

Becoming a Leader in Instructional Design in an Open University

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In the Beginnings

I think that from my earliest years, I always had this thing about being a leader. I was always the one who was only too ready to come forward and voice an opinion on something, give a hand to someone needing help and organise games with the other children in the schoolyard and neighbourhood.

I remember a ten-year-old boy who needed guidance with everything Malaysian after returning from four years abroad. I was the one who volunteered to help him with his studies and adjusting to the Malaysian way of life. In return, his mum made some very delicious food for me — something which taught me that there could be extrinsic as well as intrinsic rewards for helping others.

I grew up in a small town in Perlis State in northern Malaysia, one of the country's largest rice-producing regions. We were one of the few Punjabi families in the neighbourhood; most of our neighbours were Chinese. Back then, in the 1960s, English wasn't as widely taught or spoken as it is today. So, the only way I could communicate with most of our neighbours was by picking up a Chinese dialect. My siblings were the same, so there we all were, as teenagers, chatting away, juggling between Punjabi with our parents, English and Malay in our classrooms and Chinese when we played with the other kids in the street. I can still converse in the Hokkien dialect today — and get some surprised looks from Chinese people when I do so. Chinese culture had a great influence on me. In fact, it reached the point where my dad had to prevent me from learning Chinese script for fear that I might fall behind in learning about Punjabi ways. I was just so keen to learn as much as possible about the intriguing ways of the Chinese, in both a business and a streetwise sense, that make them the most financially successful people in Malaysia. Growing up amongst the different cultures made me receptive to human differences and similarities, sensitive to diverse people's needs and able to

see life's bigger picture. I believe this laid the ground for dealing fairly and frankly with the issues of gender and race later on in my life.

My father was the most hard-working, firm and focused person you could ever wish to meet. He had to hold down two jobs to provide for all 11 of us in my family. But he never came home at the end of the day complaining about the hard work, how hot it was working out in the sun, the people at work or how he'd been treated. To me, he was the true definition of determination and initiative. My mum was a caring, warm and friendly person. She approached all the daily challenges and chores with a calm mind, showing us that life's challenges are best approached in a relaxed and patient manner. Our mum and dad always made sure we were amply fed and well dressed.

My parents were strong believers of the Sikh faith. Ours was one of the few Punjabi homes that had a special prayer room, which meant that my eight siblings and I had to share bedrooms. We led a simple life, centred on learning, a sense of spirituality, wholeness, identity and well-being, and showing good manners and respect towards others. My eldest brother inherited these characteristics. Coming top in the state's O-level exams, he wanted to become a doctor, but our dad couldn't afford to pay for his studies, so he had to accept a scholarship to train as a teacher. He did very well in the end, going on to become a renowned professor of Borneo history.

Dad, like the other male elders in our community, held the view that girls shouldn't be too highly educated. The predominant belief at that time was that men should be responsible for putting food on the table whilst women should be the nurturers at home. So, my oldest sister, who was a very intelligent girl, received no encouragement or support for her studies. However, as time went on, my dad came to recognise the need for girls to be adequately schooled. I was also lucky in having older brothers as my heroes and supporters, so I was in a position to take up the learning challenge.

At school, my teachers and classmates were culturally diverse. But we didn't know the meaning of "different cultures" until the word multiculturalism surfaced! Ours was one big, happy family that didn't see much difference between the races. We practised each others' traditions and ate whatever everyone else ate. Halal and non-halal foods were never an issue. How things change — now in Malaysia, we are chastised for not exercising cultural sensitivity!

Something else I discovered at school was the value of books. I found they helped me occupy my free time and educate myself whenever the teachers couldn't teach me what I wanted to know, and gave me the tools for intellectual discourse. They were my best companions. Browsing in the school library, or in the state library after school hours and during weekends and school vacations, was something I dearly looked forward to.

We had a mixed bag of teachers, but most of them were dedicated, caring and concerned for our total development. I particularly recall my Form Six teacher, Ms Shanda. Fresh out of university, she brought an air of "big city" sophistication into our classroom. And she showed such interest in our development that she endeared herself to us all. Funnily enough, in later years, our roles reversed because she became one of my MEd students, and today we are firm friends. I really bloomed in Form Six. I found you could talk openly and honestly with

your teachers and the principal, and branch out into all kinds of extracurricular activities. I got my first taste of leadership when I became secretary of the Rangers Club, an organisation like the Scouts. This helped to increase my sense of self-esteem and teach me about handling leadership roles and responsibilities.

After leaving school, I went on to study at the University of Malaya. Fortunately, such were my grades that they gave me a state scholarship. My dad worked hard to support me at university — so much so that he gave me more than I actually needed. University opened up a whole new world for me, socially as well as academically. I engaged in many extracurricular activities, and I also became much more aware of gender issues. My fellow male students were pretty open-minded, but most of the presidents of the various societies were male, whilst most of us females acted as secretaries or in more minor roles. However, I did become a leader of several clubs and societies, which gave me experience in managing people and taught me the importance of self-management and time management.

So, looking back, I can see that I was moulded by a number of early influences. My dad taught me the importance of hard work, determination, focus, matters of the spirit and avoiding time wasters such as gossip and toxic people. My mum taught me to be caring, warm and friendly. My siblings taught me to be well-mannered and respectful of others, to excel in my studies and to be a well-rounded person of high principles. I also learned a lot about life skills and a sense of community from our Chinese neighbours. And school expanded my world view. All of these factors came to help me in my leadership roles later in life.

Embarking on My Career

There were really only two options for most women graduates in those days: join the civil service or become a teacher. The latter was by far the more popular option. The idea of my becoming a teacher appealed to my parents, siblings and other family members, but for all the wrong reasons: they felt it would make me a better wife and mother. Anyway, I got myself into a DipEd programme, learning to teach geography and English as a second language. During the course of my studies I began to be intrigued by the field of education itself — and something called “educational technology”. My first major project involved creating a synchronised tape-slide programme — a “cutting edge technology” at that time. I found myself being drawn to educational technology and media, perhaps because it was such a nascent field. I threw myself into this work. One of my professors was exceptionally helpful in teaching me all about the different technologies, media and pedagogical methods, and the technicians were happy to take over most of the technicalities, so I was able to concentrate on developing the best audiovisual products and educational outcomes that I could.

Immediately after graduating, I got married, and then for the next few years, I taught English, mathematics, geography, history, moral studies and physical education in various rural schools. I wasn't quite sure that I was doing what I really wanted to, but I maintained a positive outlook. Something in me said, “Do it first and learn to love it along the way.” But I was still finding that my main interest lay in developing learning materials and finding new and different ways of improving learning in those I taught. Thus began my journey into the world of instructional design.

In 1985, the Malaysian government offered my husband a scholarship to further his studies at Syracuse University in New York State. He planned to do his Master of Public Administration at the Maxwell School of Management, one of the world's best graduate schools of public affairs. I determined that I wasn't going to be left out of the picture. Syracuse also had, and indeed still has, a highly regarded Department of Instructional Design, Development and Evaluation (IDD&E). For over sixty years, the IDD&E has demonstrated excellence in research and development, consultation, service and education, consistently ranked amongst the top programmes in the country, and hosted students and graduates from over 50 countries. Seeing this opportunity to also upgrade my qualifications and in a field that really interested me — instructional systems and educational technology — I immediately applied to study for the IDD&E Master of Instructional Design.

Going to the USA and studying at the same university as my husband seemed a really great idea — at the time. However, arriving at Syracuse, I was totally overwhelmed by it all: the weather (much colder than I'd ever experienced), the different culture, the terrible emptiness of spirit, being away from family and friends, and being torn between caring for a six-month-old son and doing very demanding studies. For the first time in my life, I felt ready to give up and go home.

My husband was very understanding and encouraged me to have a word with my professors. So, before submitting my letter of withdrawal, I had a heart-to-heart chat with Professor Phil Doughty. After patiently listening to my concerns, he said, and I'll never forget this, "Abtar, there's a single mother in the apartment next to yours, and she's got *six kids* — and *she's working on her PhD.*" This remark changed my mind right away and for evermore it has shaped my views on facing up to any challenges that present themselves to me. I've never failed to share this story with students, staff and friends who are in need of motivation when they're feeling down about things.

I thus remained enrolled in the master's programme, and things soon started looking up for me. I found there were some fellow Malaysians at Syracuse who could help out by caring for my son whilst I attended lectures and worked in the labs. My husband also helped whenever he had no classes. So, I got down to my studies, and at the end of the first semester, I not only scored As in all my subjects but was offered a graduate assistant position, which enabled me to earn a daily allowance and entitled me to free tuition.

Looking back, I must say I thrived in Syracuse. I really had to compete in this "top league university", but I learned just what can be achieved through sheer hard work and adopting a "can do" attitude, even when the odds seem to be against you. I found I was quite good at multitasking, coping with studying, teaching and wifely and motherly duties all at the same time. Developing a competitive spirit was another attribute I picked up during this period. I was also fortunate in having many hardworking professors who delivered beyond my expectations. This has motivated me to do the same with my students. My advice for other women who find themselves in similar situations is to share your worries, and if you don't see the light or the way forward with the first sharing, move on to the next. Then, once you've made up your mind about where you want to go, put in the hard work, be focused and disciplined and try to establish a good support network. Find others who're in a similar position and who can support each other.

In my case, my support network consisted of my family, my fellow students and colleagues, the department secretaries and support staff, the Malaysian network at Slocum Heights where we stayed, the local Punjabi families and an American convert to Sikhism who provided for my spiritual needs.

On the work front, I learnt so much. I was exposed to the theories and findings of such leaders in the field of instructional technology and educational technology as Robert Gagné and Alex Romiszowski. I learned at first hand from such eminent persons as Donald P. Ely, Professor and Chair of the IDD&E, how to create effective multimedia materials, long before the advent of any “computer apps”. I came to learn that no medium is inherently superior to any other medium, but that each, or each combination, suits particular learning tasks and learning contexts. The learning culture at Syracuse was one of continual improvement, questioning, dedication, drive and caring. The most valuable lesson I took back to Malaysia was that learning is most effective when the teacher plans well, makes the teaching and learning logical and easy to follow and provides constant feedback. It was also an enriching, inspiring experience to find women commanding top academic and managerial positions at Syracuse. This helped change my perception of what we women are capable of.

Immediately after completing my master’s in 1987, I returned to Malaysia to teach in secondary schools, which I did up until 1990. I also started applying my newly acquired instructional design principles and practices to writing school textbooks and creating other materials for history courses, using Charles Reigeluth’s “elaboration theory”, a strategy for organising and presenting concepts in increasing order of complexity. The way I developed these teaching and learning resources was to first present the content using a few basic principles or ideas, and then progressively introduce further details and variations whilst at the same time summarising and reviewing earlier concepts, facts and skills. One example of this was when my husband, who also has a passion for teaching and learning, and I collaborated on developing a chart method for teaching history — enabling students to see a historical episode in one diagram. This work became well known and helped promote a new approach to learning in other schools. Many students later told us it really helped them master the new information.

I developed something of a reputation as an innovative teacher, and in 1991, I was invited to become a lecturer at the Technical Teacher’s Training College (TTTC), in Cheras, Kuala Lumpur. My next four years were spent training teachers in instructional design. My courses became very popular and encouraged many of these teachers to continue studying in this field.

Meanwhile, I was constantly pushing to further my experience and expertise in instructional technology. I applied for, and received, a World Bank Scholarship to take part in a five-week course in multimedia design and development at the University of Alberta, in Canada. I then applied the knowledge I gained there to introducing the principles of instructional design and technology to around 1,000 in-service teachers for the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE). A year later, I was selected by the Japan International Cooperation Agency to be one of a small number of teachers who toured various Japanese cities for a month, passing on these new ideas and methods of teaching and learning. This involved a rigorous selection procedure, including Japanese spoken language (basic), a group interaction test, a physical endurance test and a demanding interview.

These two experiences not only enriched me personally but had an impact on my motivation. I could see that I should constantly seek new opportunities and only needed to tap into my personal resources to attain my goals. The upshot was that after five years at the TTTC, I felt it was time to move on. I'd achieved all I wanted to achieve there. A lectureship position in instructional design was advertised by the University of Malaya (UM), the country's premier university, and a close lady friend encouraged me to apply for this position.

The interview panel appeared impressed by my 12 years of teaching experience, master's degree in instructional design, academic publications and membership in the Malaysian Council for Computers in Education. But then when I came to be offered the lectureship, I hesitated about whether to accept it. My family was keen for me to do so, but I could see it would entail working longer hours and sacrificing my pension scheme. In the Malaysian system, when you make a direct transfer from one government organisation or institution to another, this usually involves no break in continuity of service or obligation to resign. But in this case, I was told I wouldn't be allowed to make a direct transfer, even though I was only moving from one government institution to another. This had serious financial implications. There was only one thing to do — stand up for myself. I decided to go and see the then Minister of Education (our current Prime Minister) himself. Getting an appointment with him was a very tiring and tedious affair. I had to sit outside his office for nearly a month. And even after I'd seen him and after six months of effort on my part, the authorities still wouldn't agree to a direct transfer. But at least I knew that I'd tried my best. So, I resigned from the college, putting in the shortest required notice to quit, and joined the staff at UM in September 1996.

In this new job, I reported to the Dean of the Faculty of Education, who happened to be a woman. Right from the very start, she showed great faith in me. She immediately challenged me to plan and propose a totally new bachelor's programme in instructional design, multimedia technology, web-based learning and smart schools, which would enable UM to bid for a major Ministry of Education project to upgrade teachers from diploma to first degree level. The competition for this was really fierce, because ten other Malaysian universities were also tendering to provide this programme. So, here I was, new to the university world, faced with a major challenge by the Dean and forced to work on a large, totally new project with a terribly tight deadline. Somehow, I managed to develop the plan and proposal, present it to the Faculty of Education and get it accepted. And our bid succeeded. This was regarded as a significant achievement by the faculty and UM, because it raised our profile with the Ministry of Education.

In 1999, UM decided to establish a Multimedia Development Centre (MDC), and I was appointed to be an instructional designer in this centre whilst maintaining my post as lecturer in the Faculty of Education. There I was, a full-time faculty member and instructional designer in the MDC, developing online learning systems for the university and other higher education institutions — all on top of being a home-carer and mother and part-time PhD student. But I was still keen to move onto new and better things.

In 1997, I'd signed up for a PhD through the Faculty of Education at UM, researching web-based learning. My preference would have been full-time study, and I knew the faculty had a scholarship scheme that would enable me to do this.

But I guessed (correctly) that this would be reserved for the *Bumiputera*, the term used to describe the indigenous Malays and which can be translated literally as “prince(s) of the land”. So I didn’t waste time filling out reams of forms and trying to persuade lots of people to give me this scholarship, but accepted that if I wanted to achieve my dreams and complete my PhD by 2000, I would have to settle for part-time study at my own expense and put in a great deal of extra time.

I used to clock into my office at 06:30 and work until 21:30, after which time I attended to family and other matters. My mantra was, “If you start, you’ll see the end.” I learned to say “no” when necessary, delegate home duties to my housemaid and ask my husband to take on more responsibility for our four boys when they were unwell. I was lucky in that my dean granted me flexible working hours. But I still made myself responsible for our children’s education and their learning Punjabi with a private tutor. My husband made it quite clear that he would have no part in this, so I had to manage on my own, taking the children to school, bringing them home for a quick bath and lunch, and then driving them for a half hour to another township for more lessons. When I wasn’t free to do this, I had to arrange for the housemaid to take the four boys there by cab, stay with them and then bring them home again by cab.

I submitted my thesis in October 2000 and graduated in 2001. I’d managed to complete my PhD within the planned time frame. All this dedicated study and hard work for the faculty paid off. In 1999, the dean nominated me for an excellent service award, which the university senate duly granted. The support and encouragement of my dean meant a lot to me, and her skills in leadership had a major impact on my style of leadership. She had the experience, capability and instincts to be firm and lenient as necessary, and she was able to distinguish between those of her staff who were serious about their work, those who used flattery and tried to curry favour with her (we call these “apple polishers”) and those who simply couldn’t care less — and manage each of them accordingly.

In 1999, I successfully applied for a Fulbright Scholarship, which took me to Indiana University, Bloomington, for four months from October 2000 until February 2001. The great thing about this was that apart from our two older boys, who stayed at home to manage affairs, my family was able to accompany me on this trip, and I took particular pride in being the one who could give them this chance of a lifetime. My husband used this as an opportunity to do some more of his research and our two younger boys to gain some experience of U.S. schooling.

This experience really introduced me to open and distance learning (ODL) and implementing eLearning in schools. I had so many opportunities to discuss these matters with Professors Charles Reigeluth, Jeremy Dunning and Curtis J. Bonk, all great scholars and leaders in their particular fields. Professor Dunning, the Dean of the School of Continuing Education, was particularly generous with his time in helping me understand the design, development and application of multimedia materials for distance learners.

I returned to Malaysia with renewed energy and enthusiasm for eLearning. I decided to contact some former colleagues at the newly established Open University Malaysia (OUM) to share my new-found knowledge. Quite unexpectedly, this landed me a short-term consultancy in instructional design and ODL materials development for the Faculty of Business and Management

at OUM. Having five more months of my sabbatical to go, I accepted the job of project manager, established a small team — one graphic designer and three part-time instructional designers — and planned the timeline and model for our operations. We had to work to a tight time frame, and the greatest challenge we faced was reducing the content the faculty members gave us to work with. Being from traditional universities and unfamiliar with the kinds of distance students we had at OUM, they didn't understand why we had to reduce the amount of teaching material or why the instructional designers had to correct their pedagogical errors. Verbal abuse was common, and as project manager, I had to mediate between the teaching staff and instructional designers and make sure they all remained motivated and on task.

Within two months of the start of this project, the president of OUM was sufficiently impressed with our achievements and my qualifications and experience to offer me a full-time, permanent job with the university. Because of my commitments at UM, I initially declined this offer, but after a year back in my old job at UM, I decided to accept the offer and returned to become Director of the Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CIDT). It's best to seize opportunities whenever they present themselves.

Working at Open University Malaysia

In 1999, the minister of education had invited Multimedia Technology Enhancement Operations Sdn. Bhd. (METEOR), a consortium of 11 Malaysian public universities, to establish an open university. Open University Malaysia (OUM) was then opened in August 2000 and had its official launch by the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Y.A.Bhg. Dato Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in August 2002.

OUM was the seventh private Malaysian university, and its mission is: "To widen access to quality education and provide lifelong learning opportunities by leveraging technology, adopting flexible learning, and providing a conducive and engaging learning environment at competitive and affordable cost". Its ODL delivery methods are specifically designed for adult learners who want to pursue a degree whilst caring for their families and managing their careers. OUM's initial intake was 753 students; enrolment now exceeds 130,000. And instead of the four original programmes, OUM now offers 70, ranging from diploma to post-graduate level. With such a constant supply of large numbers of students, OUM has been able to expand tremendously in terms of IT infrastructure. In addition to the main campus at Jalan Tun Ismail, Kuala Lumpur, it now operates a strong network of 12 OUM learning centres throughout the country, all fully equipped with tutorial rooms, libraries, computer laboratories and Internet facilities.

I soon realised I was the only person in the whole institution with experience, qualifications and expertise in the fields of eLearning and instructional design. The then president recognised this and realised that the ideas and material I'd put together for the accreditation of OUM by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency had been instrumental in gaining this recognition. In this, I defined three major and essential strategies for OUM to follow in regard to teaching and learning, instructional design for the development and delivery of content, and training instructors. The only problem was that these ideas were way ahead of the

technological capabilities we could call on that time — so it was a case of “fake it till you make it”, making it appear that what we were proposing was already uploaded in the learning management system!

The teaching and learning strategies were envisaged as being a blend of face-to-face, online and self-managed learning. In all of the courses, ten per cent of the overall study time was to be face-to-face, ten per cent online learning and 80 per cent self-managed learning.

The quality of the instructional design was of paramount importance, and a rigorous and well-tested template for print-based modules was developed, together with the evaluation and quality assurance systems. One of the modules I co-developed using this template subsequently received first prize in the Commonwealth of Learning awards for excellence in distance learning material at the 4th Pan-Commonwealth Conference.

We had limited budgets, human resources and time to create quality and engaging interactive multimedia learning material, so we made extensive use of the TALON (Teaching and Learning Oriented Network) Repurposeable Learning Object Templates developed collaboratively by OUM staff and myself and staff from Indiana University and the Ari Vidali’s Envisage Corporation. These 20 templates mimic specific teaching strategies and allow not only instructional and media designers but instructors with little or no programming experience to produce courseware without any need to write or change source codes. These Flash-based templates allow the design and creation of interactive learning objects in about ten per cent of the time that would be entailed to create them from scratch.

We trained the instructors in the templates’ use, and many of the subsequently developed items were created by the instructors directly from the templates with little or no assistance from programmers or instructional designers. Initially, the instructors were sceptical about being able to create simple learning objects in 20 minutes or less using the TALON templates. When they found that this was in fact possible, they reached their “aha! moment” and became more convinced and motivated. This collaboration on multimedia courseware development with Indiana University resulted in a number of co-authored research papers that received international awards.

In regard to training instructors, I hold that you can have the best learning packages in the world, but these are of absolutely no use if your faculty members aren’t properly trained in how to use them and how to encourage and support distance learners. In those early years, between 2001 and 2006, most of the OUM faculty were extremely knowledgeable and capable in their professional spheres but quite new to instructional design and eLearning. We were dealing with faculty who were very well-qualified engineers, scientists, economists and even IT experts but who had almost zero knowledge about what was involved in, and how to provide for, open, distance and online learning. So, training in the use of self-learning materials, online discussions and the facilitation of blended learning was absolutely essential. We developed some largely self-instructional modules to train the instructors, and this initiative gained us national and international recognition. In fact, so successful and well received were these staff training methods that OUM and the CIDT were commissioned to provide the consultancy for the establishment of and training wing for Saudi Arabia’s National

Center for e-Learning and Distance Learning, which is now spearheading eLearning in that country's higher education system. This further international experience encouraged me to submit my work for an award in teaching, learning and technology, and in 2007, I received the Innovative Excellence in Teaching, Learning and Technology Award at the 18th International Conference on College Teaching and Learning, in Florida, USA.

I spent three years as the Director of the CIDT. I confirmed the OUM senior management's confidence in me by showing that I was a team player and achieved results on time. I have to say, it seemed quite natural for me to be leading the centre. There was a positive culture and vision amongst the staff team, and I believe the organisation benefited from my time at the helm. But then I was invited to head up the Open and Distance Learning Pedagogy Centre (ODLPC).

At the ODLPC, my responsibility was to provide training for all of OUM's instructors, tutors and facilitators to ensure quality in the university's open, distance and blended teaching and learning. We developed an entire training resource repository, initiated online systems to capture tutor data and developed a sound, simple-to-use pedagogical model for the tutors.

In 2005, the Ministry of Education contracted OUM to assist faculty in all the various teacher training institutions in the development of print ODL materials. Again, I was asked to lead the team for this project, and we succeeded in assisting with the development of the required 200 modules within the very short time frame of six months. The MOE was extremely pleased with the outcomes, and this partly contributed to OUM receiving in the following academic year its first intake of teachers needing to upgrade their qualifications from diploma to first degree. Since that time, OUM has upgraded close to 40,000 teachers through intakes of around 4,000 teachers two or three times a year.

The years 1999 to 2009 were most fruitful, fulfilling and educational for me. I rose from being a lecturer to becoming a leader in instructional design. I took all the opportunities that came my way, some of which were very challenging. I took risks in accepting and initiating projects and contributing ideas. I held on to my sense of purpose and capitalised on team strengths. Perhaps I could have progressed on the promotional ladder had I concentrated more on relationship building, but I have no regrets, as I'm someone who likes blazing the ODL trail, who likes embarking on bold new ventures and who still loves teaching. This was why in 2009, I conceived and implemented OUM's first entirely online post-graduate programme: the Master of Instructional Design and Technology (MIDT).

The MIDT was intended to teach the theories, principles and practices of instructional design in ways that that could be applied in various contexts — particularly in eLearning and social media environments — and was planned to be task-based, student-centred and offered internationally. It wasn't that easy getting this programme off the ground. I asked for an assistant to help me, but this request was refused. I also encountered problems with some of the OUM support services, sometimes over the most mundane issues. Even in highly innovative institutions, it can sometimes be hard to achieve change. Had I received more assistance and support then, I'm sure we could have made the MIDT better, but I was determined to get it up and running, and I think it has been successful.

A noteworthy feature of the programme is the diversity of its instructors and students. Our instructors are based in Canada, the USA, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia. And after starting in 2009 with 21 students from 11 countries, today's students hail from at least seven different time zones and 14 different countries. We have about 50 students in the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. There is also a strong possibility that the MIDT will be taken up by Eszterházy Károly College, in Eger, Hungary, and Daffodil International University, in Dhaka, Bangladesh. MOUs have been signed with both institutions. The 40-credit programme takes students about two years to complete.

The MIDT has been endorsed by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL). In 2008, OUM and COL signed an agreement that COL would provide five yearly scholarships for deserving students for a period of three years. To date, COL has sponsored 18 students, as it extended the award to cover three more students in 2012. The course is very affordable, being at least four times cheaper than those offered by comparable institutions in other parts of the world, without any compromise in the quality of the teaching and learning.

The programme was conceived for those seeking careers as instructional designers, teachers and trainers. It introduces the students to instructional systems design processes using a variety of media, including web-based applications, and is based primarily on the ADDIE Model. The ADDIE Model is the generic process traditionally used by instructional designers and training developers and comprises five phases: Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation and Evaluation. We apply this model to the course provision as well. We also introduce the students to other models, such as the Dick and Carey and the Kemp instructional systems design (ISD) models. Underpinning our approach is the idea of continual formative feedback as instructional programmes or materials are being created, to save time and money by identifying and resolving problems whilst they are still easy to fix.

ISD is generating a wealth of useful research, and we expect the students to access, critique and synthesise published research reports and apply appropriate findings to their own work. We also deal with online assessment methods, using such approaches such as e-portfolios, and address the legal implications and challenges of online assessments. We draw upon Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory to introduce learners to the idea of collaborative and online learning networks. We also expose our learners to the idea of connecting the learning and performance objectives of organisations in the knowledge-based economy. In addition to these core studies, the learners can choose any three electives from the following: Design and Development of Interactive E-Content; Instructional Technology for Diverse Learners; Human Performance Technology; Managing Instructional Technology for Change; and Network Systems and Learning Management.

I'm really proud of the fact that the MIDT course is helping to open up OUM to the rest of the world. I am also delighted to receive the kinds of feedback we get from our students, not only because they are personally reassuring and gratifying, but because they confirm that our student-centred philosophy and use of the ADDIE Model are being applied and appreciated.

Shriram, a professor in a university in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, likes the way we assign tasks to the students, monitor their process, provide feedback and, when things go wrong, offer the necessary teaching and guidance. He also appreciates the way we allow them to freely express their doubts and concerns and address these without fear or favour.

Fathimath, an instructional designer at the Centre for Open Learning, Maldives National University, believes that we always try to understand the learner's individual potential and provide scaffolding for their ZPD (zone of proximal development).

Steve, a secondary school mathematics teacher in Trinidad, who is now working towards a PhD in Education, says that doing the MIDT course gave him the confidence to study for a doctorate (also with OUM), and that whilst distance learning can be impersonal at times, the courses have never felt this way because the collaboration and interactions were warm, hospitable, pleasant and academically stimulating.

Michael, the Inspector of Pedagogy in Charge of ICT in Cameroon's Ministry of Basic Education, who is also progressing from his MIDT to PhD at OUM, says that we appreciate the plight of the distance learner and that the regular Skype video chats give a sense of real-time learning.

Nokuthula, a university lecturer in Swaziland, says that as we connect through LinkedIn and Skype, she feels as if she's part of an evolving community of practice.

Final Reflections

So, after all this, what are my thoughts on becoming a leader? Well, for a start, you need to have the right knowledge, skills and attitudes and the ability to work hard. You must also be acutely aware of what is going on around you — the culture and climate of your department and your organisation as a whole.

Looking back, I reckon I've been a good problem-solver, instructional designer, teacher and teacher trainer, but I now realise that there were times when I could have managed the political climate better. Jealousies are likely to occur everywhere, so the best approach is to deal with these matters head on. As a woman, I've capitalised on my strengths as an empathetic, caring and communicative kind of person, whilst at the same time remaining focused and firm on issues crucial to the success of the job and the organisation. I have to say I have always felt very much at ease when cast in a leadership role. It has always seemed a very natural thing to do. But perhaps I also needed to adopt some more masculine attributes when leading projects and managing people. It is, after all, very often an essentially male culture in our institutions, especially in the upper echelons.

One of my regrets is that I wish I'd read more leadership books and gone on more courses to learn about types and styles of leadership. My advice would be, don't overlook this, thinking you'll just manage fine on your own. Seek out courses for self-improvement. Remember, too, that as well as developing the essential attributes of a leader, you must always be prepared for, and able to adapt your style of leadership to, the particular contexts. For myself, I hold to the ideals of shared

leadership: nurturing, doing good for others and giving them some responsibility for exercising leadership at whatever level they operate. The feminine way of leading includes helping the world to understand and be principled regarding the values that really matter.