

Chapter 81

E–Learning: A Means to Increase Learner Involvement in Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates a method for increasing the involvement of marketing fourth year learners in academic research, by encouraging greater participation in, and commitment to, their research project in the Applied Marketing IV subject. It is assumed that greater involvement will result in a greater pass rate. The main reasons for this lack of interest were found to be a sense of incompetence and a lack of resources which were the main objectives of a research project. These objectives were addressed by using learner centered methodologies with the research method Action Research. This research method with the slow resolution of problems was used together with a teaching methodology whose objectives supported the resolution of the learners' inadequacies. Formative assessment was used at the start of the measuring of the learners' progress and was found useful with its quick and positive feedback in supporting the learners' confidence. An eClassroom was structured for the implementation of the Applied Marketing IV course. It was designed in such a way that it facilitated the learners' use of the more commonly used devices such as surfing the web, email and Internet over and above the chosen course material. Although it was not possible to complete the main intervention of the project it was possible to use the participants' experiences in the navigation of the course material in the eClassroom, to further develop future follow-up courses.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous activities and interventions are being implemented in the Durban University of Tech-

nology (DUT) in general and in the Department of Marketing in particular to achieve the goal of increased throughput. One of these initiatives is to “promote learning through ... research ...”

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via a strategic objective “to create conditions conducive to research” (Academic Plan Working Document, 2006: 24).

DUT throughput and graduation rates are below national benchmarks of 75% of learners finishing a degree or diploma in minimum time. Considerable pressure is being placed on Universities to improve such throughput rates, while at the same time maintaining acceptable quality levels. The DUT academic plan refers to a higher order intellectual skills associated with holding a Higher Education qualification through knowledge, skills and attitudes associated with their field of specialisation and general and transferable (life) skills (Academic Plan Working Document, 2006: 18).

Learners in the Department of Marketing are introduced to academic research via a subject called Applied Marketing IV in the Bachelor of Technology: Marketing degree. They have to design and implement a full research project, culminating in a mini dissertation. This is important training for those intending to progress to the masters level, but is also important training in more general research and decision making for those who will not follow an academic career, but will move into the business world. Unfortunately, the outcomes of this subject are not at the level that we would prefer. Too many learners ‘drop out’ of the course. Reasons for this seem to be the fact that they see research as very difficult, because some of the concepts that they have to apply are complex and new to them. The result is that learners do not see research as something they are capable of doing, do not become involved sufficiently, fall behind in the work and therefore become depressed, demoralised and give up.

This paper sets out to examine this problem, trying to ‘unpack’ it in more detail, to recommend a technique for resolving it, and to review an attempt made at implementing such a recommendation and the implementation problems experienced.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research was based on the concepts of knowledge management and learning organisations, which can contribute to educational change and transformation (van der Westhuizen, 2002). Using this approach assists educators to achieve what Kraak (2004) refers to as increased responsiveness to the needs of the community (including business) and to the country’s socio-economic needs (growth and technology). This is necessary because of the increase in market pressure on education, especially for greater access and an increase in adult learners (Schoole, 2004), which places tremendous pressure on the less experienced lecturer. However, appropriate learning and teaching approaches could alleviate this undue stress. An examination of the learning and teaching styles and approaches together with the use of electronic classrooms supported by blended learning based on authentic learning will clarify basic elements of the theoretical framework.

Learning and Teaching Styles and Approaches

As an adjunct to this inexperience and increasing pressure, different learners have different learning styles and therefore respond differently to the standard face-to-face teaching method. Therefore, using only one approach to resolve the above problem may not be optimal. Whatever teaching method is selected, it should be a method that caters for different learning styles and for the satisfaction of the learners.

Electronic Classrooms

The traditional face-to-face mode of lecturing and learning could be replaced by electronic classrooms in order to absorb the undue pressure on staff. Marc Rosenberg (2001) maintains that such

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