ODL materials as well as ***how*** this could be implemented in the materials. The table shows the similarity between how a teacher may talk to learners in a classroom situation and the way in which the author of an ODL text is required to “talk to” and establish dialogue with the learners through the text.

| **Function** | **Classroom talk** | **ODL dialogue** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Indicating what the learner should be able to do *before* tackling a particular project  | ‘Go on to Chapter 6 of the book, but only if you’ve finished the work I set last week....’ | Before starting this unit, you need to be able to ...Complete the following activity which revises the work you need to know before ... |
| Link to learner’s experience | How many of you have noticed…?Why do think it is so…? | How many of you have noticed…?Why do think it is so…?Have you ever considered that it may be because…. |
| Providing a rationale or motive for learning a particular skill or new content (as opposed to just announcing what will be tackled next… | It is really important to be able to distinguish between X & Y, before we move on to Z…If we do not understand the difference then … that is why we will first examine what X is made of, then… and finally tomorrow we will be able to… | It is really important to be able to distinguish between X & Y, before we move on to Z…If we do not understand the difference then … that is why we will first examine what X is made of, then… and finally in the next activity/unit we will be able to… |
| Providing links to previous / future skills and knowledge to lead the learner through a systematic set of learning experiences & to create cohesion | You will remember that last week when we heated water… we noticed how it … to day we will see what happens if we freeze it… | You will remember that we last discussed how water turns to vapour when it is sufficiently heated, now we will investigate what happens to water when we freeze it… |
| To mediate/teach / explain/discuss new content or rules (as opposed to simply stating/transmitting content/rules) | As Zimbabwe is located in the tropics it has a … climate, which means that it has… winters.. and … summers and …  | As Zimbabwe is located in the tropics it has a … climate, which means that it has… winters.. and … summers and … |
| Practising so that the learners can see whether or not they have successfully achieved the outcomes | ‘OK. Now answer the questions on the sheet I’ve given you...’ | This activity should help you to ...Answer each of the questions in the spaces provided ...Suggested answers can be found on page .... |
| To guide learners *through* their activities and to try to pre-empt possible problems or confusion (as opposed to providing instructions on what to do) | Before doing this experiment it’s always necessary to… before you… otherwise you may find that you… You should also be very careful when you… as you will notice it is likely to…’ | Remember, it’s always necessary to… before you… otherwise you may find that you… You should also be very careful when you… as you will notice it is likely to…..’Proceed carefully and write down what you have observed… |
| Relating concepts to the learner’s experience... | ‘You know when you cut your finger ...’OrIn the space below, describe an assignment that you did recently which went particularly well. Now think back on how you prepared for it. What preparations in particular on your part do you think contributed to the success of the assignment? | ‘You know when you cut your finger ...’OrIn the space below, describe an assignment that you did recently which went particularly well. Now think back on how you prepared for it. What preparations in particular on your part do you think contributed to the success of the assignment? |
| Motivation and stimulation | ‘It’s tough going but it’s worth struggling over, and it gets easier later on...’ | ‘It’s tough going but it’s worth struggling over, and it gets easier later on...’If you disagree strongly with the commentaries, you can contact your tutor on ... Do not worry if you still feel a bit uncomfortable with this idea, we will be exploring it again from a different point of view in Unit 5 ... |
| Discuss answers, observations, findings etc (do not just provide correct answers) | So what has happened to the water in the plastic bottle once it has frozen…? Can you see how it has… and the cap has… | Did you notice how when the water in the plastic bottle froze, the ice expanded and did you see how the cap was forced off the bottle…? |
| To reflect on and to consolidate learning. | So we have seen that when water is heated it… and when it freezes it… so what can we say about the properties of water..? Water is…. | So we have seen that when water is heated it… and when it freezes it… so what can we conclude about the properties of water..? Water is… |

**Some differences between textbooks and ODL materials**

A finding in many of the Units submitted for the evaluation was that they were written like textbooks rather than as ODL Materials. The key difference being that it is assumed that textbooks will be mediated by a teacher, whilst ODL materials generally are, for the most part, for self study (and are not mediated by a teacher).

The table below serves to highlight key differences in approach to writing text books and ODL materials.

|  |
| --- |
| **Some differences between textbooks and ODL materials** |
| **Textbooks** | **DE courses** |
| Assume interest  | Arouse interest |
| Written for teacher use  | Written for learner use |
| No indication of study time  | Give estimates of study time |
| Designed for a wide market | Designed for a particular audience |
| Rarely state aims and objectives | Always give aims and objectives |
| Usually one route through | May be many routes through |
| Structured for specialists | Structured according to needs of learner |
| Little or no self-assessment | Major emphasis on self-assessment |
| Seldom anticipate difficulties | Alert to potential difficulties |
| Occasionally offer summaries | Always offer summaries |
| Impersonal style | Personal style |
| Dense layout | More open layout |
| Readers views seldom sought | Learner evaluation always conducted |
| No study skills advice | Provide study skills advice |
| Can be read passively | Require active response |
| Aim at scholarly presentation | Aim at successful learning |

**How to encourage active participation in written material**

The notion of ***dialogue***, per definition, implies a two way process. The above table highlights the need for ***active response*** in ODL materials. The information of the table below provides suggestions on how to stimulate active participation in written material by including what Hutton calls the “four Cs” in the materials: Confidence, Critical & Constructive (thinking) and Creativity.

| **Confidence**  | **Critical and Constructive** | **Creativity** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| * Give learners the   opportunity for success by starting with their own experience and with tasks they can already do.
* Use non-academic language; speak directly to the reader; be present as a writer.
* Make people feel the material is theirs.  Leave space for the reader’s own ideas.
* Make the content relevant to the reader.
* As the writer, be open and self-critical**.**
* State your own opinion**.**
* Use humour**.**
* Use an accessible design.
 | * Use examples**.**
* Encourage readers to move beyond and think further about the material.
* Give readers the opportunity to practice and apply their learning.
* Get readers to question material and respond to it.
* Put material into small, manageable sections.
* Allow the reader to disagree with your point of view.
* Use headings constructively to make the reader think.
* Leave space for the reader to evaluate what she has read.
 | * Ask questions**.**
* Make the reader go beyond the material to other situations**.**
* Use activities and exercises**.**
* Encourage group work and discussion**.**
* Use visual teaching aids (Photos, illustrations etc)
* State the goal of each activity you use to motivate the reader and to help her understand the purpose of the activity.
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(Source: Extract p.43, Barbara Hutton, *A Manual for Writers of Learning Materials*, Department of Adult Basic Education, University of Cape Town. Undated).

**Some examples of the teaching voice**

The consultants are encouraged to read the individual Materials Evaluation Summary Reports pertaining to the specific units sent for evaluation as the question of the “teaching voice” is elaborated in most instances. In particular in the Maths Unit from Lesotho, the subject expert that evaluated the materials went as far as to provide an example to illustrate at least one way of introducing the teaching voice:

**Example 1: From Maths materials**

The “teaching voice” could be introduced more often using speech bubbles alongside the algorithmic working, explaining (where necessary) the steps, or adding comments which might motivate the learner. The sentence above the working, which sets out (very correctly) what follows in the working, is not really an adequate explanation for a learner who is unfamiliar with the work. This is the style followed in every worked example, and I do think it could be improved. For example (the next example is taken from Unit 1, only the speech bubbles have been added, to show an example of what I mean by a “friendly guide”):

12 334 becomes 1.233 4 if it is divided by 10 000, which is equal to ; so multiply 12 334 by , and simplify to **a × 10**where, **a** is one or any number, in decimal form, between one and ten; ***n*** is an integer.

First, we multiply 12 334 by  (remember, this is sometimes called “one in disguise” because it actually equals one). We do this because we have worked out that if we divide 12 334 by 10 000 we can change it into a number between 1 and 10.

 12 334

 = 12 334 

= 

Next, we split up the , so that we can do the dividing that we want to do. Look carefully at the two steps involved here.

= 

= 1.233 4 

Now we have written 12 334 in standard notation, as a number between 1 and 10 multiplied by a power of ten.

The style of the unit at present is very much typical transmission style – facts and definitions are given, methods of calculation are demonstrated and then examples exactly like those demonstrated are given for the learners to work through. Now in maths, this is often what happens, since things are well defined and methods are tried and true, but I do think that this text needs a stronger friendly voice to guide the learners through their activities. This voice can also make the links to prior knowledge and other content more accessible to learners, and enable the learners to more successfully undertake the activities.

Of course using “speech bubbles” in this context is just one way of doing it. One could use the same narrative without the speech bubbles.

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**Example 2: Extract from HIV and AIDS learning materials**

***UNIT 1: What do we know about HIV and AIDS?***

* 1. ***Basic biological facts about HIV and AIDS***

It is impossible to live in this country and not know something about HIV and AIDS. HIV is so well known that it is regularly referred to simply as ‘the virus’ and AIDS as ‘the disease’. We often hear the comment ‘so-and-so is positive’, or ‘s/he had a test and thank goodness s/he’s negative’ – and we know that it’s not a comment on a person’s outlook on life.

But often people refer to things that they don’t know much about, and, even though we as teachers are not expected to know everything, we do need to be able to answer basic questions from learners.

We guess that if learners hear about ‘the virus’, they may feel unsure about

* what a virus is, and
* what it does in your body.

They may also want to know

* what the difference is between HIV and AIDS, and
* why AIDS is called the ‘disease’, but HIV is not.

And then you might ask them why HIV is called **the** virus, and AIDS, **the** disease.

These questions can be answered from the wealth of information that is around about HIV and AIDS. But, instead of simply giving your learners the information, you need to make sure that it actually does answer their questions. And you need to keep asking your own questions too.

**Activity 1.1**

****Read the following extract from a booklet called *HIV and AIDS: Prevention, Care and Treatment* produced by Soul City Institute for Health and Development Communication and the Khomanani Campaign of the Department of Health (circulated with local newspapers in 2004). Then answer the questions below.

Many people think being HIV positive means you have AIDS, but HIV infection and AIDS are not the same.

**HIV is the Human Immunodeficiency Virus**

HIV is transmitted through blood, semen and vaginal fluids. Once in the body, the virus uses the CD4 cells of the body’s immune system to replicate itself, and in the process destroys these cells. These CD4 cells are vital as they co-ordinate the body’s immune system, protecting us from illness. As the amount of HIV in the body increases, the number of CD4 cells decreases, weakening the immune system even further.

**AIDS is the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome**

AIDS is the collection of diseases that are ‘acquired’ from HIV once the immune system is no longer able to protect the body from illness. As HIV weakens the immune system, a person with HIV develops a number of diseases that the body would normally be able to fight off. These are known as opportunistic infections. When a person’s immune system has deteriorated so much that he or she starts becoming ill with life-threatening and often unusual illnesses, he or she is said to have AIDS.

1. Which of the following learner questions are answered by this extract and which ones are not?
* *What is a virus?*
* *What does a virus do in your body?*
* *What is the difference between HIV and AIDS?*
* *Why is AIDS called the ‘disease’, but HIV is not?*

2. What questions or comments do **you** have about the information in the extract?

**Comment on Activity 1.1**

*The extract doesn’t tell us exactly what a virus is but it does explain what it does in a person’s body – that in order to multiply, it kills certain vital cells in the body that protect us against illness. As the virus multiplies (i.e. the viral load increases), the number of CD4 cells decreases (the CD4 count goes down), and the person is more likely to become ill. The extract also explains the difference between HIV and AIDS – that when you are HIV you won’t necessarily be ill, but when you have AIDS your body’s immune system is too weak to fight off illness.*

*As you read the explanation, you probably found that there were lots of things that the writers assumed you knew – for example, that viruses don’t reproduce, they replicate (make copies of themselves again and again), or that you understood the meaning of ‘acquired’ or ‘deficiency’ or ‘syndrome’.*

*There may also be other insights – for example, that AIDS is not really a disease, but a collection of diseases, which makes it difficult to treat.*

*What the extract doesn’t explain at all is why HIV is called* ***the*** *virus, and AIDS,* ***the*** *disease. What do you think? Is it because it is so widespread? Is it because it is the ‘mother of all diseases’? Perhaps because it is incurable?*

A lot of information about HIV that is given in an extract like that in Activity 1.1 is often too brief to really explain biological concepts that are quite difficult.

Example 2, is a part of the same extract that SAIDE provided to the participants to critique as part of the baseline assessment. In particular I would like to draw your attention to the ***teaching voice*** used in the ***Comment on Activity 1.1.*** Note how the content of this section mediates and discusses the content of the input provided in the reading*.*

**Example 3: Extract from *Being a Vocational Educator*** (Chapter One: What is Vocational Education and Training?)

## Activity 2 Skills and knowledge for the job

[Time needed: 15 minutes]

Think about the way industry works today. Reproduce the table below in your workbook and use it to brainstorm the level of skills and knowledge that you think the various occupations require.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Job description** | **Skills needed** | **Knowledge required** |
| Telephone technician |  |  |
| Machine operator |  |  |
| Interior designer |  |  |
| Sales person |  |  |
| General cleaner |  |  |
| Administration clerk |  |  |

Having completed the table, answer the following two questions:

1. Which job would be fairly easy to learn on-the-job, and which job would require a good understanding of theory?
2. Which of these people would find it most difficult to learn new skills if their job description had to change or they were forced to find new work? Why?

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## Our comment

Answers to these questions are not easy or straightforward. This is because, no matter what job we do, we are always simultaneously *doing* something practical and *thinking* about what we are doing. In other words, every human activity always has both some element of practice and some element of theory at work within it. However, it is obvious that, for some jobs, we need to have a detailed understanding of the system that underlies the different things we do in order to be able to do them properly. So, telephone technicians need to understand how cabling networks work in order to be able to do their job. They need to understand these systems theoretically and have a high degree of practical skill in order, for example, to diagnose a fault in a telephone line. On the other hand, cleaners do not need a complex theoretical understanding of cleaning in order to do their job. They do not need to understand why different cleaning agents work; they simply need to know what to do in order to clean something.

[**ART WORK** **not included in this extract**]

cartoon portraying these two workers and the job each does, in such a way as to portray the relative complexity of the tasks

In answering the above questions, you would have noted that some of the jobs need a higher degree of theoretical knowledge in relation to the task, while others simply need mastery of the practical skills of the job.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------***STOP & THINK***

Think for a moment about how people in certain occupations would find it easier to learn new skills because of what they would have had to learn already. It is probably true that the telephone technician, having learnt certain theoretical knowledge about cabling, networking, electricity and the like, would be able to learn refrigeration maintenance more easily than a person who had been a cleaner all their life. Why do you think this is so?

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Again, look carefully at the ***Our Comment*** and the ***Stop and Think*** sections in this extract – both devices for mediation and reflection.