

Postgraduate English Language students' interactions with technology, what does the future hold?

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ABSTRACT

In keeping with international standards and technology the University of South Africa (Unisa), the only dedicated open distance learning institution in South Africa, has come up with policies to implement and facilitate online learning for all students, in particular those at postgraduate level. However, experience has shown that, among other challenges, some students might not be ready to embrace this innovation. This paper is based on a longitudinal three-year study of a postgraduate English Language course for teacher trainees. The aim was to determine the extent to which these students utilise the technological tools as per university expectations and in practice as they teach. The results, for the first year of the study, reveal that while a number of them are excited about online learning, the majority are rather conservative. Some view it as a social network that is not appropriate to a learning context; others are simply intimidated by venturing into something new, while a big majority is disabled from experimenting due to contextual factors. Chief of these is the inaccessibility to internet facilities in the remote areas where they teach. The paper argues that online learning at Unisa, should be introduced gradually even at postgraduate level and recommends an in-depth investigation of Unisa's unique situation as an open distance education institution.

INTRODUCTION

In keeping with worldwide trends, Unisa has and is still introducing technological tools to facilitate closer interaction between and among students and lecturers. These range from sms, Facebook, to online teaching. Starting from next year, 2013, all postgraduate modules will be offered online and, closely related to this, lecturers are being trained in online marking. Tutors will be also be brought on board and expected to tutor online.

This is intended to reduce the gap that is created by the distance mode of learning. Expectations are that students will find it much easier, not only to get in touch with their lecturers and tutors, but also be able to access their study material more easily. More

importantly, they will be able to submit their assignment online, circumventing the slow, unreliable and sometimes cumbersome postal system. Of significance is that feedback to students will be immediate and students will benefit from announcements and tutorials that previously took months to reach them.

The active participation among lecturers and students can improve throughput because problems are dealt with timeously. In addition e-learning not only enables students to get individual attention, but has the potential to expose students to valuable additional information from the wealth of resources on the internet. This has got the washback effect of making student responsible for their own learning, which is in line with the learner-centred approach. Because of e-learning, learning itself becomes a life-long learning process as opposed to something that one is exposed to only at school.

As a result of the vast amount of information at their disposal, students are forced to be critical readers and consumers of information because they have to make choices. This is particularly relevant to students at Unisa as a distance education institution, because of the physical distance between lecturers and students; student can make appropriate choices of sources that are available in their context as opposed to relying on the lecturer to prescribe from one source. In other words e-learning enriches the learning experience.

Teachers, in particular, need to be adept in utilizing technological tools for their own benefit as well as that of their learners. This paper seeks to determine the extent to which the group of teachers identified uses technological tools that have been provided by the university as well as their ability to access them.

Therefore, the paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- To what extent do teacher trainees make use of technology in their teaching?
- In practice, how effective are the technological tools provided by Unisa?
- What effect do the teaching and learning environments have on the provision of access to technology in schools?

A preliminary analysis of the results, for the first year of the study, reveal that, while a number of students are excited about online learning, the majority are rather conservative. Some view it as a social network that is not appropriate to a learning context; others are simply intimidated by venturing into something new, while a big majority is disabled from experimenting due to contextual factors. Chief of these is the inaccessibility to internet facilities in the remote areas where they teach. The paper argues that online learning at Unisa should be introduced gradually, even at

postgraduate level, and recommends an in-depth investigation of Unisa's unique situation as an open distance education institution.