1. Title

Developing an e-Learning Strategy to Enhance Learner Engagement: A Pilot Study of the Media Studies III classroom at the Durban University of Technology

Introduction

“Knowledge is not intended to fill minds. It is intended to open them.”
(Siemens, 2006 in Kilfoil, 2008: 1021)

The above quotation reflects the global shift in perspectives towards learning and teaching. There is a marked shift from understanding the classroom as a place where knowledge is only imparted. Recent pedagogy in teaching and learning (cf. Siemens, 2004; Pallof and Pratt, 2005; Kirschner, Sweller and Clark, 2006) reveal the importance of building a classroom where knowledge is shared and created, by both the learner and the facilitator. This is particularly important for education in the 21st century as institutions of learning face the challenges and opportunities that come with the global trend towards the digitisation of learning environments. South Africa is no exception. Institutions of learning must do more to engage learners who have grown up in a ‘digitised’ environment. In looking at effective teaching methods for the 21st century learner it is crucial to focus on how e-learning management systems such as Blackboard, WebCT and eCollege can enhance teaching and learning. This report investigates one such system, Blackboard, and how it can be used to enhance learner engagement in the Media Studies III class.

2. Context

Which current international and/or local trends are triggers for your investigation?

In his seminal essay, Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants (2001), Marc Prensky assigns the term ‘digital natives’ to a new breed to students who are entering the education system. He further argues that “Our students have changed radically. Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach” (2001: 1). This is very apparent in today’s classroom environment. It is becoming increasingly difficult to rely only on traditional learning methods to engage students in their learning experience. Today’s learner is a complex one. He has a heightened sense of technology, often more so than the educator (often a ‘digital immigrant’1) in the

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1 “Those of us who were not born into the digital world but have, at some later point in our lives, become fascinated by and adopted many or most aspects of the new technology are, and always will be compared to them, Digital Immigrants. The importance of the distinction is this: As Digital Immigrants learn – like all
classroom. He has grown up in a rich media environment and will also encounter a rich media environment in the working world. Why then do higher education institutions tend to cling to traditional classroom structures and view e-learning strategies with skepticism?

As Prensky identified in 2001, the learner has changed. It makes sense then that the learning environment adapts accordingly. This report also investigates how Blackboard can be used to ‘speak the language’ of the digital native and further engage the learner in his learning experience.

In South Africa, there have been several studies on successful online classrooms, which reveal better throughputs, enhanced learning experiences and an increase in overall student satisfaction (cf. Greyling et al, 2008; Greyling and Wentzel, 2007; Brown, 2006). This burgeoning local trend towards online classrooms highlights the importance of implementing e-learning strategies at the Durban University of Technology and marks the trigger for my investigation.

3. Challenges

Which challenges and/or opportunities exist in your own teaching environment which you could possibly address through web-based learning?

Media Studies III is a B.Tech subject and is offered at the Department of Marketing, Retail and Public Relations. The class consists of learners from various backgrounds, cultures and who have varied learning styles. Some learners are ‘working students’, who find it difficult to attend the two-hour weekly lectures. I have been teaching this subject for the past three years and have often battled with trying to get students to engage with the learning material, which is vital at this level of study. Despite putting the students in groups and have each group present a ‘seminar’ (a prescribed reading from the course), I have found that the students’ involvement with the subject is limited to the reading they present as a group. This is a challenge for me as the field of media studies is an applied subject in that the concepts and theories clearly relate to the South African media landscape. Getting the learners to see the link between the theory and realities of the South African media is often a challenge for both the learner and me. The online environment lends itself to authentic learning activities that would make the link between theory and practice clearer. As I will explain later, Blackboard has a number of tools that are designed to give the learner a more practical learning experience.

immigrants, some better than others – to adapt to their environment, they always retain, to some degree, their "accent," that is, their foot in the past. The “digital immigrant accent” can be seen in such things as turning to the Internet for information second rather than first, or in reading the manual for a program rather than assuming that the program itself will teach us to use it” (Prensky, 2001: 1-2).
Other challenges that exist, but are not unique to my classroom, are the budgetary constraints involved in implementing online learning; the difficulties in teaching and learning online; faculty and institutional support needed for online learning and the problem with the different learner capabilities. The last challenge though, is not something that I view as a challenge as from my experience with the learners, they are able to quickly grasp the workings of new technology and as such, will be able to easily navigate their way through the online classroom.

The greatest opportunity that exists in the classroom is the learner itself. As described earlier, today’s learner is a digital native and encountering the Web and the resources\(^2\) that come with it is not an unfamiliar experience to the learner.

4. Theory

Which educational theories seem most relevant to your investigation? Briefly describe each theory's key characteristics.

There are several theories that are important to this investigation as the theories work together in creating a theoretical framework for understanding the different approaches for enhancing learner engagement. For the purposes of this report, the most relevant theories will be discussed.

Emphasis firstly needs to be placed on blended learning, a form of instruction that combines face-to-face learning with online learning. This is discussed in more detail in 6.4 (page 10).

Bearing in mind that my classroom investigation is geared towards enhancing learner engagement, authentic learning is another important theory.

\(^3\)Authentic learning is rooted in the constructivist educational theory (cf. Dewey, 1938) which broadly speaking, purports that learners should ‘construct’ their own learning and thus generate their own knowledge through experience-based activities. Thus, the ‘teacher’ and learner both have a stake in the knowledge generated with the learner taking on a more active role in the learning experience. This reiterates the quotation at the outset of the report, which explains that knowledge should open minds and should ideally be a shared, collaborative experience.

\(^2\) These resources range from browsing the Internet for research and entertainment, downloading music, iTunes, videos and a range of other multimedia resources as well as using the Web for social networking (such as Facebook, Twitter and MSN).

\(^3\) The summary on authentic learning is adapted from an earlier document submitted to the Pioneers class (Mind Map assignment, unpublished report, 2008). The summary was compiled by the author.
Donovan, Bransford and Pellegrino (1999) define authentic learning as that which allows students to explore, discover, discuss and meaningfully construct concepts and relationships in contexts that involve real-world problems and projects that are relevant and interesting to the reader. In relation to Media Studies III, this is particularly important in gearing learners towards a more engaging learner experience. The online classroom can be designed to have reflect real-world relevance, relate to practical media examples and show clear links to media organisations and research institutions. In this way, the learner’s engagement should increase as the relevance of the subject to the working world becomes more apparent.

There are several other characteristics than can be used to enhance learner engagement. These essential characteristics are identified by Herrington et al (2007:37) as:

i) Real-world relevance;
ii) Ill-defined, requiring students to define the tasks and subtasks;
iii) Compromise complex tasks to be investigated by students over a period of time;
iv) Opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources;
v) Collaboration;
vi) Reflection;
vii) Integrated and applied across different subject areas;
viii) Integrated with assessment;
ix) Polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else;
x) Allow competing solutions and diverse outcomes.

Authentic learning explains that students must be challenged with authentic tasks that drive the need to use, transform, apply and reinterpret that information. Such activities in conjunction with the use of new technologies have the power to stimulate the development of intellectual skills such as reasoning and problem solving ability, learning how to learn, and creativity (Grégoire, Bracewell & Laferrière, 1996). Some of the benefits of online authentic learning are:

- The Web enhances access to experts;
- Enables multiple forms of communication among collaborative teams of learners;
- Access to enormous amount and variety of information (presented in multi-media format);
- Learners can conduct online exercises, play instructional games, engage in virtual reality experiences on the Web;
• Collaboration (teamwork) can be facilitated through communication such as e-mail, discussion forums, bulletin boards and other interactive tools. Learners can discuss problems, debate issues and exchange information with each other. The facilitator can provide more timely feedback, either group or individual (Herrington et al, 2007).

In addition to the above, online learning can be highly successful on the level of engagement, which is enhanced by the use of authentic tasks that ensure such interaction (Herrington et al, 2007). Essentially, online authentic learning tasks allows learners to share their thoughts, relate ideas to past experiences, collaborate with their peers, actively construct their own meanings and incorporate the diverse perspectives of others.

The next theory which relates to the investigation is Online Facilitation. Facilitation is a pedagogical term that refers to student-focused approaches to imparting knowledge whereby the student is actively engaged in the learning process (Australian Flexible Learning Framework, 2005:1). In terms of the Media Studies III classroom, online facilitation can be linked to the ‘lecture-replacement’ process. In this process, the learners are empowered in that they are placed at the centre of the learning experience, allowing them to personalise their learning based on their personal needs and motivation (Siemens, 2002).

My role then as an online facilitator is different to that of a classroom lecturer. The online facilitator is expected to engage, guide and motivate learners, and provide a safe and conducive environment for learning and communication exchange for all learners regardless of their prior experience and predisposition or otherwise towards online learning technologies (Berge, 1995).

Blackboard has several tools that enable effective online facilitation and increase student engagement with the course material. These include:

1. Threaded or unthreaded discussion board
2. Chat tool
3. Links to other materials or lists of materials
4. Email

Lastly, online assessment also plays a significant role in enhancing learner engagement. Online assessment is defined as the use of internet based tools for creation and delivery of assessments; capturing, marking, storage and analysis of learners’ responses; and collation, return and analysis of marks (SQA Guidelines, 2003). Various tools in Blackboard can be used to assess the learners online, which helps promote learner engagement with the course.
material. Feedback is very important in encouraging learner involvement. Tools such as quizzes, discussion thread etc, provide regular feedback to the learner and invite the learner to engage more deeply with the material. These have been used in the Media Studies III class to enhance learner engagement.

5. Methodology

*What is action research and how have you used the methodology's structure for your investigation?*

Action research has been used in many areas where an understanding of complex social situations has been sought in order to improve the quality of life. Action research approaches to educational research were adopted in the late 60s and early 70s by the ‘teacher-researcher’ movement in the secondary education sector (Riding, Fowell and Levy, 1995).

Dick (1999) reveals that action research is responsive and flexible; and it (action research) achieves responsiveness and flexibility through being cyclic. Dick (1999) also continues on the characteristics of action research and says that action research is also participative in that the actors are involved as informants and they also share other roles with the researcher. The action research cycle is made up of planning, action, observing and reflection. These steps are repeated in sequence as work progresses, creating an upward spiral of improving practice. This is illustrated below.

Adopted from:

In terms of this investigation, the action research cycle has been used in the following way:
Plan: Actions were proposed to address the issue/problem. In this instance, I wanted to investigate how to enhance learner engagement. The online environment and particularly, Blackboard has several tools that promote learner engagement. Blackboard would also help in creating a more authentic learning environment for the learners in my Media Studies III class, who often battle with linking theory to practical media examples.

Act: Here, the plan is implemented. During this phase, the Media Studies III class was piloted amongst a group of Media III learners. The students engaged in a range of online activities on Blackboard.

Observe: I observed the learner participation during the online activities and also recorded pertinent information. In addition, a questionnaire was administered to learners to gauge their reactions about the online learning environment.

Reflect: The observations will be interpreted so that the problem can be better understood and improved upon. Outcomes from the reflection phase will feed back into the cycle (an ongoing process), returning to the planning phase.

Action research is a very useful research tool as it promotes collaborative research; learners, facilitators and other faculty members can be involved in the action research; which is an ongoing process. Action research also purports that no research is too small – hence, you can start your action research with a small pilot study (as is in this case) and develop this into a full-blown study of the online Media Studies III classroom. Overall, action research encourages the quality control of your teaching methods and promotes ownership of the learning environment.

6. Design

6.1 The Vision

*What is the vision for your online classroom in the long term?*

The long term vision for my classroom is four-fold:

(a) *Safe space:* I would like the Media Studies III classroom to be a safe space for learners that enhances the overall learning experience. The safe space implies no fear from prejudice, reprisal and in using the technology.

(b) *Enhanced engagement:* Using the tools available on Blackboard, I would like to enhance learner engagement and create a more authentic learning environment for the learners, who often battle with linking theory to practical media examples.
(c) **Collaboration and support:** I would like to see the Media Studies III class develop with the support of the faculty, staff and learners. Collaboration is also an important part of my vision, in that I would like to develop industry links with key media practitioners and involve them in the online classroom (further reinforcing authentic learning).

(d) **Current and relevant:** The course content would need to be regularly updated to reflect and meet the demands of the different learners. The relevancy of the content needs to be highlighted and this can be done through updated case studies, scenarios and simulated learning activities.

### 6.2 Active Learning

*How will the online course encourage interaction/ collaboration/ engagement/ participation/ active learning?*

The basic way in which I interpret this question is: how will my online classroom create excitement amongst my learners?

This question forms the basis of my investigation. My classroom is currently designed in such a way to promote engagement, participation, and interaction. The collaboration component is a long term vision of my classroom as more time is needed to develop this.

There are several ways in which my classroom addresses this:

a) **Threaded and unthreaded discussions:** the discussion tools promote learner participation at the most basic level. Learners respond to a set of questions or question, which is facilitated by the instructor. For the future, the aim is to get learners more involved in using this tool. Currently, learners are placed into groups and each group has a turn throughout the year to present a set of selected readings. My aim for the future is to have each group present offline (in the classroom) but also be responsible for eliciting responses from their fellow students about the readings. At present, the learner guide contains focus questions on each set of readings. Although repeated requests have been made to encourage learners to answer these questions, very few learners actually implement this. It is difficult for me to monitor the focus questions on a weekly basis. The aim thus is to make the group presenting responsible for the discussion of the focus questions. This will be set up using the discussion tool and will be a peer reviewed exercise by the group doing the presentation.

b) **Online quizzes:** This is an excellent tool to encourage the learner to engage more deeply with the course material. B.Tech students do not write tests during the year, but sit for a final examination at the year end. It is
envisioned that the online quizzes throughout the year will help better prepare learners for the final examination.

c) Media library and Web links: The media library and web links contains a rich source of relevant and current resources to motivate the learner to engage more deeply with the subject matter. In addition, external links to media organisations and resource centres create a more exciting experience for the learner.

There are other communication tools, such as e-mail that can be used to involve learners in the learning process.

6.3 Working Smart
How will you use this mode of teaching and/or the Learning Management System’s capabilities to make your life easier?

There are various ways in which the online classroom can make my life easier. There following key areas have been identified:

(a) Course handouts/materials: These can be put online so that learners who miss a class can easily log on to the site and catch up with offline lectures. In this way, I am not inundated with requests for repeat lectures.

(b) Announcements: Announcements can be made in the online classroom and learners can refer to this on an ongoing basis. This will limit the number of queries I receive regarding assignment due dates, exam dates, FAQs etc. In addition, I can use the announcement tool to keep my learners updated about the course.

(c) Submission of assessments: Assessments can be submitted online and it will be easier for me to monitor submission of assessments as clear deadlines can be set (after which the learner will not be able to submit his work). In addition, the plagiarism tool that is available on Blackboard makes my life so much easier in that I now don’t have to grade essays with the google search engine open on my browser!

(d) Marking: I can now create online quizzes for the learners, without having to worry about grading their work. The results are instantaneous. Further, learners can retake quizzes to learn from their earlier mistakes and gain more understanding of the subject matter.

(e) Feedback: Using the discussion tool, I too can be more involved in the learning experience. Not all learners have the same learning capabilities, thus, feedback and the discussion tools can help further familiarise concepts and theories to those learners who do not digest the information first time round.
Media library and Web links: Learners tend to approach me for additional readings and resources. This can become time-consuming when I have a busy schedule. However, I can avoid this by loading additional reading material to the media library and add external links to the web links section.

6.4 Blended Learning

How will "the blend" work? Consider how you could keep the best of both worlds, combining paper with electronic resources, and face to face interaction with online activities.

Blended learning is an important theory in this investigation as the online classroom will be coupled with the traditional classroom. Blended learning is defined as an educational formation that integrates e-learning techniques including online delivery of materials through web pages, discussion boards and/or email with traditional teaching methods including lectures, in-person discussions, seminars, or tutorials (Teach-nology, 2009).

The traditional classroom has the benefit of a more formal structure. This is important to learners who would be encountering the online classroom for the first time. This, In terms of Media Studies III, the blend will work in that seminars, face-to-face lectures and group presentations will still be implemented. The online classroom will be used to support the traditional classroom and make learning more exciting for the learner, by using the various tools available on Blackboard (see page 8). The overall aim of this investigation is to look at ways of enhancing learner engagement through the online classroom.

Blended learning lends itself to asking the question: which should come first, offline or online? To achieve the best of both worlds, I believe that offline classes (traditional classroom) should be first, followed by the online learning experience. This is because the offline environment would help guide the online activities.

7. Implementation

7.1 Pilot Activity

Describe the pilot activity you have tried out with one or two users.

I uploaded the course content for a section in Media Studies III referred to as the ‘Public Sphere’. The pilot activity was based on understanding the concepts in the public sphere and participating in the online activities to
reflect your understanding. Figure one⁴ shows an image of the Learning Module page:

Figure One: The Learning Module window

The activity was designed to help learners gain a better understanding of the concepts in the public sphere. The activity was completed well after the lectures delivered in the traditional classroom.

The activity was piloted with a group (five learners) from the Media Studies III class. The learners volunteered to participate in the activity. The activity was set out as follows:

a) Learners logged on to the classroom (they were given formal instruction on how to log on as well as a set of notes showing them how to log on and engage with the activity).

b) After logging on, the learners went to Learning Module, clicked on Public Sphere and followed the instructions.

c) The outcomes and instructions were clearly explained. Figure two illustrates this.

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⁴ All figures from the online classroom are shown from the Student view.
d) In showing their understanding of the public sphere, the learners had to respond to a set of focus questions that were based on the readings. The readings were loaded in the Media Links section. In addition, PowerPoint slides that summarised the section on the public sphere were loaded. These PowerPoint slides were not used in the traditional classroom and were put online to encourage learners to log on to the online classroom. Figure three shows the screen for the focus questions.
e) Once the learners had answered the focus questions, they were required to mail their responses to me using the Email tool in the online classroom. Learners were taught how to use the Email tool in Blackboard.

f) Lastly, the learners had to paste the link of an online newspapers article in the discussion forum. External newspaper links were loaded in the Web Links section. They then had to explain why the article/issue was of interest to them, respond to at least two other issues raised by their classmates and reflect on using the online classroom as a form of the contemporary public sphere. See figure four for an illustration.
Two separate discussion tools were used to facilitate the discussion. The blog tool and the threaded discussion tool were used. Each discussion tool was better suited for the activity.
7.2 **Relevance**

*What is the relevance between this activity and the challenges and opportunities you have identified?*

The relevance is clear between this online activity and the challenges and opportunities identified earlier.

**Challenge: Enhancing learner engagement**

Using the tools available in Blackboard such as e-mail; discussion tools and the media library, learners were able to engage more with the course material.

**Challenge: Linking theory with practice**

Using the media library and web links sections, learners were able to gain a more authentic learning experience as the link between the theory and the practice is more evident. It is important for the learners to view, interpret and comment on media case studies, examples and scenarios. The online environment makes this possible.

**Opportunities: The ‘Digital Native’**

The online classroom recognises the importance of the digital native and speaks to him is his media-rich language. The tools used during the pilot activity are common to the digital native and would create a familiar environment for him.

7.3 **Feedback**

*What feedback did you receive from users?*

Feedback from the learners concentrated more on the online experience rather than the specific activity. Feedback was both online and offline. In the online classroom the learners had to reflect on their online experience and offline, the learners responded to a set of questions.

**Online feedback:**

The feedback from the learners was positive. One learner stated:

*The online class is an excellent tool to communicate and interact with the class. In all it is easy to use application and tools, the individual winds that open up make it easy to read and user friendly. Some time people that are shy to talk in class; however they feel it so easy use electronic messages to communicate (SMS, Emails, and Mixt). Thus when we communicate or participate in the discussion is it easy to share your views. To conclude I would like to say that is a good idea to use this online class, however it should be used together with the face to face class.*

It was encouraging to note that the learner acknowledged the different learning styles in a given classroom and realised the benefits of the online classroom in catering for different learning styles.
Another learner also reiterated the first learner’s point of using the online classroom with the face-to-face classroom:

_I absolutely love the concept of the online classroom, I think it has great potential for success because it is simple and easy to use and saves time because the log in process is quite efficient. I must complement the lecturer on a very attractive design and layout of the online classroom it just makes learning a fun process. I also like the fact that we can communicate with other colleagues with regards to our subject matter. However I do not think that face to face communication with the lecturer should completely be substituted with this online class if anything both should work together. I also have found that the links to various articles were user friendly and will help tremendously in gathering more information about subject content. This was a great experience for me I really hope that this online class will be launched (sic)._

The learner highlights the importance of blended learning – using the best practices from the traditional classroom and the online classroom. The learner also found the external links and additional resources useful. The learner also raises an important point – the benefits from communicating with your fellow classmates and learning not just with them, but from them as well.

Other comments focused on how user-friendly the Blackboard system is:

_The media 3 online system was very helpful and more enjoyable to use. It was easy to follow and understand._

This reinforces how adept today’s learners are with using new technology.

_Offline feedback:_
A questionnaire was sent to all five participants to measure the learners’ overall experience with the online environment. The questions administered were:
Overall Reactions to the Class (Please tick)

Which of these statements best describe the way you feel about the Media III online class?

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I like the online Media III class.</td>
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<td>2. The online class makes learning more interesting.</td>
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<td>3. Online course delivery systems should be changed to make them resemble face-to-face learning environments.</td>
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<td>4. I prefer activities on paper.</td>
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<td>5. I knew how to use computers before taking the Media class.</td>
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<td>6. It is easy to use the technology in the Media class.</td>
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<td>7. My Internet skills are adequate for this class.</td>
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<td>8. The instructor provides adequate feedback for this class.</td>
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<td>9. The instructor provides timely feedback for this class.</td>
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<td>10. The course materials are helpful.</td>
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<td>11. The process for sending/receiving assignments is working smoothly.</td>
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<td>12. The instructions for assignments are clear.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. The external links (web links) are helpful.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. I enjoyed working with the Discussion tools.</td>
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What would you like to see improved in the online classroom?

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Thank you.
All five learners completed the questionnaire. The responses were overwhelmingly positive. The responses have been grouped into the following categories:

a) **Online learning environment:** All learners agreed that the online class makes learning more exciting. However, only one learner disagreed that the online classroom should be altered to resemble face-to-face learning environments.

b) **Tools:** All learners found the online tools useful and easy to use. However, one learner also indicated a preference for ‘paper activities’. This reinforces the notion of blended learning. In addition, the learners enjoyed engaging with the discussion tools.

c) **Technology:** All learners strongly agreed that they had the adequate skills needed to participate in the online classroom. In addition, all learners found it ‘easy’ to use the Blackboard tools. This further reinforces the digital native’s ability to adapt more easily to new technology than the digital immigrant.

d) **Course Material:** All learners agreed that the instructions for the piloted activity were clear and easy to follow.

In terms of what they would like to see improved in the online classroom, the responses were as follows:

- a) Learners commented more on the Blackboard system, than the online classroom. In other words, they found it ‘annoying’ when they were logged off Blackboard while typing out a message.
- b) One learner felt that the interaction between the learner and the facilitator was greater in the face-to-face classroom than in the online environment.
- c) Other learners reinforced the importance of blended learning (both the traditional and the online classroom).

I was disappointed that the learners’ approach to the open-ended was very general and not specific to the Media Studies III classroom. This provided me with very limited learner feedback for future adjustments.

8. **Reflection**

8.1 **Assumptions**

*Which assumptions did you make and what did you learn from your assumptions after implementing the activity?*

Based on the online activity and the data collected, it has become apparent that it was a mistake to assume the learners would struggle with using the
online tools and basically engaging with the online environment. The data also reveals that it was wrong to assume that the learners would support a total shift from the traditional classroom to the online classroom. It was surprising to note that the learners called for a blended learning approach to teaching and learning.

8.2 Future Adjustments
In the light of the feedback received and the lessons you have learnt, how will you adjust/adapt/change your activity and/or your classroom during the next action research cycle?

In terms of my activity, I would like to reduce the number of tasks for the section. Although the learners did not voice any complaints, I realised that to have too many tasks per section would impact negatively on the student. For the future modules, I would shorten the tasks and also include an online quiz per section. I think it is imperative in creating an ongoing learning environment and encouraging learner participation. Also, I would like to collaborate with media practitioners from the real world to encourage them to participate in the online classroom. In this way, my aim is to develop a more authentic learning environment and enhance learner engagement.

8.3 Impact
What impact do you envisage this intervention could make, or has made on either or all of the following: you, your learners, the curriculum and the institution?

I envisage that the online environment will have a very positive impact on today’s learner and the institution. Firstly, the online classroom demonstrates to the learner that as an institution of higher learning, the Durban University of Technology (DUT) recognises that learning environments need to adapt to the new, emerging learners. Secondly, Blackboard and e-learning initiatives positions the institution favourably both nationally and internationally. As an institution that actively promotes e-learning initiatives, the DUT truly is an institution for developing leadership in technology.

In terms of the curriculum, I envisage a more practical component to the subject, with clear links to the working world. The online environment also lends itself to regular updates of course material, case studies and general research in the discipline of media studies. This can only enhance the overall teaching and learning experience.

Personally, the online classroom has made me aware of the possibilities available to engage the learners in an improved learning experience. Further,
the online environment has made me develop as a facilitator of knowledge and has improved (and no doubt will continue to improve) my facilitating skills.

8.4 Lessons Learnt

What lessons have you learnt overall during the year in which you have become an online facilitator?

During the Pioneers course I was transported back to my days as a learner at university. This year long experience as a learner has made me more aware of the challenges faced by today’s learners. These challenges include hectic schedules, work commitments and increased changes to technology. It also made me aware just how exciting it is to learn new and different things. Although I was a learner in the Pioneers class, I simultaneously donned my facilitator cap in that the class leant itself to me constantly referring to my role as an instructor in the classroom. I found this dichotomy very interesting in that I would think both as a learner and as the facilitator in the design and approach to my online classroom. This helped me better conceptualise the overall look and approach to my online learning environment.

Learning about the various educational pedagogies has made me rethink my role in the classroom as an ‘imparter of knowledge’. I now view my role in the classroom differently; I see myself as a facilitator in the creation of knowledge; knowledge not intended to merely fill minds, but rather, open them.

I also appreciate the support and camaraderie amongst the Pioneers group, which has helped me complete the course. This kind of support has taught me the importance of learning and developing with and from your peers.

In conclusion, this report has looked at developing an e-learning strategy to enhance learner engagement in the Media Studies III classroom. The report mentions several Blackboard tools that can be used to enhance learner engagement, as well as different pedagogical approaches (blended learning, authentic learning and online assessment). Ultimately, the report reveals that for the learner to fully engage with the material, e-learning strategies need to be developed in conjunction with traditional classroom activities.
9. Bibliography


