The introduction of an online classroom for the benefit of Information Retrieval 1 (IRET101) students at the Durban University of Technology.

1. **Introduction and background**

Information Retrieval 1 (IRET101) is one of the major subjects offered in the first year of study to students doing the National Diploma: Library and Information Studies. IRET101 has two components: theory and practicals. The theoretical aspect accounts for 40% while the practicals account for 60% of the final mark. The LIS Programme is fortunate to have its own dedicated LAN, an Information Retrieval Room and a resource centre for the benefit of the students. It has been my observation since I started lecturing the subject that students are unable to grasp the theoretical foundations of the subjects. Students also seem to perform better in their practicals than in the theory assessments. It is on the basis of this that I decided to enroll for the Pioneers Course.

2. **Context**

The focus of any academic institution is student performance, student retention as well as success rate or graduation rate. Students’ dropout rate is a major problem for the institution, Faculty as well as departments. Initiatives are always put in place to make sure that students do finish their courses within the acceptable time frames. For example, lecturers at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) are always required to identify “at risk students” during the course of the academic year. At risk students are those students that seem not to meeting the minimum requirements for all assessments conducted. It is then the lecturer’s responsible to explain and put measures in place to assist these students. The main reason that at risk students are identified early in the year is to try and make sure that each student registered is given adequate attention and assistance to make sure that they perform well.

Tinto (1975) as cited by Jama et al. (2008:996) states that “dropout occurs because students are insufficiently integrated into different aspects of the university.” Bennett (2003:127) elaborated on Tinto’s theory by including two aspects to the theory, namely academic integration and social integration. Academic integration encompasses students’
performance, intellectual development, etc. Social integration on the other hand involves among other factors the student’s self-esteem and the relationship with fellow students Jama et al. (2007:997).

The importance of knowing ones’ students is well documented by Jama et al. (2007:998) where the authors describe in detail the issues surrounding most black students in tertiary institutions. Some of the issues that are discussed by the authors are: lack of finance, which results in having these students to commute using public making them to be late and this mode of transport is not always reliable. The issues discussed by the authors are what the lecturer has to deal with on a daily basis as she goes to her lectures. Sometimes, though the students might have genuine reasons for late coming, unfortunately it cannot be condoned. Though it is important for one to know her students and be understanding towards the many problems they have and face, it is also very important to make sure that students adhere to the rules in the lectures.

Jama et al. (2007:998) further discuss the effects of language on academic performance. Good command of the language is one of the barriers for students’ performance in tertiary institutions. The language barrier becomes a reality when students are required to write either essays or do oral presentations. It is then that you realize the importance of writing centres in other institutions that equip students with skills to master their academic studies. Jama et al. (2007:999) provide a diagram on the retention theory that they propose for non-traditional students. Jama et al. (2007:998) explain that non-traditional students refer mostly to “black students from disadvantaged family and school backgrounds. The authors argue that there are four stages within the circles of progression namely:

- Pre-entry: in this stage, students find themselves with or limited resources and support to help with integration. Students have no skills for academic excellence and they need these skills developed.
- Initial entry: students come to a new environment, the campus is new and they also have to meet different people and cultures.
• Teaching and learning experience: realities of academic life kicks in and students are being introduced to their specific learning programmes. During this stage, students learn new methods of teaching, rules, regulations, assessments etc.

• Ongoing social and academic integration: students begin to specialize within a specific learning programme and are being prepared (by academics) for the roles as professionals or specialists. They are now required to apply skills and critical thinking skills

I share with most of what the authors discuss because it is really a mission for lectures to make students understand and see the difference between high school and tertiary education.

That is why the lecturer decided to create her online classroom for first year Library and Information Studies students. It was mainly due to the fact that students were not coping with this particular subject and the lecturer hopes that the online classroom will indeed help in making sure that the subject has no more drop outs and also increase the pass rate.

3. **Challenges**

As stated in the context of this paper, one of the biggest challenges facing higher education institutions is the students’ pass rates and graduation rates. A lecturer always wants to see his/her students succeed in any subject that he/she offers. The understanding of students with regard to the theoretical aspect of the subject is one of the challenges. I am looking forward to a day or year when students’ performance in IRET101 is balanced between theory and practicals.

We need academic literacy and information literacy incorporated into the curriculum because most of the students fail to express themselves through academic writing.

We need access to computer labs and the Durban University of Technology does not have at the moment large LANs for students. Departments that are lucky do have their own LANs and as it is the case with the Library and Information Studies Programme, some of the computers have had their fair share and are not working.
I do believe that the online classroom will create a participative environment for the students and by visiting the classroom frequently it will provide additional support to the lectures.

4. Theory

4.1 Learning styles
Learning style “refer to how a learner perceives, interacts with, and responds to the learning environment; it is a measure of individual differences” Ally (2004:14).

4.2 Blended learning
Graham (2004) defines blended learning as comprising of instructional modalities; instructional methods; as well as online and face-to-face instruction. Blended learning facilitates critical thinking, creative and complex thinking skills are also fostered through blended learning because the facilitator (lecturer) will use different methods of delivery.

4.3 Online facilitation
Online facilitation refers to student-focused approaches to imparting knowledge whereby the student is actively involved in the learning process (Australian Flexible Learning Framework).

5. Methodology
Denzin and Lincoln (2008:557) define action research as “critical research dealing with real-life problems, involving collaboration, dialogue, mutual learning and producing tangible results.” O’Brien (1998) clearly provides the cycle of action research being planning, action, observation and reflection. As a lecturer I believe that we do action research each and every time and probably not knowing that is action research.

The cycle of action research reminds me of a lecture I once had with second year students. I lecture Literature Studies which is a subject that deals with literature, storytelling genres of music etc. On this particular day I was starting a new module based
on genres of South African music. I started off my lecture by giving them different types of music and on this particular day I was doing with them Reggae music.

I looked at the students at I could see that nothing I have said has made sense. What should I do? Do I continue even though it is obvious that I am the only person talking and understands? Do I just forget about this module and hope that they would like the next genre? An idea was immediately in my mind. Students were asked to be in groups of four; they chose a genre of music that they like. They were told of the presentations in two weeks time, they had to research the history of their chosen genre, know the South African artist as well as perform a track/song on the day of the presentation.

You should have seen the excitement, I wish I had recorded those presentations…the students were participative and involved, they learnt and it really showed that they had done their research. Within four lecture periods, all the music genres were covered and they understood that module better.

Is this then not action research? I had planned my lesson realizing that the action was not benefiting the course (through observation) I did a reflection and I had to plan again, because action research is a continuous cycle, it never ends nor stops.

6. Design

6.1 The vision

Looking at how much I have grown in the past year, knowing having explored the capabilities of Blackboard, I know my life will never be the same again. I am hoping for a day when IRET101 students perform at their level best especially in the theory lectures as they do in their practicals. I am hoping for a fully functional LAN where first year students will be able to sit and be able to assess themselves online and hopefully gaining the theoretical foundations of the subject.

I am hoping that some parts of my lecture periods will be conducted online and also still keeping the face-to-face interactions with the students.
I believe that the classroom will be operational in 2010.

6.2 **Active learning**

Active learning may a form of learning that requires fully participation and engagement by students. Bonwell and Eison (1991) argue that active learning “is an umbrella term that refers to several modes of instruction that puts the focus of learning on the students.”

There are a number of activities that students can be engaged in, in order to see them participating in lecture, these may be: working in pairs; discuss materials while role-playing; debate; engaging in case studies; taking part in cooperative as well as producing short written exercises Bonwell and Eison (1991).

It has been my observation that students seem to enjoy using computers than writing. I remember a video that Mari once showed us in class, students in that particular class were all having laptops and doing their work during the lecture. Though it has not happened at DUT as yet (all students having laptops), at least we are lucky in our Programme because we have a dedicated LAN for our students.

I believe that the students will participate and be motivated to learn and ask questions (using a discussion option). We have different kinds of learners in our classes and we are obliged as lecturers to know and understand their different needs and their learning styles. A question was once posed to us during Induction in 2007 by Mrs Delisia Timm (Ched). She asked us: “who are ours learners? Do we know them?” This statement stayed me since then, I am always trying to understand my learners.

I strongly believe that the online classroom will benefit the students a great deal. The online classroom will have quizzes that they will need to complete, some controlled test will be online; assignments will be sent electronically. The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) offered through Blackboard will also contribute to the students’ lifelong learning as they will be equipped with computer skills.
By using the Chat room and discussion tools, students will be able to interact with the lecturer as well as among themselves. I know that at first it won’t be easy for them but with practice they will eventually get there.

I would like to collaborate with my colleagues in the Programme especially Information Retrieval 2 (IRET201) to work together in making the classroom a resourceful space for our students. The calendar feature can also be used to communicate departmental information to students reminding them of tests, assignments, projects and examination time table/s.

All of this will only be possible if the lecturer is dedicated to visiting her classroom making sure that the classroom is kept up-to-date with current and relevant information for the students’ benefit. Keeping the classroom current and relevant will also motivate the students because they will always want to access the classroom knowing that there is always information that is important for them to know about.

6.3 Working smart

It is a reality that a lecturer always has his/her plate full at all times. You lecture, set and mark assessments and you still have other responsibilities for example, administrative tasks. I am always looking at the amount of time it takes to do all these tasks and have always tried to work smart, unfortunately one was not exposed to WebCT then. After enrolling for the Pioneers Course, I was fascinated by the tools that are available that will help me to work smart. I have learnt about the different management tools that available through Blackboard, and my role and aim will be to make sure that I use of the knowledge I have gained in making my life easier.

Multiple choice questions…sitting and cutting the marking memorandum in order to make marking easy and quick (you paste the marking memo with all the correct answers cut out) and this quickens the time spend on marking a whole set of MQCs; long queues of students coming to submit assignments at 08:00 will be a thing of the past. Most of my
IRET101 work will be online. I will make sure that I utilize all the different available in order to assist me in working smartly (and then enjoying my job!).

6.4 **Blended learning**

Prinsloo (2007:51) defines blended learning as the inclusion of technologies like creating online learning environments using CD-ROMs and video conferencing in teaching strategies and mode of delivery. Prinsloo (2007:63) argues that blended learning can “enhance student success” and the availability of these technologies in institutions of higher learning is important. I would like to keep the face-face interactions that I traditionally had with the students but on the same time introduce the concept of the online teaching and learning. Different task will be developed that would require the students to use both ways. In some instances, assignments will be submitted online and sometimes brought to the lecturer. A variety of assessments will provide the students with an opportunity of having to work independently online as well as keeping in contact with our mass lectures. Consultation times will still be available for students who require a one-on-one interaction. My own understanding of blended learning is that the traditional methods of teaching are not completely forgotten but a lecturer needs to use ICTs for the improvements of his/her teaching which will also cater for students with different learning styles.

7. **Implementation**

7.1 **Pilot**

On the 10\textsuperscript{th} of June 2009, a group of Library and Information Studies (LIS) students were requested to assemble in the LAN to assess the online classroom and give constructive criticism and comments. Four students from each level of study (first year, second year, and third year) were chosen at random to participate in the pilot assessment of the classroom.

I had earlier tried to get logins for the students but when nothing was received on the day of the assessment, I decided to use my own dummy logins. When the class was gathered, I remembered that we each had four logins and I thought it would easy if they use four logins. I tried giving each student to use rakomapdummy1 up to rakomapdummy4,
unfortunately dummy2, 3 and 4 did not accept and the students ended up all using dummy1.

I started off by explaining to the students about Pioneers online and what I would like them to do. Students were then requested to navigate the site and note problems, questions and other comments on a piece of paper. They were also requested to note what was good, what should be removed and what can be added to the classroom.

Many thanks to the following students for their valuable comments, participation and willingness to assist:

- Nqobizitha Langa 3rd year
- Maxwell Gumedede 3rd year
- Thembelihle Shozi 3rd year
- Bathobile Stewart 3rd year
- Sandile Khanyile 2nd year
- Mseni Thembani 2nd year
- Sihle Bekwa 2nd year
- Lunga Khumalo 1st year
- Lwazi Madonsela 1st year

7.2 Relevance

I believed that since the classroom is created for students, it would proper to have a mix of students within the Programme assessing the classroom for me. I know that the students who participated in the pilot project will spread the word that there is an online classroom for first year students and the first year students who participated would want to see the classroom up and running. The pilot study was also relevant because it gave students an opportunity of assessing the classroom in details and they also tried out the assessments that are posted on the classroom.

7.3 Feedback

There wasn’t a better way of recording the feedback from the students. I decided to have them in a paragraph. My overall impression is that the students see this classroom as an
extension of their lectures and a place where they will get additional information relevant
to the course.

They loved the discussions that are posted; they want a homepage that reflects the our
department; too much time is given on the assessments; the menu bar is sometimes
confusing; the announcements are great because if you missed a lecture you will have a
way of knowing what students were told; the calendar is an excellent tool please highlight
the test dates; it looks good and promising; include notes for everything that we cover in
class; it would be nice to login using our student numbers; please post questions under
assessments; the content is relevant; discussion tool is an exciting one; something must
be done to make sure that it is used educationally and constructively; it is an interesting
site; add more information to the links provided; please post our assignments as well.

8. Reflection

8.1 Assumptions
I assumed that the students will not find the classroom user friendly; I thought that they
would be lost and will be constantly asking questions because of their inability to
navigate the site. My goodness, I thought rather than getting constructive criticism based
on what was in the classroom, I will be answering questions about Blackboard.

I have realized that our students are more capable than we think. I must not be afraid to
introduce them to new technologies just because I think/believe it will too hard for them.
I got a reassurance as I observed for the first 20 minutes that our students are capable and
are not always afraid to try out new things.

8.2 Future adjustments
There are two broad categories of research namely, quantitative and qualitative research
methodology. O’Brien (1998) defines action research as learning by doing whereby a
problem is identified, do something to resolve it, see how successful the efforts were, and
if not satisfied, try again. O’Brien (1998) describes the action research cycle as planning,
action, observing and reflection. The cycle is continuous until the desired outcome is achieved.

I have realized that creating an online classroom is as demanding as the traditional methods of teaching because your classroom needs to be alive by making sure that the content is checked, addition and deletion of irrelevant content is done. You remain a designer right through the lifespan of your classroom and you check you reflect on your work by constantly being a student online. The classroom will require that I spend most of time online in order to respond to queries and keeping in contact with Ched is very important as well. Though the formal contact lectures on Fridays are finally over, I will need to make sure that my two hours on Fridays are spent visiting my online classroom. I want to make sure that I keep the classroom as participative as possible in order to make sure that the students learning 24/7.

8.3 Impact
Coming to the Pioneers Course for the first time – I looked, listened and asked myself “why I am here?” I sometimes felt that it was better being in my office doing something constructive than sit in front of a computer for two hours. I sometimes hated my Fridays, little did I know that “the space” as Mari always called it was going to make me the new person I am today. I have learnt and grown since I attended the Pioneers course.

I am confident that the students will appreciate the innovative ways of teaching Information Retrieval 1 and will find is useful. I have really grown since 2008 when I started and I cannot wait to share my experiences and my classroom with my colleagues and the rest of the world. I am already thinking about September 4 because on that day I will say to myself “Portia you have made it.” I know my employment at DUT can only get better. My certificate will open a world of opportunities. I owe my growth and development to Mari and her team. Thank you very much for your patience and passion about online teaching.
8.4 Lessons learnt

I remember the day I started like it was yesterday. I would sit and wonder why did I register for this course? Little did I know that I would end up enjoying and looking forward to the many Fridays we spent with the group. We had a space to share our experiences, provided with an opportunity to learn from each other and provided with a space to call home – a space to develop our own individual online classrooms. Yes, my space at Ched really felt like home, I knew there were always people I could count on for help and Mari was always available to assist in whatever way possible.

What I have learnt in the course is not documented in the learner guide, it is not explained in a few pages like the report that I am writing, because it goes beyond that…the lessons are more to be person I have become rather more than anything else. Making friends, sharing experiences, working in groups are some of the memories that I treasure for as long as I can remember. I have really enjoyed and learnt whilst attending Pioneers. There was a time when I wanted to quit but I am glad I didn’t because how else would I have acquired the skills that I now have? Sometimes it was hard, I felt drained and I did not want to carry on and it is in times like these that you see the value of having a partner – that is what Mogie provided, she supported me and encouraged me to go on and make sure that we finished what we started. And yes, it is done and I am so happy!

I would like to end with this quote by Marianne Williamson titled our greatest fear:

Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate,
but that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us.
We ask ourselves,
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, handsome, talented and fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.
We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us.
It is not just in some, it is in everyone.

And, as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

9. Bibliography

Australian Flexible Learning Framework. Accessed 10 June 20098, Available at:


