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Being an online researcher

In partial fulfillment of the Pioneers Online Learning Course

19th June 2009

ACTION RESEARCH REPORT

THE USE OF ONLINE LEARNING TO BUILD A STABLE FOUNDATION OF KNOWLEDGE AT FIRST YEAR LEVEL ON WHICH TO BUILD MORE ADVANCED CONCEPTS AT HIGHER LEVELS

1 INTRODUCTION

Give your report an informative title and mention the discipline/diploma/module you are putting online.

The National Diploma in Clothing Management is divided into four main subject areas, each focusing on a particular area of Clothing Manufacture, as depicted below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCTION TECHNOLOGY (Major Subject)</th>
<th>PRODUCTION ORGANISATION (Major Subject)</th>
<th>MANAGEMENT (Minor Subject)</th>
<th>BUSINESS STUDIES (Minor Subject)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRODUCT</td>
<td>PROCESS</td>
<td>PEOPLE</td>
<td>MARKET / BUSINESS/MONEY</td>
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Although I have lectured most subjects on the programme at different times my passion has always been for the “process” side of clothing manufacture, ensuring that systems, procedures, methods etc are correct and effective in order to be more productive.

I lecture Production Organisation at all levels from first year to fourth year, and find that if students grasp the basic concepts and terminology at first year, they are better able to cope with higher level application from second year upwards. This concept is emphasized in “Blooms Taxonomy”, where it is believed that learning at a higher level is dependent on obtaining knowledge and skill at the lower levels.

Thus my “Online Classroom” has focused on the subject of Production Organisation 1. I would however like to develop classrooms for each of the four levels in the future, but for slightly different reasons.


2 CONTEXT

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

We are living in the Technological era, where there is a strong trend to do everything or as much as possible electronically. We like to shop online, do banking online, do research online rather than visit a library, communicate with friends and family via email, Facebook, Skype etc. We even prefer to do business online, whether it is ordering supplies, communicating with customers, or selling our products.

If this is way that our students communicate, then it would seem a natural process to move towards learning online too.

Education and specifically Higher Education at a University of Technology, are being reassessed and Lecturers are required to embrace and engage in this technological era, by making learners more self sufficient and making use of Virtual Classrooms to enhance the learning process (Gumport and Chun, 1998:4)

It is important however to recognize that technology alone, cannot solve all teaching problems, and to note that there are challenges involved in embarking online learning. It is important to understand the theories behind online learning and study its successes. In this way one can make informed decisions regarding where online learning will be most effectively used.

3 CHALLENGES

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

Challenges faced in the department fall into two categories:

(1) those that are faced by most departments in the area of facilities or lack there of, as well as students sometimes having poor computer literacy.
(2) Those challenges experienced with the subject itself.

In our department we are fairly lucky, in that we do have a dedicated computer laboratory, with internet access. Although the lab is small, our classes are generally small and can be accommodated. A number of students have seen the need to have their own laptops in order to complete assignments after hours, and have prioritized this acquisition along with the rest of their equipment and materials needed for the year.

In terms of computer literacy, I have seen that often students have poor word processing and spreadsheet skills. However they are able to access and socialize in areas such as “Facebook”, online chat rooms, blogs etc. They are completely “at home” in these environments. Because these students are from the Y generation, they are more confident with technology and experimenting with it. I don't believe that lack of computer literacy is so much of a stumbling block. The second year students who I used to test my class room, all spoke honestly about their lack of computer skills. Yet with the help of my “face to face” instructions and some basic typed instructions, they were able to navigate “Blackboard” fairly successfully in a very short space of time. If they had been exposed to it more, it would become easier and easier.
In terms of the subject itself the following challenges are prevalent:

**POOR ASSESSMENT RESULTS:**

Currently we are experiencing very poor assessment results from learners, partly because often the learners are ill prepared for tertiary education and the ability to learn, retain the knowledge and then apply it practically, but also to visualise processes/terminology used in the clothing industry as they have not been on factory visits, particularly in the early weeks of first year.

**POOR ATTITUDE TO “TRADITIONAL THEORY” SUBJECTS:**

We often experience better results in subjects that are more practically orientated, such as sewing, where learners are “learning by doing”. Because the learning is “active”, learners don’t become bored.

However with theory orientated subjects we find that students often have a poor attitude to traditional "theory" subjects. Although Production Organisation can be made practical, there is often a great deal of foundational knowledge that needs to be learnt to apply the practical. Theory (knowledge) is often seen as boring, and the student's attention span during these lectures is short.

**LACK OF TIME:**

Because learners are not adequately prepared for tertiary education, it often takes longer to explain terminology and concepts in class, sometimes having to repeat oneself several times. This means not getting through the amount of work needed to ensure that the syllabus is covered.

With the learners battling with the course material, it would be better to complete formative assessments regularly to ensure that they understand the work covered and give timeous feedback to the lecturer. However assessments in the traditional sense of “pen and paper”, are time consuming for both the learner and the lecturer who has to prepare the assessment and then mark it.

**OPPORTUNITIES:**

We have realised that traditional chalk and talk lectures are no longer the only method available to teach. Integration of blended learning making use of some traditional teaching, as well as using technology would be of great benefit to our students. We see how they easily adapt to new technologies in the form of cell phones, computers etc and how they enjoy working with technology. Using online learning is a way of grabbing the student's attention through the use of technology. They are excited to access the work because they are using technology, and before they know it, they have accomplished learning "theory" without the boredom. It is hoped that through achieving a better grounding and foundation, the work will become more meaningful, application of practical will be easier and more successful, and the students will become self-motivated and encouraged to "dig deeper" into subjects that they would previously have written off as "boring".

It is also hoped that by developing online quizzes, in all areas of the subject that, learners will have fun doing the quizzes, and while they are having fun, they are answering questions and getting instant feedback on the results. These formative assessments can assist to prepare students for important tests, give the lecturer
feedback on how the class is faring in a particular subject area (if these quizzes or assessments are graded). The lecturer would need to spend time initially in setting up and preparing these assessments or quizzes, but once they are done, there is very little time required of the lecturer. These can be graded by the computer and the student gets instant feedback on how they are doing, which beats waiting a week or two for the lecturer to mark and give feedback.

4 THEORIES

Which educational theories seem most relevant to your investigation? Briefly describe each theory's key characteristics.
(Some examples are learning styles; blended learning; motivation; authentic learning; online assessment; online facilitation.)

AUTHENTIC LEARNING:

Authentic learning involves practicing a skill using an authentic task, one that is realistic and as close to real life as possible. As often found in text books related to general topics, for example in my area of Operations Management, the information in the text books is used for any production environment not just clothing. So often case studies, examples, practical exercises could be related to manufacturing of any product. Sometimes these can be irrelevant and unrelated to our industry. This can also be confusing to the learners.

By making tasks authentic and realistic, learners become immersed in problem solving that is realistic and the knowledge is realistically applied (Herrington, Oliver and Reeves, 2002: 2).

The secret in designing authentic tasks is to make them open to multiple interpretations and different perspectives. When learners give feedback on their experiences and interpretations, the learning experience is even deeper as different groups learn from each other’s different experiences (Herrington, Oliver and Reeves, 2002: 3).

Critics of Authentic Learning say that it is difficult to persuade learners that the task is “real”, when it is only simulated. However all learners have to do is “suspend disbelief” as they would when they watch a movie for example. Research has shown that often learners feel less intimidated in this type of learning environment, because although the task is simulating the real world and real skills will be used to problem solve, it is almost like a practice round, where learners get to practice the skills in a relevant manner, but before they actually use them in the real world. It has been found that learners may need more support in the beginning stages of the project or task to get them to believe in the “reality” of the task and plough through the amount of material required to problem solve, but that often learners show immediate acceptance of authentic environments and become deeply involved in the task to the extent that they really start to “believe” the task is real and not just pretend (Herrington, Oliver and Reeves, 2002: 2,3,4).

These authentic tasks can be used to assess knowledge across subject barriers and allows for knowledge integration.
As will be seen as my long term vision, I am hoping to create a Virtual clothing factory in my “classroom”. This will allow first year students to visit a factory any time of day to reinforce new processes, terminology etc. It is hoped that this virtual factory will be as realistic as possible and tasks can be designed and related to this simulated factory as opposed to doing factory visits which are sometimes difficult to organize.

My “Paper aeroplane” webquest, has also been designed to simulate production systems, but includes aspects of design, quality etc. Thus reiterating the concept of integration across subject areas, but still making the task as realistic as possible.

**BLENDING LEARNING**

Blended learning as the term suggests involves a combination of both “face to face” teaching and “online learning”. Different situations will call for different “blends”. It is important to get the right mix. In some contexts face to face teaching may be more prevalent and in other situations that are more conducive to e-learning, the “online” component may be higher (Blended Learning: What works?, 2003:1).

It is important to realize that this mix can include a number of media types, such as traditional class room teaching, webinars, podcasts, CD ROM material, Powerpoint presentations, supervised e-learning, self-paced learning etc. (Blended Learning: What works?, 2003:3).

Some of the benefits of blended learning are as follows:

1. "Students not only learned more when online sessions were added to traditional courses, but student interaction and satisfaction improved as well." DeLacey and Leonard, Harvard Business School, 2002
2. "Providing several linked options for learners, in addition to classroom training, increased what they learned." Peter Dean
3. Speedier performance was detected on real world tasks by those who learned through blended strategies as opposed to those that learned via e-learning alone. Thomson & NETg, 2003.
4. "Adults don't just "learn" in one way. Likewise, associations should not make the mistake of providing just one way for adult learners to receive their educational content." by Judith Smith (Blended Learning, 2004)

As can be seen in the above examples, one obvious advantage of blended learning is its ability to maximize effectiveness by matching the best medium for each learning outcome.

Blended Learning, has the ability to create a synergy of learning where the correct “mix” can achieve results that are higher than the sum of the parts.

I believe my virtual classroom to be a support structure of the traditional classroom and not to take the place of face to face teaching. I envisage my face to face lectures to be used for introduction of theory, feedback sessions for tests as well as online tasks. While the online environment, will be used to give students additional support in the form
of visual and verbal glossaries, revision of topics discussed in class through visiting the virtual factory, preparation for learning and tests through online quizzes, and collaborative group tasks/assignments, where use of the media library, weblinks, and discussion tool can be used for authentic learning.

I would see the face to face learning touching the basics of theory and concepts, while online learning would be used to revisit what was discussed in class and take learning to a deeper level through well designed tasks and peer discussions.

**ONLINE ASSESSMENT**

Online assessment can be seen as a method of assessment, 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).

Online assessment can be used at all levels of assessment and is not limited to Formative Assessment, in particular only testing knowledge, as is often thought (Institute for Interactive Media and Learning, 2007). Online assessment expands the diversity of assessment processes, through which students can develop and demonstrate a range of skills, knowledge and understanding. However creating and development of formative assessments online is a good starting point for pilot runs.

The benefits are:
- instant feedback and greater student satisfaction through increased participation,
- automated marking,
- objective marking,
- ability to assess more frequently
- submission tools assist with administration (UniSA, 2006).

Online Assessment is fast becoming a preferred method of assessment and research shows that students perform the same and better than those assessed using traditional assessment methods (Roos, 2001).

My first aim in terms of Online Assessment, is to create comprehensive question banks for Quizzes as a form of formative assessment. To give students instant feedback on what they know (or don’t know), as well as giving the lecturer feedback on students progress, and thus knowing which areas need to be revised again. My pilot run students, who visited my very incomplete quizzes, expressed great delight, that quizzes are fun, therefore you don’t feel as if you are “Learning”, and emphasized that these quizzes would be very beneficial to students in preparing for tests.

I would also make use of the assignment tool, for group and individual work, as can be seen in my Webquest assignment. Included in this assignment is use of the discussion tool, which encourages learners to discuss their progress, ideas etc, with each other in a “safe” environment where they don’t feel intimidated. These discussions can be graded as I have used in the webquest. This is to encourage participation and collaboration.
I would find using the assignment tool for online submissions very useful as I am a part-time lecturer and not always around when it is time to submit an assignment. It becomes difficult to monitor who handed in on time, who actually handed in etc. Thus administration of assignment submission is made so much easier through online submission. This tool will enable me to track assignment hand in times, who has handed in as well as assignments will not get “lost” as they will be accessible through the classroom. Because they are all in one place, it means the lecturer does not have to carry hard copy assignments around with her, but can access the classroom at any time, when she may have some spare time and start marking and commenting on the assignments. Thus speeding up the feedback process.

5 METHODOLOGY: ACTION RESEARCH

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

Action research is “learning by doing” - a group of people identify a problem, do something to resolve it, see how successful their efforts were, and if not satisfied, try again (O’Brien, 1998). While this is the essence of the approach, there are other key attributes of action research that differentiate it from common problem-solving activities that we all engage in every day.

What separates this type of research from daily problem-solving is the emphasis on scientific study, which is to say the researcher studies the problem systematically and ensures the intervention is informed by theoretical considerations. Much of the researcher’s time is spent on collecting, analyzing, and presenting data on an ongoing, cyclical basis (O’Brien, 1998).

Several attributes separate action research from other types of research. Its focus is on turning the people involved into researchers, and people learn best, and more willingly apply what they have learned, when they do it themselves. It also has a social dimension - the research takes place in real-world situations, and aims to solve real problems. Finally, the initiating researcher, unlike in other disciplines, makes no attempt to remain objective, but openly acknowledges their bias to the other participants (O’Brien, 1998).

The Action Research Process has been depicted by Stephen Kemmis as a simple cycle which has four steps: plan, act, observe, and reflect (O’Brien, 1998).

I believe that during the journey of online learning that we have been on over the last year, we have followed these four steps many times, without even realizing it.

In terms of developing our virtual classrooms, we have looked back and reflected on our “traditional classrooms”. We have seen that some of the problems experienced in the traditional classroom, such as poor throughput rates, poor assessment results, lack of interest in theory subjects, lack of “visual understanding” etc, can be turned into opportunities in a virtual classroom.

Because of the cyclical nature of the action research process, any step in the process can be started with. I therefore started with REFLECT.
Once I had reflected on the problem areas in my traditional classroom, I set about PLANNING, what aspects I would like to include in my online classroom. I decided that the subject of Production Organisation I, was where I wanted to focus, because over the last couple of years I have experienced very low results and found that students who have progressed to higher levels still do not have the basic foundation of knowledge they should have obtained in first year. This hinders the ability of the student to delve deeper into subjects and apply their knowledge.

Because the subject area covers quite a wide area of topics and theory, I battled to find “that dot on the page” regarding my focus area in the designing stage of the pioneers course. This has resulted in more of framework for the whole subject with some of the modules developed further than others.

Once I had designed my basic framework of a virtual classroom, with development in some main subject areas, I was able to pilot the virtual classroom with three second year students and one B.Tech student. This was where the ACTION took place. I was also able to OBSERVE how the students reacted to the virtual classroom environment, and receive feedback via the discussion tool as well as in verbal discussions with the students participating.

Once the pilot activity of my virtual classroom was completed and I had received feedback from the participants, the cycle of Action Research begins again. I needed to reflect on the observations and feedback, and going forward will need to make changes accordingly.

Thus this cycle will continue, and should never be “completed” in terms of our virtual classrooms, because students needs will change, course content and technology may change etc. Thus we will continually need to Plan, Act, Observe and Reflect.

6 DESIGN
6.1 VISION

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

As mentioned in my introduction, the subject that I have focused on is Production Organisation I. This subject focuses on the processes involved in clothing manufacture, in particular, at first year level, there is a need to understand the clothing “pipeline”, from designing a garment all the way through to finished products ready for dispatching to the customer. This involves many processes, departments and people. Coupled with this is the related terminology that goes with it.

I was suddenly struck with a huge idea towards the end of last year regarding my virtual classroom. That was to design a virtual clothing factory, either with the use of graphical representation, video clips, photos or all three. The learners could then go on a virtual factory visit and as they enter the different departments they are able to see the layout, equipment, people, understand terminology etc.

This is very much a long term vision at present. I hope to in the next six months start building this virtual factory, department at a time. The most difficult and time consuming part is going to be getting visuals.

My classroom, thus far, has focused on the framework, and is divided into different departments, but still needs a lot of time spent on adding the “meat”.

8
6.2 ACTIVE LEARNING

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

INTERACTION

I hope to make use of the virtual classroom, for assisting students with group assignments for example the Webquest I have designed. In doing this webquest, learners will need to work as a team in order to complete it successfully and meet all the objectives. In this way learners will be interacting with each other as well as with the facilitator.

I have also tried to make use of the discussion tool as much as possible in any activity or assignment that I include in the virtual classroom. In some of the discussions I have included grading, which means that learners will get marked on the contributions to discussions. These discussions also encourage interaction with each other and facilitators can also get involved and encourage the interaction process.

In the future I would like to include use of Wiki’s and Blogs, as well as the chat room, as I believe that these are things that learners relate to in their everyday lives and these forms of communication are quite “natural” to them. In this way they will be communicating and interacting and learning at the same time, probably without even realizing it.

ENGAGEMENT

In the traditional classroom, I often feel like there are a select few, who are really engaging with the subject material, particularly in theory lectures. I think this is possibly due to students not understanding concepts and therefore “switching off”, but also because their levels of concentration are generally very poor at first year level.

I feel that by designing well thought out activities and assignments in the virtual classroom, along with the support structure in the classroom with visual glossaries, the virtual factory etc, students will have a better understanding and foundational knowledge of concepts, terminology etc, that they will begin to enjoy the theory more, and will actually start engaging with the learning material they need to complete activities and assignments, either through the use of the Media Library, Weblinks, or carefully structured projects such as the Webquest, which assist with “surfing” the net, but in a well structured manner.

I believe that when learners start to “do things for themselves” and “learn for themselves”, without being “spoonfed”, this is when engagement of the subject truly begins. When you start to see and visualize how things work, understanding increases and interest in the subject increases. It is hoped that the virtual factory will provide this for the learners and encourage engagement.
PARTICIPATION

Often learners are threatened or nervous of the traditional classroom setting, and are too scared to ask questions in fear of being laughed at. However from the feedback received in my pilot study, the learners who participated said they thought the discussion tool would be great to communicate with other learners in the class, ask each other questions and for clarifications, as well as being able to discuss with the facilitator anything they were not clear on. They felt this was far less intimidating than in the normal classroom situation. Using the discussion tool in this way, the learners would be participating.

The activities and assignments also encourage the learners to participate in their own learning experience, rather than sit back and try and absorb and understand all that the lecturer is trying to teach.

ACTIVE LEARNING

By starting to look for and find out information for themselves, learners will be more active in their learning experience. From my experience, when you do things practically for yourself your learning experience is far more “real” and the knowledge is far more likely to stay embedded in your memory than when learning is “passive”.

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 two main areas that I believe in the long run will be huge time savers:

(1) For formative assessment – a way of testing students knowledge either for grading or self assessment, giving instant feedback, without taking up my time with marking. Although in the short term, setting up assessments and quizzes will be time consuming, this is an area which a wish to develop as soon as possible, as the students need these to prepare for summative assessments and to practice what they have learnt.

(2) For assignment management – I am a part time lecturer and am often not around when assignments need to be handed in. The involves relying on the secretary to collect assignments, assignments sometimes go missing, and it is difficult to monitor if assignments have been handed in on time or late. Students also sometimes hand in assignments early, which means I don’t collect them all together and they are sometimes in different places when it comes to marking. With the assignment tool, the assignments are submitted online, recording date and time and they are all in one place when I need to mark them. It is more convenient for the students, as well, who often find it difficult to find printing facilities.
6.4 BLENDING 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. (Don't throw out the baby with the bathwater...)

I believe that students still need to build a relationship with their lecturers which could not be easily done through online learning alone. I envisage my "blend", will still maintain the hard copy handouts and learner guides and face to face learning will be done to introduce modules and explain concepts further as well as give feedback on assessments and where it is felt further intervention is required where formative assessment results have perhaps been poor.

I see the online environment, being the support structure, a place to go and revise class work, do quizzes, interact with classmates about related topics access glossaries to revise terms covered in class etc.

It will also be used for all class activities and assignments. All briefs will be available on line and students will make use of the discussion tool to interact with each other on assignment issues, media library and weblinks for resources and the assignment tool to submit electronically.

7 IMPLEMENTATION
7.1 PILOT ACTIVITY

Describe the pilot activity you have tried out with one or two users (or your real students...not compulsory, but first prize!)

Due to time constraints and first years writing end of semester summative assessments, I asked my second year students if anyone would like to volunteer to pilot my virtual classroom. Three of them volunteered along with one B.Tech student. These students have already been through the first year experience and can therefore give feedback as to whether such an environment would have assisted them and given them a better grounding in the subject. They are also able to give feedback as to whether this type of environment would be helpful in the higher levels as well.

The activity as can be seen on Annexure 1, involved, logging in to the classroom, browsing the different tools in the online environment and three discussion activities.

The first discussion activity, was a threaded, ungraded discussion, asking the learners to tell me how they felt in the "Blackboard" environment for the first time.

The second discussion activity, I asked the learners to journal, how they thought online learning could be helpful to students, challenges etc. I felt that they would be more open and honest in the journaling space as only I would be able to access their comments.
The third discussion activity, again a threaded, ungraded discussion, I asked them to read the article “Why do students like online learning?” found under Weblinks, and discuss four points that they found interesting.

In both discussions one and three they were supposed to respond to each other’s comments.

7.2 RELEVANCE

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

It would have been preferable to pilot my webquest, but as this assignment is group based it would have required a considerable amount of time from my volunteers.

Thus I decided to just introduce the online environment to my four volunteers, through logging in, browsing, watching a powerpoint presentation on the Blackboard Tools, and making use of the discussion tool.

I felt these activities had relevance, as these learners had never been into Blackboard before and required some time to familiarize themselves with the environment.

In terms of relevance of activity to challenges, it highlighted the students concerns regarding lack of computer knowledge. This feedback came through in the discussions, However it was amazing how quickly they managed to navigate through the tools and become comfortable in the virtual classroom. This emphasizes my view that although often students feel their computer skills are inadequate to work in a virtual environment, they quickly adapt and learn the skills required.

During the “browsing” task, most of my volunteers got hooked on the quizzes tool. Although this is not an area I have had much time to develop, the quizzes that were available they used to test their first year knowledge. They found this great fun, and would like to see more of these developed. This was in line with my view point that I needed to develop the quiz area to assist students with increasing assessment results, by giving them instant feedback on what they know and assist them to prepare for tests.

7.3 FEEDBACK

What feedback did you receive from users?

The learners had no problem logging into the classroom, as my brief was fairly self explanatory.

As can be seen from the responses below, the first discussion asked them to give feedback on how they felt entering the classroom for the first time. I think that these responses would sum up how a larger group of students would have also felt – nervous, mixed feelings about change and then those who feel the environment is easy to navigate and have no problems with it:
DISCUSSION ONE:

Topic: Warm-Up Activity  Date: 22 May 2009

Author: Dummy 5 Dummy 5

“I feel very nervous cause I am not really good with computers. But everythings been nice and simple so far”.

Author: Dummy 1 Dummy 1

“I find this interesting but I have mixed feelings about the program. I am not sure if it will be as easy or user friendly as the old normal way of learning. I am happy though about the upgrade and keeping up with technology. my mixed feelings may just be fear for change.”

Author: Dummy 5 Dummy 5

Me too! Not really good with computers, but it went well. Everything seems simple

Author: Dummy 1 Dummy 1

Everything is user friendly and easy to find.

DISCUSSION TWO:

I believe the responses found below where the students used the journaling space in the Discussion Tool to express how they felt online learning would be helpful to their learning, speak for themselves. On the whole the feedback is positive, and highlights the opportunities that I have already expressed for online learning.

Topic: How do you feel about online learning? Date: 22 May 2009

Author: Dummy 1 Dummy 1

This may be helpful for students who find it difficult to communicate directly with the Lecturer. Sometimes you need to find out more but you are afraid. this program will allow students to leave messages and requests. However I am concerned if this might affect attendance in Lectures.

Author: Dummy 2 Dummy 2

I feel it can be very helpful if one has missed out on a lecture or even if you want to re-enforce what you have already learnt. My only problem is that I take forever typing out things which can become frustrating but with constant use I may be able to improve but that could take awhile. It is a great way of learning especially if listening and writing is a challenge for you.

Author: Dummy 3 Dummy 3

I'm able to concentrate better and not rush in to give answers. I understand and am clear as to what I'm learning.
I'm able to discuss problems on-line and find possible solutions. The website is user friendly.

Author: Dummy 5 Dummy 5

There are many challenges faced by student mainly boredom and an inability to really concentrate. This is because a lot of the terminology being used is new and they still need to familiarise themselves with clothing management. The computer programme can help because it will make learning easier and more approachable. Computers are fun they you take out of the typical classroom situation and make learning seem like a game.

**DISCUSSION THREE:**

In this activity learners had to go and find the article on Why students like online learning in the Weblinks tool. This they seemed to do with ease. They then had to respond to 4 ideas from the article. The volunteers did not have a lot of time to do this activity, so they have not really discussed the points in the article to the best of their ability. However the points that they have highlighted, again reiterate that they feel the online environment will benefit learners by being available at any time, less intimidating, encourage participating and asking each other questions in this type of environment.

Topic: Homework Activity 1: Intro to Online Learning Date: 22 May 2009

Author: Dummy 5 Dummy 5

1. They are very convenient because you can log in anywhere and time. You don't have to have any supervision or a physical classroom just need internet access.
2. Course material is available 24/7, good for when you need help and the lecturer is not available.
3. Less intimidating than being in a real class. No one knows it's you and therefore you freely engage yourself without fear of judgement.
4. Get exposed to new material that not available in books and see how things applied in the real world.

Author: Dummy 1 Dummy 1

- better method of getting students to participate.
- accessibility at any time
- less intimidating for students
- students get to view other comments and participate

Author: Dummy 5 Dummy 5

Love being able to chat with fellow learners.

Completely agree with you fellow dummy!

Plus the informality of everything makes everything so relaxed!
I totally agree. I’m glad we can pick each others brain cells and learn in the process. I’ve enjoyed the quiz.

We can communicate freely to our instructor.

I have assess to the programme anytime.

Have discussions with other students.

The students are exposed to a broader spectrum.

I am glad that I decided to use a blended approach for my pilot study, as I was able to answer any questions regarding the classroom and explain terms like breadcrumbs, pop-ups, the different discussion tools etc. I think this contributed to the positive feedback received as well as how the learners seemed to manage with ease, navigating the classroom.

8 REFLECTION
8.1 ASSUMPTIONS

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

I consider myself to be computer literate across a broad spectrum of computer software packages, including Frontpage. I assumed that designing my classroom would be almost “childs play”. This was not the case. I found designing my classroom to be incredibly frustrating. The reason for this, is I tend to be a perfectionist. When I open my home page I want to see the visuals and text in a balanced aesthetic manner. I would achieve this on my laptop, only to open it in the Pioneers Lab or on another computer and find it did not look like this. Screen resolutions play a huge role in how things look on the screen. This is quite an important factor to remember when setting up the lab where your students will be working.

I also learnt that you can’t make use of any font, as sometimes the different computers don’t have the font you have used in your classroom and thus the text will display differently.

I have thus had to become a little more relaxed in my perfectionism, to try to keep designing principles simple in order to make translations into HTML easier, and enjoy the experience rather than get stressed about minor issues that the students probably wouldn’t notice anyway!

I believe that I am correct in the assumptions that I made regarding the benefits of my virtual classroom, judging by the feedback from my volunteers. I believe that they will become more participatory, their results will improve through the use of quizzes and glossaries etc, and that although there will be adjustments to be made and challenges, the opportunities will far out-weigh these challenges.
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?

As already expressed in my vision, I would like to develop the virtual classroom, into my virtual factory, I would like to develop the quizzes further and make the glossaries more comprehensive. I have developed the foundation of my course, I now need to “build” the walls and roof of my virtual environment and add more content.

I would like to develop my Blackboard Skills further by making use and becoming more familiar with some of the other tools available like Blogs, Wikis etc in order for the environment to be exciting and encourage learner participation.

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 the virtual classroom will add a new dimension to teaching, which will excite the learners and myself which will result in more motivated and enthusiastic learners who want to participate, engage, and become more involved in their own learning experience.

I believe the students will have a better foundational grounding to progress to higher levels of study and we will be able to cover topics in a deeper more meaningful way getting different viewpoints from different learners.

I also believe that we should be able to cover more subject material, as the lecturer will not have to repeat herself over and over again. She can refer students to the classroom for further clarification and visual interpretations.

With a better understanding, students’ assessment results should improve and increase the pass rate of students in the department. Thus increasing throughput and increasing viability of the department.

I think we will send out better qualified students to industry, and this will increase our credibility as a programme and the credibility of the institution.

8.4 LESSONS LEARNT

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

I think the biggest challenge for me, has been coming to grips with the theoretical side of online learning. I am a practical person, so the designing of the classroom is what I find exciting. I don’t usually enjoy “theories” and the reasons why we should design and do things in a certain way. However I have found the learning theories to be very
interesting, and through “practicing the theories” in the Pioneers programme, have been able to make sense of the theory and make it practical.

Even though I feel my forte is in developing the virtual classroom, I have realized that there is still a lot to learn to maximize the benefits of Blackboard itself, as well as more to learn about designing and developing an exciting classroom, that students want to visit and ultimately assists the learners to become more rounded, active and participatory learners.

9 REFERENCES


ANNEXURE 1: PILOT EXERCISE

Orientation
Welcome to the first workshop.

TASK 1: Login

1. Click on the Start button in the bottom left of your screen.
2. Click on the Internet Explorer icon to launch the programme.
3. Go to the Blackboard home page by typing the following URL into the address bar: http://edtech.dut.ac.za
4. Click on Login
5. Type your Blackboard ID. Your facilitator will give it to you (no capitals or spaces).
6. Type your password.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>USER NAME</th>
<th>PASSWORD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nokwanda</td>
<td>moolmanjdummy1</td>
<td>dummy1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reece</td>
<td>moolmanjdummy2</td>
<td>dummy2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>moolmanjdummy3</td>
<td>dummy3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leseli</td>
<td>moolmanjdummy5</td>
<td>dummy5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Click on Training08-Moolman Janice Course.

TASK 2: Browse

1. Click on the different Course tools running down the left hand side of the screen to familiarize yourself with how your virtual classroom works.
2. Click on Media Library, Introduction to Online Learning, Blackboard Tools. View this powerpoint presentation.
3. The most important areas to concentrate on at this early stage are:
   - Learning Modules
   - Media Library
   - Weblinks
   - Discussions.
4. Ask your facilitator to discuss the term “breadcrumbs”.

TASK 3: Warm-up Activity 1

1. Click on Discussions under Course Tools, and then on Warm-up Activity.
2. Follow the instructions in the message Warm-up Activity 1.

TASK 4: Warm-up Activity 2

1. Click on Discussions under Course Tools, and then on “How do I feel about online learning”. Ask your facilitator to explain the difference between the discussion tool used here and the one used above in Activity 1. Type up your comments.

TASK 5: Homework

1. Make sure that you can login to the online classroom.
2. Go to Discussions -- Warm-up Activity. Read any new comments.
3. Read the article: "Why do students like online learning?" You will find it under the Weblinks Tool. Identify four important ideas.
4. Go back to Discussions. Find the message titled "Homework – Intro to Online Learning".
5. Reply to this message, posting four important ideas from the article.
6. Reply to two other people's messages.