

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO DO E-LEARN DEVELOPMENT IN THE FET SECTOR?

A PERSPECTIVE FROM FALSE BAY COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

Key words: Blackboard, content repository, mindsets

In August 2007 three FET colleges, College of Cape Town, Northlink and Boland Colleges implemented the first phase of a Pilot e-Learning project. The remainder of the FET colleges in the Western Cape, False Bay, South Cape and West Coast Colleges joined the second phase in October 2007. Each college chose a different subject/s to develop and specific lecturers were tasked with the development. The lecturers were trained on how to use the different tools in Blackboard. A decision was taken that a content repository will be created and that upon completion all content will be shared amongst the colleges. During the two years of development many of the lecturers became disillusioned about the process and some ceased their participation in the e-learn pilot. Content sharing have also not yet commenced during this period.

This paper is aimed at investigating the process of e-learn development and implementation in the FET sector, with particular reference to False Bay College. The presenter will focus on the following issues. Which skills, knowledge and resources are necessary for successful content development and implementation? How can the lecturer marry the responsibility of 25 hours teaching per week with content development? How can mindsets be changed mindsets? How can e-learn benefit the student?

BACKGROUND

Before we can address the current situation of e-learn development in the FET sector, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the e-learn journey spanning from 2000.

The FET sector was introduced to e-learning when the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) initiated The DASSIE (Distributed Advanced Strategic System for Innovative blended E-learning) project, in partnership with German based IT and e-Learning companies and the German government's technical co-operation agency (GTZ).

The project was officially launched in December 2000. After a refocusing exercise in 2003, it was decided, to mainstream blended learning (e-Learning) as a mode of delivery to increase access to vocational and technical training at Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges in the Western Cape of South Africa.

The envisaged benefits to be gained from the "Dassie" pilot, were:

- the opportunity to introduce a world class e-Learning environment which will have a common user interface (consistent look and feel about it).
- an opportunity for FET colleges to do collaborative content development work towards a common goal
- an opportunity to raise our standards of delivery to that of international levels
- an opportunity to enter into distance education by means of electronic media
- the opportunity to generate revenue from previously untapped markets the opportunity to generate revenue from previously untapped markets
- The opportunity to promote and contribute meaningfully to the "massification of education (Gaum, A. 2002.)

This project was thus the forerunner of the current e-learning pilot with six FET colleges in the Western Cape. The WCED entered into negotiations with Eiffel-Corp, the proprietor of WebCT/Blackboard in Africa, during 2005– 2006 and subsequently entered into a Memorandum of Understanding to run a pilot over 2 years in the selected colleges.

In 2007 the Minister of Education, Ms. Pandor, during her address at the World Ministerial Seminar on Technology in Education in 2007, made the following statement:

‘ICT is the future and indeed the key to 21st Century teaching and learning’ (Pandor, 2007)

In August 2007 three FET colleges, College of Cape Town, Northlink College and Boland College entered into the first phase of a Pilot e-Learning project. The colleges each decided on a specific topic/s to develop with the notion that the content will then afterwards be shared amongst the colleges. In other words a repository of content will be formed from which colleges can then draw quality content to deliver to their students. Specific lecturers, who are subject matter experts (SME), were selected at each college to do the development. They were trained in the use of the WebCT Designer tools and were assisted by the instructional designers from Eiffel-Corp.

In October 2007, the remainder of the FET colleges in the Western Cape joined the second phase. They are False Bay College, South Cape College and West Coast College. The same procedure for development was adhered to.

ICT IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS AND FET COLLEGES

Before we can investigate the e-learn landscape in the FET sector we have to take cognizance of ICT development in the school sector.

The White Paper on e-education was proclaimed on 26 August 2004 and published in the Government Gazette on 2 September 2004. The White Paper addressed the need for ICT integration in schools in line with the ICT revolution which had an impact on curriculum development and delivery and continues to pose new challenges for education and training systems around the world. Three major challenges were identified:

1. Participation in the information society.
2. Impact of ICT's on access, cost effectiveness and quality of education.
3. Integration of ICT's into the learning and teaching process. (Education Department, 2004)

In our country, we thus have a strong commitment to ICT in education. According to the Minister of Education bringing ICT connectivity to all South African schools and education institutions is not negotiable. A dedicated education network called the EduNet was piloted to connect all schools and make connectivity affordable to teachers and learners. This takes place in the context of the 21st Century and a globalized world. (Pandor, 2007)

The Khanya Project was initiated by the Western Cape Education Department April 2001. The focus of this project was to investigate different ways to use information, communication and audiovisual technology to improve teaching and learning, or curriculum delivery in schools. Furthermore the project aims to empower every teacher in the Western Cape to eventually use technology, such as computers or televisions, to teach. This can help alleviate the shortage of qualified teaching staff at many schools.

SchoolNet SA through partnerships with large international and national organizations, including the World Bank, Open Society Foundation, Telkom SA, Thintana Communications, Intel, Nortel Networks and Microsoft, has designed, managed and implemented projects in educational ICTs. This resulted in 22 000 Teachers being trained to use ICT in education by 2007. This process is still going and the vision is that all teachers will be trained by 2014.

In the FET sector the colleges was funded through the FET college recapitalization fund through which R1, 9 billion was made available countrywide to upgrade lecturer skills, equipment, infrastructure and IT connectivity with the focus on NCV delivery. The colleges had to evaluate their needs and each was allowed to spend this money wisely on specific focus areas. False Bay College focused its spending of the Recapitalisation Funds on three campuses, Muizenberg, Westlake and Good Hope. One of the main focus areas was the setting up of Open Learning Centers at each campus. This ensured the establishment of well stocked library sections and a virtual classroom for delivery of e-learn initiatives. The six Colleges in the Western Cape embarked on e-learning without similar support given to them as with the schools through the Khanya project to develop their ICT skills.

The following factors will be investigated in this paper which impacts on the e-learn development and implementation process at False Bay College

1. SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND RESOURCES

It is important that we evaluate what skills, knowledge and resources are necessary for successful content development and implementation by lecturers in the FET sector.

Lecturers have to realize that when they become involved in e-learning that they become the drivers of change in their environment. This is not only in the classroom, but also in the college environment. For most of the lecturers the e-learning environment is new and unexplored. The NCV students are teenagers who are from a different generation as those students they used to work with before 2007 and this creates the need to implement new approaches to meet their specific needs. Through e-learning the integration of teaching vocational subjects and technology must take place.

The lecturers who embark on e-learning development must have the ability to apply basic and advanced ICT skills in order to create their own learning content and be confident in their use of computers and other software applications. Whilst the lecturer is a subject expert they must also be knowledgeable about the e-learning environment and the e-learning communities which can assist them. Through interaction with other e-learn practitioners they can learn how to present the content in a creative and acceptable way which will impact positively on the learners. 'Making the most of e-learning is a matter of developing "softer" elements, such as training and human-capacity building' (Opoku, 2008)

The lecturer must realize that they are no longer just the vessel of knowledge and that face to face teaching to succeed in knowledge transfer is outdated and that they should rather partner with the learner to become the helper, facilitator, guide or encourager. They must become adaptive, innovative, and collaborative in teaching. This will lead them to realize that the learner is no longer the object of teaching, but become the focus of learning.

Reference to resources must also be made here and this is specifically aimed at access to hardware (computers) for the purpose of e-learn development. Within the college structure lecturers share workrooms and computers and sometimes even have to compete for a computer. In e-learn development a considerable amount of time and effort initially goes into the development phase and lecturers need to be

supported with the right ‘tools’ to do this properly. A lap top and 24/7 connectivity is the minimum requirement for e-learn development by a lecturer.

2. WORKLOAD OF LECTURERS

The core business at the FET colleges is teaching. How then can the lecturer marry the responsibility of 25 hours teaching per week with content development? During the two years pilot phase of e-learn development many of the lecturers became disillusioned about the process and some ceased their participation in the e-learn pilot. A couple of colleges are also not interested in carrying on and this might be due to two factors. Firstly lecturers were tasked with the content development process and the advocating of e-learning within their institution. Secondly management did not realize the potential of e-learn and did not support this notion. Most of the content which was earmarked for development was not finished and is not yet ready for sharing amongst colleges. The question can be posed as to how long will it really take before this process will become effective?

Lecturers need to have time off from teaching to allow them to embark successfully onto the e-learning route.

3. CHANGING OF MINDSETS

As we all know transformation cannot be accomplished, unless it allows the people it affects the most, to make the paradigm shifts required and allays the fears that are inherent in the process. (GAUM, 2000)

According to the Minister of Education the key to achieving the integration of ICT’s in teaching and learning is the successful integration of teachers/lecturers into this process. She pointed out that although we have to ‘move YOUNG minds, we have to move OLD minds’ too. (Pandor, 2007)

According Broere (2008) today’s generation do things differently and does different things. We have to reconsider our teaching methodologies and content and transform teaching into a meaningful information age experience

Changing the attitudes of people is about their development to enable them to fully appreciate and participate in the process. Gaum (2000) reiterates that the necessary support, re-education and re-training services must be made available and co-ordinated to facilitate change.

4. HOW CAN E-LEARN BENEFIT THE STUDENT?

According to the White Paper on e-education, 2004, the impact and effectiveness of ICT’s rest on the extent to which end-users (learners, teachers, managers and administrators) have access to hardware (computers), software (IT programs) and connectivity. It also states that in order for e-learning to be successful, learners must have regular access to reliable infrastructure. (Department of Education. 2004)

When Best Practices are adhered to during content development increased access to relevant, high quality and diverse content resources are given to learners. This will increase the opportunity for teachers and learners to communicate, collaborate and collectively develop and share learning experiences. (Pandor, 2007)

CONCLUSION

At the institutional level it is recommended that a system must be developed to enhance staff involvement in development and to give recognition for e-learning developments and give incentives for e-learning activities and innovation. It is further recommended that policies are developed to enable staff in the use of ICT's for teaching; that institutional structures are developed to enable staff in the use of ICT's for teaching; that institutional policies are developed to support students in the use of ICT's for learning (e.g. computer literacy, information literacy and graduate competencies); that institutional structures are developed to support students in the use of ICT's for learning.

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