Pioneers 2008/2009

1) Armchair Travel in a Virtual World: An Orientation Class for the Arts Extended First Year Programme Communication and Design Appreciation Class (Academic Literacy)

2) Context: Which current international and/or local trends are triggers for your investigation?

Since starting teaching at DUT in 2006 I have been mentored by experienced lecturers who constantly interrogate and examine their teaching and classroom management practices in their attempts to better engage their students and in turn ensure steady pass rates. I have learned from them how the classroom demographics at DUT have changed steadily and noticeably over the years. The learners that fill our classrooms come from very socio-economically and language diverse backgrounds. When attempting to engage these learners one soon comes up against as many and varied barriers to learning. These may be amongst other things, poverty leading to educational disadvantage, English as a second language challenges and emotional deprivation and trauma.

As a result of these factors many of our students although motivated to attend a tertiary institution, have little or no idea what this kind of study entails and what the appropriate coping strategies should be. Teaching a class called Communication and Design Appreciation for the Arts Extended First Year Programme affords me the opportunity to work closely each year with a group of around 50 students as we have a weekly contact time of 4-5 hours. The students write, do oral presentations, visit art galleries, receive guest speakers, have library and computer laboratory research time, sit exam-like control projects, hang their own exhibitions and participate in cross subject integrated projects as well as a Community Service Learning mural painting project. It is within these activities that I expect to facilitate a growing academic literacy of the world of Art and Design.

When looking at the trends influencing my interest in E Learning’s application in this programme it was clear to me that they are at two levels. Firstly, with regards to the students it is not difficult to observe the disturbing lack of educational opportunity that the majority of young South Africans face. The academic ‘under preparedness’ of tertiary students is often coupled by a lack of understanding by the learners of their need to be active owners of their education. Students flounder in tertiary classes where rote learning is no longer sufficient to pass the grade. Added to this students are often attending tertiary classes at great financial cost to their families and the necessary home support is lacking, be it physical, emotional or attitudinal.

The second trend fuelling my interest in using an E Learning approach is an ‘institutional’ one. Teaching in a University of Technology, it is vital that students are well-equipped for the world of work and that they see the links between theory classes and their future careers. As a Technikon turned University of Technology it is
now even more important to provide students with a rounded and broad based educational experience, thus ‘making knowledge useful’ and seeing ‘technological capabilities as important as cognitive skills’ (Du Pré, 2009:11 and 16).

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

The challenges are engaging the students, getting them excited about learning and thus motivated. One also needs to enable them to cope and not feel overwhelmed and afraid in an often difficult to interpret and understand, learning environment …each with its own ‘language’ and set of implicit norms and rules.

Another great challenge is making sure that students read and write at every opportunity. It is a challenge to me to be able to respond to their writing in a way that facilitates the development of critical thinking and also encourages them to become self aware. This is especially important because as students of art and design they have to know themselves in order to communicate effectively with the world.

Using E Learning creates opportunities to provide deep and rich learning environments for all students, regardless of home background, at the click of a button. As shown by Carmean, C. and Haefner, J.(2002:29) with E Learning my teaching can be all of the below through the intelligent use of a web based Classroom Management System (CMS).

‘Social’ – discussions, email, chat rooms, blogs and announcements

‘Active’ – students receive immediate feedback from the lecturer and each other.

‘Contextual’ – web links, calendar, access to up to date real world happenings (e.g. current art exhibitions and competitions).

‘Engaging’ - accommodates diverse learning styles(e.g. art students are often visual learners and the internet caters to this), presents new experiences (e.g. virtual tour), provides relevant and appropriately graded information (e.g. readings in media library). Preset written feedback to student after a quiz has been submitted asks questions that stimulate further analysis of topic.

‘Student owned’ – learning happens when a student chooses to learn. This caters for a range of abilities and speeds in task completion.

4) Theory: Which educational theories seem most relevant to your investigation?

Briefly describe each theory’s key characteristics.

The Blended Learning approach is defined by Verkroost, M., Meijerink, L., Lintsen, H. and Veen, W.(2008) as ‘the total mix of pedagogical methods, using a combination of different learning strategies, both with and without the use of technology’ (p499). This
approach stresses the importance of face to face contact between teachers and
learners, as not only do learners thrive on immediate feedback from the teacher, but
also do well where there is emotional connection. As Rosa (2004:65) suggests
‘programmes with frequent interaction between learner and teacher will positively
influence learners from educationally disadvantaged environments’ In a web
classroom one does not lose the opportunity for personal contact but rather, one
gains the internet linked computer as a research resource and a Classroom
Management System.

Authentic learning is said to occur when classroom activities have ‘real world
relevance, are ill defined, require students to define the tasks needed, require
investigation over a sustained period of time, provide opportunities to examine the
task from different perspectives and use a variety of resources’ (Herrington, J., Reeves, T., Oliver, R. and Woo, Y. 2004:11-12). The very nature of a
complex CMS such as Blackboard (Bb) would provide opportunities for all the
Authentic Learning criteria mentioned. Learners grapple not only with the class
content but how to access it through learning the use of the CMS.

5) Methodology: What is action research and how have you used the
methodology’s structure for your investigation?

Gilmore, Krantz and Ramirez cited by O’Brien define Action Research as research
which aims to ‘contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate
problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously. Thus,
there is a dual commitment in Action Research to study a system concurrently to
collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded
as a desirable direction. Accomplishing this twin goal requires the active
collaboration of researcher and client and thus it stresses the importance of co-
learning as a primary aspect of the research process.’ (1998)

There are four key stages in any Action Research Cycle: Plan, Act, Observe and
Reflect.

The planning stage began as I designed my web classroom based on my studies of
educational theories within the Pioneers course and my perceptions of learners
needs. My planning was also influenced by my observations of and discussions with
other E Learning lecturers at DUT.

The action stage was my attempt to use Bb in a real time classroom situation with
volunteer learners.

My observations were initially limited owing to a technological hitch in the DUT
computer system. I had hoped to chat informally about the testee’s impressions of
Bb after the learning activity. My primary area of interest was to be, noting whether
the learners all engaged in the reading task with enthusiasm, whether they wrote
comments in the Discussion Tool and whether they felt exposed or comfortable
using the Discussion Tool. I would have been able to enter the Action Research Cycle again based on the learner’s reactions to the task. Pedagogical issues anticipated were whether the readings were pitched at a suitable level for independent study and whether the planned task was the right length for the allocated time.

My reflections have thus been captured in this report

6) Design
6.1) Vision: What is the vision for your online classroom in the long term?

My vision in the long term is:

- To allow students to have fun while teaching computer skills in an incidental and non-threatening way.

- To provide exposure to the world of Art and Design and alongside this facilitate the realisation in the learner that this knowledge and experience is within their grasp when using the internet for research. A strong implicit message a teacher is thus giving to students is that 'I know you are capable'. This is particularly important when teaching in an Extended Curriculum Programme as students may feel marginalised by and excluded from the departments in which they have enrolled. From the research opportunities afforded by the online classroom will follow the learner's interest in and growing academic literacy of Art and Design.

- To create collaborative learning activities that foster group work skills, as is highlighted by Du Pré (2009) when describing the uniqueness of the role of a University of Technology in the 'preparation of a new generation of knowledge workers'. These students will learn to share similar 'work ethics and the ability to work in multicultural teams and in the process will become ‘students-for-life.’ (p 11)

6.2) Active Learning: How will the online course encourage interaction/collaboration/engagement/participation/active learning?

The planned pilot activity would have ensured interaction between classmates through the use of the Discussion Tool. The students would have found the virtual tour of an art gallery engaging and this would possibly have resulted in spontaneous or lecturer directed class discussion about the works of art on show. Learning about the possibility of virtual tours might have stimulated the students to find other interesting websites to tour (e.g. The Tate Modern in London). Web links such as these could be shared and then uploaded by the lecturer. A further activity (not yet
included in the online classroom) was to have been a group visit to a Durban gallery. The students were to choose a gallery using the Web Links Tool, find a map of how to get there using the internet and to do readings about the exhibition/artist from art online publications such as Arthrob. This ‘real’ gallery visit will be a natural extension of the students exploration of a virtual gallery. It was planned in this way to allow the learners a chance to first feel comfortable ‘virtually’ and then move to a real life experience.

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?

Although there are many Bb technological support challenges at present at DUT City Campus I feel these challenges are by their very nature, excellent teaching opportunities. One has to go through problems in order to understand/find solutions and challenges are needed to in order to learn a system. The ‘teacher’ is in the position to model good research practicise, to problem solve fearlessly (no computer ‘problem’ ever seems to repeat itself!) and to demonstrate that we are all learners no matter what our age or qualification.

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.

The face to face component of my E Learning class would be the time I spent explaining what Bb is and talking and supporting the students through the use of the computer and then the activities. My approach in the conventional classroom is very hands-on as I feel it is very important that learners know they have my undivided attention, this would not change in a web classroom. The benefits of using E Learning in my Arts Extended class would revolve around access to resources and would not reduce the contact time between lecturer and class. I would be able to provide print-outs of learning materials such as readings and would also make use of printed instructions to explain the workings of the computer such as the ‘Mini Computer Skills Tutorial’

Another element of the ‘Blend’ is in the use of structured vs. unstructured activity. The planned online activity was a threaded discussion with a structured topic. The student ‘testees’ very soon navigated around the classroom and started using the Chat and Email Tool in their spare time. They were thus using Bb as a social networking facility (one hopes that they were discussing what they observed about galleries!)
7) Implementation:

7.1) Pilot activity: Describe the pilot activity you have tried out with one or two users.

I booked the Computer Lab for 18 enthusiastic Arts Extended Curriculum programme students. I had to explain to them that not only would they have fun and help me but that they would familiarise themselves with Blackboard in preparation for its use in their first year classes. I had planned to give them a brief explanation of Blackboard and then to invite them to take a virtual tour of a current exhibition at the Standard Bank Gallery in Johannesburg. This activity was planned at this point in order to ‘help build the student’s interest, arouse their curiosity, and stimulate thinking’. This would, in other words ‘immediately plunge the students into the subject matter.’ (Activity Builder, 2000:7) After the tour they were to read a short text about galleries (a newspaper or magazine article or a short introductory chapter from a book). After reading they were to post a comment in the Discussion Tool and respond to one other comment before leaving the Lab. This lesson was planned for a one hour period. Unfortunately on this and two subsequent occasions the classroom would not load from City Campus. I thus plan to use my ‘virtual tour’ activity with my whole class (to go live!) the moment the bandwidth improves in South Africa and in the meantime will use Bb for classroom management and relevant and structured research.

7.2) Relevance: What is the relevance between the activity and the challenges and opportunities you have identified?

The ‘virtual tour’ activity was designed to provide a taste of a novel experience in order to broaden learner’s life experiences and to provide equal access to learning opportunities within the classroom. It was also intended to foster the learner’s self confidence and to develop a growing academic literacy of the “the rules of conduct in new social environments” (Maxwell- Jolly 2009:2). It was hoped that this would satisfy the University of Technology’s requirements for broad based and real world linked learning opportunities.

7.3) Feedback: What feedback did you receive from users?

The Arts Extended students were curious and excited. Talking the students through logging in to the class was time consuming and it was then that I observed the varying degrees of computer literacy amongst the students and noted the great importance of explaining discipline specific terminology. I was able to explain to them what Bb is and discussed the terminology I was using (e.g. virtual, hyper-linked glossary) while we waited for the system to load. The students listened intently and were visibly disappointed when nothing happened. Two Graphics students seemed to have more success on the computers they were on and when I asked them if they were confidently computer literate they replied that they ‘had the magic!’ The students expressed concern about being ‘left out’ because we could not log in
properly and they also asked if they could ‘do work in the web classroom” They were very clearly expressing their perceived importance of this CMS and the learning potential housed therein.

My next two attempts were at City Campus (one with 4 students from the Arts Extended office and one in the Lab with a colleague). The students commented on the design of my home page calling it ‘professional and personal and the colours too dark’ and said that they would like to use Bb as it seemed ‘organised’ and ‘would make life easier’. They expressed particular interest in using the classroom Email Tool. My colleague felt that Bb was an important link to the working world, that it would enhance learner’s computer skills and that it shouldn’t be ‘only for fun as computers are an integral part of learning’. He said that ‘Bb should be used for all programmes at all levels”

The final feedback I received was at the EdTech Lab on ML Sultan campus with a colleague. We then discovered that two students had independently posted comments in the discussion area. I was later told by the student that he and a friend had logged in to the classroom later that day from a lab at Steve Biko Campus. The students had uploaded their photos into the Class Roster and had communicated using the Chat room and Email Tools. The student reported really enjoying using the system (exploring) and doing the readings in the Media Library, and asked if I would provide more. He suggested that the readings be stored differently as the texts were too small to read comfortably in their present form.

These students saw beyond the use of Bb as purely an educational tool and used it to network socially in a ‘safe’ space. Recent research from ‘The Stanford Study of Writing’ cited by Keller(2009) is showing that much of the out-of-classroom writing that students do is to ‘accomplish immediate, concrete goals such as organizing a group of people’ and that the ‘immediacy’ of online writing ‘helps to keep the students engaged’. Again this points to an important broad value of a CMS such as Bb. If on-line writing is considered to be the ‘new normal’ where one of the benefits is that students are ‘more conscious of the effect their writing has on other people’ and that ‘social networking forces the writer to be aware of audience, tone and voice’ then a teacher at tertiary level can’t afford to ignore the value of using an online class as a teaching tool.

8) Reflection:

8.1) Assumptions: Which assumptions did you make and what did you learn from your assumptions after implementing the activity?

I assumed that my students would be enthusiastic about trying this approach to learning and I was right! I asked for seven volunteers to test my classroom and eighteen students came forward. I assumed that I would be able to go through a short collection of activities designed to engage the learners in a reading activity with a written response. The system was slower than anticipated and after an hour of
waiting the virtual tour had not loaded and the other Learning Resource areas were also slow to load. I thus learnt the importance of not planning to teach on-line only. It is necessary to have alternatives to all one’s teaching resources (the ‘blend’!). This is vitally important as ‘success or failure of the first opening activity can have a vast impact on the perceptions of other activities thereafter’ (Activity Builder, 2000:6)

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?

I realise I should adapt my expectations of E Learning for the moment and make sure my teaching methods stay flexible. Using the library, guest speakers, outings and group work are all methods one can easily combine with the use of Bb. I will be able to use my planned web class ideas in a conventional way and simply book the Lab for part of the lecture time. I could then set smaller research tasks in order to expose the students to computers. For example, after the virtual tour failed to load the students could look at the work of the artist being researched using Google Image and the discussion activity could be carried out in small groups to ensure all students felt comfortable participating.

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 expected the technological system to be inadequate under the current ‘bandwidth’ conditions in South Africa. Also, the Lab accommodates around 25 learners and I have 45 in my class. I thus need to plan carefully as it would be short sighted to not pre-empt certain challenges in the use of CMS’s. Using two venues (e.g. library and computer lab) to accommodate the students and to allow them an equal amount of time on the computer would be a way of working within the current system. I also plan to create log-in numbers for the whole class so that they all feel part of the system and can start feeling confident in its use. I trust that as more lecturers book the computer labs and express an interest in implementing E Learning, management will be able to motivate for more and better equipment and most importantly better technical support. I know that when Bb works reliably and with adequate capacity for large student groups it will be a powerful teaching tool.

8.4) **Lessons learnt:** What lessons have you learnt overall during the year in which you have become an online facilitator?

I have learnt a lot about learning, teaching and myself. The learning about ‘myself as a learner’ has given me the greatest teaching as we all need to be reminded frequently of the experience of being a student in order to make our teaching methods real and empathic. I have learnt so much about educational theory and classroom practise and praxis that I can and have already applied in my work. Most importantly that I am also a ‘life-long learner’ and this must be conveyed through my
teaching. It is so important to not fall back on what one is comfortable with as this is a sure way to stagnate! I also know that I have a long learning journey ahead to truly feel confident that my use of Bb is as streamlined and pedagogically deep as possible. Thank you Mari, Gita, Preggy, Denise, Sanjuka, my classmates and students for a fun and challenging Pioneering experience!

Bibliography


Du Pré,R. 2009. The Place and Role of Universities of Technology in South Africa. Durban: Durban University of Technology.


