Action Research Report

Mirror Mirror on My Desktop: Reflective practice in the Theory of Clothing 1 online classroom at the Department of Fashion and Textiles

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1.0 Introduction

This Action Research Report documents the conceptualization and pilot implementation of Reflective Practice through Blackboard for the ‘Design Reflection’ project in Theory of Clothing 1, within the Fashion and Textiles Department of the DUT. My e-classroom, themed Alice in Theoryland is a post-modern, africanised metaphor inspired from Lewis Caroll’s 1865 story of Alice in Wonderland (Caroll, 2004). While the classroom has been designed to eventually house the Theory of Clothing 1 as a module, this investigation has focused on the singular aspect of teaching and learning through Reflection in order to achieve depth rather than breadth of analysis. This report also discusses the context and challenges of this project as well as the educational theories, which have been relevant to this investigation. An Action Research methodological approach was deemed suitable and is structured around the problem.

2.0 The Context: Wiki, YouTube and the Siren’s Call for Pioneers enrollment

The impetus for this study stems from my observation of the dynamics in change of our technological environment and the parallel evolution of learners in relation to these changes. I took on lectureship the Fashion and Textiles Department two years ago and was wondering straight away how my classes of Generation Y Wikipedians would cope with my Lo-Tech classroom and my Hi-Tech (well, Medium-Tech at that time!) demands in terms of researching and presenting projects. After my first term of lecturing, I put in a request for computer lab for teaching Theory of Clothing 1&2 which was granted as a batch of old unused PCs was available as well as and possibility for internet access for the whole lab.

As the educator / designer / cultural commentator that I like to think myself as, I spend a lot of time surfing the World Wide Web. Did you know that...

- There are 31 billion searches on Google every month
- The number of internet devices in
  1984 was 1000
  1992 was 1,000,000
  2006 was 600,000,000
- The years it took to reach a market audience of 50 million for:
  The radio: 38 years
  TV: 13 years
  Internet: 4 years
  iPod: 3 years
  Facebook: 2 years

(Did you know that 2.0, 2007; Fischer, 2006)
My enrollment in the Web-based learning and teaching course (Pioneers) was a natural sequence of events and, it led to further and formal investigation of international and local trends that put the need for e-learning into focus.

An investigation into the definitions of a Digital Native (Prensky, 2005), - like our learners and current newborns, and a Digital Immigrant (like myself, born before 1980) leads to scientific proof that these two categories are inherently different on a cerebral level. In fact, experience in the form of exposure to digital devices from the time one is a toddler means that digital natives have significantly different brain wiring from digital immigrants (Rikhye, Cook and Berge, 2009; Learning Technologies and Schools of the Future, 2007:6).

Learner expectations are changing; Generation Y navigates in “a technologically rich, problem solving and lateral environment; many find the flat, linear environment of traditional ‘chalk and talk’ pedagogies stifling” (Learning Technologies and Schools of the Future, 2007:3).

While the preceding arguments are situated in Western contexts and can be seemingly applied to a specific segment of South African youth, it can be candidly argued that the digital divide is very much a real factor in a widespread South African context. In my professional experience however, I have empirically observed from comparing the computer literacy levels of intake of three consecutive First Year batches of fashion students that; the number of new learners who are computer illiterate is decreasing and secondly, that the time it takes for those computer illiterate learners to learn computer skills (through facilities offered by the DUT Library) is becoming shorter.

It is interesting to note that The South African government’s goal for 2013 is that no South African learner will leave a public school without being computer literate (Kasonde, 2007). Project MobilED is an initiative in the designing of virtual learning environments of which the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (SA), Tshwane University of Technology (SA) are partners and the pioneer in e-learning and Teemu Leinonen of the University of Art and Design Helsinki (Finland) is on the project team (MobilEd, 2008). These are all signs that the digital divide should not be considered as an insurmountable obstacle or unbridgeable gap; it would be sheer shortsightedness and unprogressive thinking in the context of future trends anticipated by visionary thinker Karl Fisch (2006). As Africans, we cannot afford waking up, unprepared and ill equipped in a future where sister developing Asian countries are growing exponentially – and we are not just looking at population numbers here (Did you know 2.0, 2007).
3.0 Inside every problem lies an opportunity: Identifying challenges in the teaching environment for addressing through web-based learning (WBL)

General challenges in teaching Theory of Clothing 1&2 and Communication (part of Professional Practice 1) include the following:

**The Time Factor**

The Practical components in the ND: Fashion programme get allocated the bulk of the timetable whereas Theory subjects are run for a maximum of 2 hours per week. I feel this is insufficient in my instruction, as I do not get to communicate sufficient depth or variety of elements such as learning materials. An e-classroom will allow for these issues to be addressed in the sense that my classroom can be accessible to learners virtually 24H and they can browse learning materials such as uploads and links at their convenience.

**My assessment load**

The prescribed 10 minutes per project as per the time allocated for assessment by DUT is vastly insufficient for Theory subjects where fair marking requires in-depth consideration and critique, which can be time-consuming. While Blackboard cannot do assessment on that level, it offers a variety of tools such as the quiz and discussion tool that offer possibilities of automatic and peer grading thereby freeing time for the Theory lecturer to assess written work such as essays, more effectively and thereby providing the space for timeous feedback / crit sessions with learners while the topic is still ‘fresh’ in their minds.

**Learners’ lack of motivation**

This problem is a complex one as issues around teaching and learning methods would not necessarily be the only reasons for a lack of motivation with learners. While putting my theory subjects online will not necessarily solve this issue it is hoped that it will provide an innovative and more stimulating interface for learners to engage with.

3.1 Localised challenges in facilitation of Design Reflection

The 3 problems mentioned above have all affected the outcomes of the Design Reflection project on the 2 occasions that I have set it to learners. In fact, I consider the first 2 attempts to have been failures in that only 2 or 3 students engaged with the project to an appreciable extent on the two separate occasions.

Design Reflection is an integrated project for which learners are required to design and make a Little Black Dress (LBD) under control conditions. After the process, they are given the opportunity to bring their design concept and product to the Theory of Clothing 1 classroom to reflect with the class, on their design, pattern-making and garment construction processes. Following this, they reconceptualise an Ultimate version of a LBD. In the most disappointing instances learners have proposed changes such as ‘a 2 cm adjustment in hem length’ on the existing design after 4 weeks of staged reflection on the process.

After changing parameters of the project in 2008 such as project duration following the first go in 2007, I decided to revise this project for 2009 from a more informed and totally revolutionary angle by transforming the teaching and learning methods involved in making it the focus of first my e-classroom.
The way in which web-based learning addresses these challenges is discussed in context of the design of the e-classroom in section 6.0.

4.0 Theoretical Viewpoints: An overview of the relevant theories for this investigation

4.1 Why is the process of Reflection important in fashion education?

According to Alison James (2007:183) of the London College of Fashion, “reflection in terms of visual analysis is clearly central to creative learning.” In the one instance where a student performed exceptionally well for this project, I noticed that there had been almost, an evolutionary jump in conceptualizing skills after the Reflection process. I subsequently documented the latter in the production of a motivational video (Madhoo-Chipps, 2008) for future learners in my e-classroom.

Donald Schon, the prominent theorist on reflective practice describes two types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Reflection/Lessons Learned, n.d).

“Reflection-in-action helps us as we complete a task. It is that process that allows us to reshape what we are working on, while we are working on it. It is that on-going experimentation that helps us find a viable solution” (ibid).

Reflection-on-action in design projects is provided by final reflection practice, evidence of “design documents titled 'lessons learned,'” and also any time (written or otherwise) in which an evaluation of learners’ own process which is actually a critical part of the design process, is mandatorily incorporated as part of the design documents (ibid).

Evidence of reflection is indicative of a move up the hierarchy of learning; it demonstrated that learners have moved from basic levels of knowledge and comprehension to “higher levels of applied and metacognitive knowledge (application and analysis)” (Bateman et al, 2007:1)

Metacognition is an awareness of the process of learning and happens when there is self-reflection, self-responsibility and initiative; and where it manifests students become more independent as learners (Halter, n.d). “Independence leads to ownership as students realize they can pursue their own intellectual needs and discover a world of information at their fingertips” (ibid).

For all the value attributed to reflective practice, I have noticed that both my attempts at instigating it in the classroom have been met with a lack of interest and apathy, almost. In a similar vein, James (2007:187) states that staff members working on reflective practice on all fashion-related programmes reported that students did not see reflection as a valuable activity but as a tedious one, which was treated superficially. If this issue is not just DUT-specific, and could be a commonly occurring one amongst design students worldwide, then surely the challenge of addressing it will be of significance in fashion education.

4.2 The Antidote to Apathy? An outline of possibly supportive and enhance key educational theories for the implementation of reflective practice in the e-classroom
4.2.1 Blended Learning

A core definition of blended learning could be; the combination of face-to-face teaching and learning with online or internet-based learning (Blended learning, n.d). Colis and Moonen (ibid) are quoted in their explanation of the advantages of blended learning offering a more robust educational experience than either traditional or fully online learning can offer.

In 2003, a study by the eLearning Guild found that the top three reasons for using blended learning were that 68.6% of learners like it; 73.6% felt it had was more effective than non-blended approaches; 76% felt it was more effective than the classroom alone (Sparks, 2007).

The implementation of the online learning dimension to reflective practice could perhaps provide a more interesting platform for learners to engage in that it is a more Generation Y-friendly format of doing things.

4.2.3 Authentic Learning

Learning can be defined as authentic when learners engage in collaboration, articulation and critical self-reflection whereby their worldviews and values are confirmed or challenged as they produce outcomes typical of quality performance (McKenzie et al, 2002: 426-427).

While academic learning tends to be ‘formulated by others,’ and ‘characterised by having only one correct answer’ or ‘having only one method of obtaining the correct answer.’ (Herrington et al, 2004:6). Herrington et al (2004) also propose that authentic learning comprises of complex tasks to be investigated over by the learner over a period of time, providing an opportunity for the learner to examine the task from different perspectives while using various resources; while also, providing the opportunity to group work and leading to reflection.

Designing of a collaborative authentic learning activity in an e-classroom could be facilitated through the Blackboard discussion tool where learners can discuss, constructively criticize and exchange information in a structured but unlimited forum-style communication. This would hopefully result in a high level of engagement in its similarity to a chat-room environment.

4.2.2 Motivation

Motivation in the educational context as described by Vockell (2001), entails the setting up of conditions within academic settings, which foster adequate learner performance. Motivation is determined around classroom factors set by the teacher, “that stimulate or inhibit the desire to engage” (ibid).

The term ‘motivation’ has synonyms like inspiration and drive (The Times English Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2000). Fundamentally, the virtual environment offers a new approach that, through the metaphor used throughout the classroom, aim at inspiring learners to action through factors such as fantasy, curiosity (see Section 6.2) and challenge (Vockell, 2001).

4.2.3 Online Facilitation
Online facilitation is defined as the online management of learners and their learning process, as well as the communication of learners online (Effective Online Facilitation, 2003). The term facilitation is key in its pedagogical significance whereby the teaching approach is student-centred as opposed to teacher-driven (ibid).

The online facilitator needs to be sensitive to the unique qualities of the online workspaces and be able to engage and motivate learners yet hold a neutral position in helping learners focus on their tasks (Online facilitation, 2002; Berge, 1995). Considering these multi-faceted roles the online facilitator has to display, she/he needs to be skilled in pedagogical, social, managerial and technical skills (Berge, 1995).

4.2.4 Online Assessment

Online assessment in the e-learning environment offers “the capability to drive interactions and engagement, as well as minimize plagiarism, strengthen higher-level learning and build e-portfolios” (Assessment in E-learning, 2008).

Learners are afforded an opportunity to plan and design evaluation methods that can assist them in avoiding plagiarism (Assessment of Student Learning in the Online Classroom, 2009), which presents itself as a very desirable attribute for Theory teachers. The exploration of processes such as peer-grading (using electronic evaluation tools) for evaluating e-portfolios, discussion postings and group projects enable learners to develop valuable skills (ibid).

Online assessment in the form of Multi-choice Questions (MCQs) favour formative assessment and provides benefits such as automated, immediacy of results which promote learner engagement (Catley, 2008) – this fits in well with the profile of Generation Y who want and expect instant gratification in all aspects of their lives (Sheahan, n.d).

4.2.5 Learning Styles

Manochehr (2006:11) draws from Kolb, Rubin and McIntyre in defining learning style as “an individual’s inherited foundation, particular past life experience and the demands of the present environment that emphasise some learning abilities over others.” The 3 main types of learning styles are found in the 1) Visual learner who learn through seeing and prefer the use of images and spatial understanding; 2) Auditory learners who learn through listening and benefit from practice such as reading out aloud to understand; 3) Tactile/Kinesthetic learners who learn through moving, doing and touching and learn best through a hands-on approach (Learning Styles Explained, n.d).

The above three outlined categories normally work in combination with the following intellectual styles; a) Logical or Mathematical aptitudes whereby learners favour the use of logic, reasoning and systems to understand content; b) Interpersonal or Social aptitudes where the learner prefers to learn in groups; c) Intrapersonal or Solitary tendencies where self-study and working alone are favoured (Overview of Learning Styles, 2007; Learning Styles Explained, n.d).

While WBL caters for the learners with different learning styles, according to an empirical study by Manochehr (2006: 10), that learners who learn best through ‘thinking and watching’ and ‘thinking and doing’ achieve a better result with e-learning.

5.0 Methodology: Action Research
5.1 What is Action Research?

Muhren (2004) draws from Carr and Kemmis in defining action research as self-reflective inquiry by social researchers undertaken so as to improve the rationality of their practice, their understanding from these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out. Muhren (ibid) further draws from the Western New Mexico University e-learning site to expand on defining action research in an educational context; it is proposed that this inquiry-based research follows a process of in examining existing practices, implementing new practices, evaluating the results, leading to an improvement cycle that benefits both students and teachers.

O’Brien (1998) quotes Gilmore, Krantz and Ramirez in his definition of action research as “seeking to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of that system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction.

Action research is a process that allows action – in terms of improvement and change, and research – in terms of understanding and knowledge, to happen simultaneously in a spiral or cyclical cycle. (Dick, 2002; O’Brien, 1998).

Action research happens in a spiral or cyclical way that allows for research and improvement and change followed. The relevance of this methodology for this investigation is explained in the following section.

5.2 Why Action Research for this investigation?

I had unwittingly already started on the path of action research the first time I revised the parameters of the project for re-implementation in 2008. In deciding to revise this project for the second time before re-implementation in 2009, I am engaging actively into action research by planning an intervention after development of my professional knowledge in terms of WBL and pedagogy.

The diagram on the left illustrates the spiral path in which this action research on the Design Reflection project is re-adjusting itself and evolving since 2007.

Figure 1: Action Research Spiral for Design Reflection project since implementation in 2007

Situated in the Praxis research paradigm, action is taken upon practice informed by knowledge in the
ongoing process with researcher subjectivity being part of the process (O’Brien, 1998). Action research methodology provides the framework for planning; acting, observing; reflecting critically in order to revise the next step of re-implementation. This is exactly how the Design Reflection project will be run for the Theory of Clothing 1 module until the major issues are sorted out and a more or less successful generic formula is found, that should only require minor adjustments for successive first year ND: Fashion learner intake.

Action research is participative in nature (Dick, 1999; O’Brien 1998) and will allow active collaboration of both facilitator and learner in the e-classroom. This is considered as a desirable aspect of 21st Century pedagogy; “ Schemes and lesson plans are maintained online; iterative practice permits these to be collectively improved. Teachers work collaboratively to share resources, locally and at a distance” (Learning Technologies and Schools of the Future, 2007:10).

The above paragraph provides the substantiation needed from theory to validate the use of action research methodology for this investigation. It is paramount that learners participate in this process, nor only for their own gain, but also so that I, as the educator can build further on the knowledge I would have gained from the 2009 run of the Design Reflection project online.

6.0 Design

6.1 The Vision for Alice in Theoryland

The long-term vision for my online classroom is to eventually upload the whole Theory of Clothing 1 module on Blackboard. I would like to provide a functional, safe and engaging space for learners where they can access not only learning materials for all projects, but that it becomes an accessible, personal and comfortable space that they feel is an indispensable and integral part of their creative fashion training. I also would like to eventually have the remaining modules that I teach – Theory of Clothing 2 and Communication morphed into Blackboard ‘alter-egos’ so that the benefits can be widespread and I can call myself a complete Generation Y lecturer!
6.2 Active Learning

6.2.1 Engagement

The *Alice in Theoryland* theme of the classroom is something that most fashion students should be able to relate to. Alice in Wonderland, the film (1999), provides an escapist narrative rich in fantasy and depicting rich visual imagery. Generation Y is more visually literate and express themselves better through images than text (Learning Technologies and Schools of the Future, 2007:6). Learners in design also tend to have a natural affinity for images and engage and respond better to visual stimulation. This narrative is often adapted in the context of fashion concepts and imagery as depicted below. It could therefore be assumed that the metaphor used will be an attractive storyline that will get learners engaged.

![Figure 3. Alice in Wonderland themed photoshoot by Vogue (yr) depicting designer John Galliano as The Queen of Hearts with Alice dressed in his creation.](image)

McQueen (2006:4) quotes Randy Garner in proposing that “instructors use metaphors to transform a foreign concept to one that may be more recognizable to the student.” In that light, the metaphor of the Alice in Wonderland is carried throughout the classroom in the form of quirky graphics or text that are derived from memorable details in the narrative.
6.2.2 Interaction, Collaboration and Participation

“Extensive networking and instant messaging might promote social interaction and teamwork rather than individual activity. Peer evaluation and moderation is a very powerful part of the experience – young people may value the appreciation and validation of their peers over (external) educators.” (Learning Technologies and Schools of the Future, 2007:6)

The forum format of the Discussion Board could be seen as encouraging as it is very similar to a chat-room environment which most learners would have had experience with and possibly frequently engage in their daily online activities.

The use of the Discussion Tool in Blackboard through which learners will be required to comment on peer posts will induce interaction even amongst the those learners who are normally less confident (and therefore do not voice out) during class discussions. Here we see the theory of learning styles coming into play – whereby learners with Intrapersonal skills (solitary disposition) are afforded the opportunity to collaborate and participate in discussions where they would not have normatively made their voices heard.

It is most interesting to note that 20th Century pedagogy promoted “linear, textual, verbal approaches” in learning whereas in the 21st Century “hyperlinked, interactive, visual and aural approaches dominate learning” (Learning Technologies and Schools of the Future, 2007:10). Blackboard being ICT-enhanced pedagogy clearly adheres to the 21st Century philosophy in this blended approach to learning.

6.4 Blended Learning

Chalk and talk model is often used in 20th Century pedagogy; whereas 21st Century ICT enhanced teaching is “predominantly interactive, involving the learners actively and creatively, with both learners and teachers using a range of presentation tools. Presentations can be uploaded to the VLE for revision purposes or for access by absent learners” (Learning Technologies and Schools of the Future, 2007:10).

While the above paragraph outlines the importance of e-learning in the classroom, contact / face-to-face sessions with learners will be essential in the Design Reflection project. Class presentations of actual design artefact (the little black dresses and Creative Design boards) per student for discussion cannot be substituted by WBL experience. This blended learning approach is therefore at the basis of the approach to WBL.

Furthermore, interaction with students is a highlight personal experience as a lecturer. I really enjoy contact sessions with learners as it gives me a sense of purpose in my career. So I will indeed not be ‘throwing out the baby with the bathwater’ in this exercise!

6.3 Working Smart

Peer reviews and grading; the electronic Grading tool and possibility to customise grading forms available to the facilitator all lend to working smartly and efficiently. In 20th Century pedagogy, the teacher marks pupils’ work – which is a process that can be very intensive and lengthy especially for theory subjects. In contrast, with Blackboard, much of work can be marked electronically. “Teacher-marking is focused on moderating self-assessment and peer assessment. The teacher spends more time providing personal feedback and guidance o the learner.” (Learning Technologies and Schools of the Future, 2007:11)
I have created a link to SafeAssign on the classroom home page which I have already started using for plagiarism detection. Prior to this, I used to type in paragraphs of student work in Google search when I suspected plagiarism. Plagiarism checks used to be a very tedious and time-consuming process and it has now become a really simple ‘upload & click for a plagiarism report’ process with SafeAssign.

7.0 Implementation

7.1 Pilot Activity

Pilot testing has enabled me to study the system and identify empirical issues with application before the actual implementation of the e-classroom for all Theory of Clothing 1 learners. This can be classified as part of the ‘Plan’ step before action.

I piloted the e-classroom with 4 participants; a brief profile of each one follows:

*Dummy2*: Colleague at the Department of Fashion and Textiles and qualified designer and instructor for Blackboard.

*Dummy3*: BTech student, overachiever, with specific interest in the Theory of Clothing; also part-time tutored Theory of Clothing 1 for a period of 4 weeks, while I was away on a study trip.

*Dummy4*: First year ND:Fashion student, average performer, with basic computer skills

*Dummy5*: First year ND:Fashion student, average performer with fairly good computer skills

This selection was deliberate as I hoped that Dummy 1 and 2 would give me critical feedback on the content and quality of the classroom, each coming from their own perspectives; and hoped that Dummy 4 and 5 would simulate what learners in the actual e-classroom would experience.

7.2 The Process

Participants were given printed-out instructions to log in the classroom and to navigate in the initial stages of the exercise, after which I facilitated the navigation verbally. The 10 minutes video introducing Design Reflection, produced around past student Julia Cronje’s LBD project was screened. It seemed to be very effective in the combination of images, excellent performance by Julia and the upbeat soundtrack and participants indicated that they would feel inspired to launch into the project after seeing the video. The pilot session ran mostly smoothly for one hour except for external factors like connection speed, which hampered the process to a certain extent and, the sound set-up for the Design Reflection introductory video which posed a few initial issues.

As facilitator, I got confused at the simple task of getting participants to open the Project brief in a separate window. These are things I will need to iron out for the official launch of the e-classroom.

7.3 Feedback and future adjustments
Participants were asked to fill in a feedback sheet at the end of the pilot session. I have tabulated the questions and responses from this exercise for easy reading.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Average Rating and Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How easy did you find it to navigate in the virtual classroom?</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please rate on a scale of 1-5 with 5 meaning very easy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you feel that the different web pages loaded on your page fast enough?</td>
<td>100 % Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the language used in the classroom easily understandable</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please rate on a scale of 1-5 with 5 meaning very easily understandable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the facilitator provide clear enough instructions to you?</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please rate on a scale of 1-5 with 5 meaning very clear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please comment on and rate the quality of the content of the classroom</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please rate on a scale of 1-10 with 10 meaning very good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please rate the 'cool factor' of the classroom ☺ on a scale of 1-5</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have suggestions for improvement? *See below</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you find this session in terms of the space it offers for learning?</td>
<td>*See below</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I have summarised comments and answers to question as follows:

Dummy 4 found the facilitation a bit too fast-paced at times while Dummy 3 felt that the interface in terms of the ‘buttons’ for the different tools could be more colourful. Dummy 3 also felt that the classroom got a bit ‘visually boring’ after navigating from the Home Page. A further concern expressed by Dummy 3 is that ‘some students may feel that they can skip the actual lecture as the online classroom is available.’ There did not seem to any suggestions at this stage and the feedback on the last question were very positive. ‘Fantastic’ and ‘amazing’ were some of the words used for the last question. Dummy 4 and 5 feel that it will improve the quality of the learning experience and are looking forward to remote access to the e-classroom to do work not physically being in the classroom. Dummy 3 indicated that such direct access to learning materials and useful weblinks will be very helpful.

In response to some of the issues of facilitation pace raised, I will need to take a slower pace when launching the virtual classroom and for lessons onwards.

The issue of the ‘look’ of the classroom cannot really be solved from the perspective that Blackboard provided a standard skeleton which is then customized by the facilitators – I cannot colour code specific ‘buttons’ / tabs as the LMS will not allow it. The issue of the ‘visually boring’ pages following the main page is easy to relatively solve. It would however require a lot of time in web page designing which I am not sure is a good idea, as supported by this article:
“Developing highly interactive and creative media in virtual learning environments VLEs must therefore be high priority, as must avoidance of the trap of developing attractive looking virtual teaching environment, which may be little more than a portal to an online repository for text-based linear exercises and random objects.” Learning Technologies and Schools of the Future, 2007:7)

Furthermore, some pages need to be printer friendly as learners will sometimes want or need to print out material from the classroom such as briefs and learning materials.

7.4 Relevance

There seems to be an appreciable relevance between the pilot run and the challenges identified earlier in this report. I feel that the motivation aspect for the Design Reflection project is addressed to a considerable extent from the feedback of the participants in the pilot run.

The innovative and collaborative interface should really result in an improvement of the level of engagement of students to the project. The lack of time factor will also be addressed to a certain extent as direct access to suggested useful readings and weblinks means learners can do these readings when is convenient and not necessarily during our limited contact sessions.

As for a lightening of my assessment load, I have not been able to determine this through the pilot run so I will have to have my e-classroom running in real conditions to find that out!

8.0 Reflection

Advice for “any teacher wishing to authentically embed technology into their classroom experience is to always start small. It’s easier to build on a simple, achievable idea, than it is to trim down an all-consuming tech monstrosity.” (The Seeds of a Good Project, 2009)

In the light of the above, I started small. The trial set-up of only one project within the Theory of Clothing 1 online module was to avoid confusion, frustration in my learning process and moderate the level of complexity of my first attempt at designing an e-classroom through Blackboard. In starting small, I got to explore more avenues in more depth and quality – such as the direction and production of the introductory video for the project.

8.1 Assumptions

“Discussions on the digital divide tend to be concerned with (home) access to broadband connectivity. However, if scientists are right and cognitive processes are influenced by regular creative engagement in the online environment, our schools need to address the quality of online provision they make. An aspect of tackling the digital divide will be able to ensure that all young people gain access to and guidance on the use of more sophisticated tools...Digital exclusion is highly correlated with social exclusion which in turn is highly correlated with educational underperformance.” (Learning Technologies and Schools of the Future, 2007:7)

I had put much thought into the classroom horrors that slow connection speed could generate. In fact I have assumed participants would be not be able to navigate the e-classroom anywhere near effortlessly and speedily in the near future. However, Vecchiato
(2009) has just announced that the speed of internet connection on the DUT network is about to increase exponentially as from December 2009; The DUT has just been test connected to the Seacom cable and eventual connection will improve connections up by 50 times. “To illustrate how fast this is, it is the equivalent of a full-length DVD movie in 3.5 seconds” (ibid).

If home access could still be an issue, I feel that the DUT connection on Broadband will be a very important milestone for WBL.

Another assumption made was one around learner navigation speed. After the pilot run which showed that some learners battled to keep up, I will need to make a concerted effort to make sure everyone is literally on the same page before moving on.

8.3 Impact on my learners, the DUT and myself

At this stage I can say that I have gone through a huge learning curve. I have grown as an educator, a designer and an individual. I cannot wait to find out the impact that WBL will have on my learners and on the curriculum, when finally implemented.

Change begins with the individual. And this intervention has altered my microcosm and a whole lot more Pioneers. It is now spreading to learners and that surely will cause a chain reaction that will end up as change in the institution.

8.4 Lessons learnt

I have learnt that the lesson of sharing with colleagues leads to personal and professional growth. I have learnt the lesson of patience in this year of training. I feel that I need to carry on building on the knowledge I have gained form this year. I have learnt that there will always be new challenges with every new generation that steps into the DUT to be educated.

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