

Introducing e-learning in a South African Higher Education Institution: Challenges arising from an intervention and possible responses

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Abstract

This article draws on research conducted at a tertiary institution in South Africa as part of the redesigning of an English for Educational Development (EED) course to include an e-learning online discussion component. The subject material used was based on HIV/AIDS topics that students had to debate within an online discussion forum. Framed by the concept of Multiliteracies and the Social Constructivist view of teaching and learning, this study problematizes students' experiences of the online component in an attempt to explore the potential benefits of and challenges in using e-learning in teaching and learning and the extent to which e-learning should be adopted into the EED curriculum. The benefits derived and challenges faced by the students and the writers during the implementation of the intervention are presented with the aim of generating further discussions from researchers on national and international levels. This article briefly contextualizes the study by providing some background information, theory and the research process. It then draws on a number of evaluation tools ranging from course evaluations; classroom discussions and observations; reflective notes; as well as minutes of meetings to evaluate both students and writers participation and experiences.

Context of the study

This article reports on a project at a South African University to include e-learning as an alternate pedagogical tool into an existing English for Educational Development (EED) module as part of the redesigning of the EED curriculum. EED is a semester module that is offered to different groups of Community and Health Science (CHS) students in semester 1 and semester 2 of the academic year. The primary purpose of the EED-CHS module is to develop the academic literacy practices that students need in order to make a success of their first year courses and their subsequent studies at the University. To achieve this purpose an integrated approach is used whereby reading texts and discussion topics directly related to the disciplines of students are chosen for inclusion into the EED curriculum in consultation with the discipline lecturers. Consequently, in the revised EED curriculum students had to engage in online discussions on given topics which were related to their particular disciplines.

Practitioner Notes

What is already known about this topic?

- Advancements in technology make it imperative to include technology into teaching and learning.
- Using technology can be both rewarding and challenging.
- Technology contributes to flexible modes of teaching and learning.

What this paper adds

- Provides an understanding of the University context in South Africa and the literacy levels of students entering higher education in South Africa.
- Discusses the negative impact that a lack of basic language proficiency has on teaching and learning initiatives. While technical skills are important, it is not sufficient for epistemological success.
- Discusses some specific benefits of and challenges in using an e-learning discussion forum. This discussion would be useful for practitioners prior to the implementation of e-learning into the curriculum.

Implications for practice and/or policy

- Care and caution must be exercised in developing institutional policies that recommend e-learning interventions. Merely providing ongoing e-learning training for academics is not sufficient. It is imperative that academics are exposed to current literature on the issues that will prevent them falling into “traps,” eg. using e-learning to replace teacher interaction or making unrealistic demands on students based on the assumption that all student are technologically literate.
- Consideration must be given to the social context of students as well as the expertise of students prior to adoption of e-learning into the curriculum.
- Highlights the importance of using a “scaffolding approach” to develop expertise of students.
- Stresses the need for Higher Education Institutions to revisit their minimum entrance requirements.

The use of e-learning has grown considerably in the past three decades, which has prompted a great deal of interest in using technology thereby transforming the very nature of higher education (Pollock & Cornford, 2000). While the new technologies are supplementing conventional course delivery (Murphy, Walker & Webb, 2001), they have become a protagonist for change in higher education. However, Garrison and Anderson (2003) argue that there needs to be a clear purpose and reason for introducing e-learning interventions. Over the last 3 years the University of the Western Cape (UWC), as part of its institutional operational plan, has encouraged the use of e-pedagogy. Consequently, there is a big hype across the institution on using the e-learning platform. This is not only the case at UWC as in most South African Universities the use of technology, particularly e-learning, is becoming increasingly popular. While there are ongoing debates, criticisms and cautions on using e-learning, much of the literature on e-learning both locally and internationally has shown the positive impact of e-learning in educational contexts. For example, Cunningham (2000) found that students felt the use of e-learning was non-threatening and challenging, that it benefited their writing, and that their grades had improved as a result of its use. Warschauer (2003), who argues the need for technology in developing

countries as a means of social inclusion, found that a computer-mediated communication environment promotes participation and encourages social presence. In light of this, and the fact that information literacy is a vital necessity for today's modern information-intensive world, there is the need to integrate it into the curriculum.

In South Africa, many students entering higher education come from disadvantaged schooling and poor socio-economic backgrounds. In many cases students from disadvantaged backgrounds have no access to school or community libraries and computers, and in some cases there is a lack of basic facilities such as running water, electricity, ablution services, desks and chairs in schools, etc. South Africa is also currently grappling with its low literacy levels. Many students who enter higher education do not have the adequate literacy levels to cope with the demands of their disciplines. In addition, within the South African higher education context itself, there exist huge disparities between institutions arising from the discrimination during the apartheid era, for example, the historically advantaged and the historically disadvantaged institutions. The UWC is classified as a historically disadvantaged institution and as such was provided very limited resources by the previous apartheid government as a university created for the "Coloured" section of our society. The unevenness between the advantaged and disadvantaged institutions still exists despite the continuous efforts of South Africa's present democratic government. As an institution with a proud activist role during the struggle against apartheid, the UWC is committed to providing access to the "poorest of the poor." Consequently, the UWC is dominated by students from the disadvantaged sectors of society, primarily from schools which are not well resourced and without the necessary level of preparation for higher education.

This project lies within the framework of multiliteracies, a term coined by the New London Group (1996, p. 63) to describe "the multiplicity of communication channels and media and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity." In keeping with the socio-cultural perspective and recognizing that learning does not occur in isolation, Lave and Wenger's (2002) work on "communities of practice" (COP) and the concept of "literacy as a social practice" and New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Gee, 2000; Street, 2003) were drawn on to guide the writers. Lave and Wenger (1991, 2002) argue that learning occurs within specific contexts and they locate learning as a form of interaction and co-participation, focusing on how individuals become members of COP. To this end the concept of "social presence" (Gunawardena, 1995) which contributes to building a sense of community among students was drawn on by the writers to assist them in enabling students to express their knowledge freely and for successful learner-to-learner interaction (Kazmer, 2000). Garrison and Anderson (2003) define social presence as the ability of participants in a community of practice to project themselves socially and emotionally. Within the NLS the use of digital and electronic media are referred to as technological literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 1997). Reading and writing require new practices which include exposure to technological literacies. NLS embrace these changes highlighting the importance of what students bring to the classroom from outside of it. Therefore, in designing the intervention described here, the electronic literacy practices that students have been exposed to, at home and in their high schools, and the electronic literacy practices they are exposed to at university, were taken into account.

The main aim of this article is to critically explore the potential benefits and challenges of e-learning on teaching and learning by reflecting on the experiences of the students and the writers in the project; and to make an informed decision on the extent of adopting e-learning into the EED curriculum. An additional aim of this research is to use its findings as a springboard for further engagement among academics across UWC and more generally in national/international higher education forums/platforms.

The research process

The project was implemented in the second semester of 2010 to a total of 220 student participants who were registered across disciplines (Physiotherapy—30 students, Psychology—12 students, Sports, Recreation and Exercise Science—35 students, Occupational Therapy—30 students and Social Work—113 students) in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences, UWC. Each of these disciplines has their own lecture slot, and students are further divided into tutorial groups of between 12 and 20 students per group. In the first semester of 2010, students had completed an introductory 6 months computer literacy course. The revised EED curriculum included three 1-hour e-learning sessions. Since e-learning can be accompanied by a sense of aloneness (Garrison & Anderson, 2003), the e-learning component was included in the curriculum in the last term of the second semester over 3 weeks. By this time in the semester, the lecturer was able to establish social presence in that the students got to know each other quite well and there was a sense of connectedness with each other. They also became quite comfortable chatting about issues in class discussions. Each discipline group had their e-learning sessions together with the exception of the Social Work students who were split into two laboratories because of the large class size.

In the first e-learning session, students received training on how to access the e-learning site and enter the discussion forum; to save, post and reply to messages; and to use the Internet and the different data bases available to the CHS students. It must be noted that the UWC uses the Open Source Learning Management System called Knowledge Environment for Web-Based Learning. In the second e-learning session, the Instructional Designer spent the first 10 to 15 minutes recapping the lesson on how to enter the e-learning site and use the discussion forum. Thereafter, the first task for the students was to post a message of approximately one paragraph in length (ie, between 10 and 12 lines) on a topic that they were given (referred to as Message 1). The topics were chosen in consultation with the discipline lecturers and covered general debatable issues relating to HIV and AIDS and were specific to the particular discipline of the student. It must be noted that in an EED lesson, in order to build students knowledge base on their respective topics prior to the online task, students worked in groups and discussed their topics. This was followed by feedback from each group and a general discussion. Students were also made aware that the online task was an academic task and therefore they had to adhere to the conventions of academic writing taught in the EED lessons. As an additional resource students were given a worksheet which clearly listed the tasks to be completed and the steps to be followed in sessions 2 and 3. In addition, technical support was provided throughout the duration of the e-learning sessions. Furthermore, the EED Lecturer and two Instructional Designers acted as facilitators throughout these sessions. Students who were unable to complete the task during the allotted time were given a week to complete the task. To assist them a technical assistant and Instructional Designer was available for consultation outside of the lecture period and students were encouraged to seek their assistance.

A week after the completion of Message 1, students had three library sessions which were also part of the restructuring of the course. In these library sessions, students were shown how to locate and obtain information on their respective online topics from the library and different databases. Thereafter, students were encouraged to use their sources to conduct research before the next online session thus enabling them to debate their topic from an informed position.

In the third online session, students had to read all the posted messages within their groups and choose one message to reply to in approximately one paragraph (this posting was referred to as Message 2). In doing so, they had to take cognizance of the research conducted on their topic, the class discussions with their peers and EED lecturer and their lesson on writing norms and conventions given by the EED Lecturer. Once students had completed the tasks, they were requested

to print Message 1 and Message 2 and insert them into their EED portfolio which formed part of the EED coursework marks.

The Project was then evaluated by both the Instructional Designer and EED Lecturer with the aim of ascertaining students' experiences of using the e-learning tool and in completing the given tasks. Informed consent was obtained from students for the writers to use any texts produced by them during the duration of the Project. They were also assured anonymity should their texts be used. The evaluation tools included student course evaluations and classroom discussions with the EED Lecturer; and the writers' observations, reflective notes and minutes of meetings. The analysis of the data was iterative and cyclical. The course evaluations were first analysed by the EED Lecturer who searched for commonly recurring words, phrases and sentences and coded these into different categories as they arose. The Instructional Designer then went through the same process of searching for patterns and workable categories in order to confirm the categories obtained by the EED Lecturer. The Message 1 and Message 2 postings were analysed by the EED Lecturer and a tutor. The focus was on students' level of engagement with the task, their ability to construct and convey meaning, language usage, tone and register, which are outcomes of the EED course and that were taught prior to the e-learning sessions. It must be noted that a detailed analysis of these issues is not the subject of this article.

Discussion

In the data analysis, two broad issues emerged consistently throughout as presenting a challenge to many students. The first related to the noticeable division of students coming from advantaged and disadvantaged schooling and home environments and the general literacy levels of some of the students. The second issue was the use of e-learning as a pedagogical tool. These two issues will be discussed in relation to the experiences of the students and the revised EED curriculum and the implications it has for higher education institutions in South Africa.

Paving the way to access unfamiliar territories

A student, Mandla stated "*I don't have a computer at home and in my school I did not have a computer or library. I type very slow and found some things very hard, like cut and paste. It also took me very long to finish the work. I had to come back to the Lab to complete the work. My English is not very good and I struggle to write. I like the online task but I don't feel good enough.*" In this quote Mandla raises two important points that will be explored. First, is the limited access to basic resources such as the library and computers resulting in the lack of expertise in using the library and e-learning tool. Second, is the difficulty in writing and lack of proficiency in the English language.

As already discussed, in South Africa many students come from schools that are under-resourced, with no access to basic resources such as a library or computer laboratories. Therefore, they often find it difficult to cope with using the library and the technological requirements of higher education, where the related skills are generally taken for granted. It is precisely for this reason that the decision was made to integrate e-learning as well as library information literacy into the EED curriculum. However, it is clearly evident that for some participants, while the interventions were beneficial, they were not adequate to boost their level of confidence in using the e-learning tool. Despite the training sessions these students still found it difficult to cope with the requirements of the online tasks. The data also show that the introductory semester course in computer literacy that students had undertaken prior to the intervention was clearly not adequate for students coming from homes with no access to information and communication technology (ICT) and/or disadvantaged schooling backgrounds. In hindsight, this is understandably so, since the nature of technology is such that one gets better with practice and the students level of expertise is more likely to improve if the resource is available at home. Thus, students like Mandla felt inadequate, excluded and as being denied membership to the broader university community as

indicated in the quote above when he says “. . . I like the online task but I don't feel good enough.” Similar findings were reported by Kajee (2006, p. 226) who studied the use of ICT at the University of Witwatersrand by using 20 first entry students as participants, the majority of whom were from disadvantaged backgrounds. She states that students felt marginalized because of their limited electronic literacy and that they did not belong to one of the dominant discourses of the university. As a result, most of the participants in her study experienced this as disabling, to the extent that it created a divide between them and students who have had better access, usually students of other race groups. The divide that Kajee (2006) refers to was clearly evident during the online sessions, where it was observed that participants with adequate computer literacy completed the tasks much quicker while those with inadequate computer literacy skills had to return to the laboratory during their own time to complete the task. In addition, it was noted that more computer-literate students were able to work between multiple browsers to access information on their topic. While some of the databases used by the students included EBSCOhost, the search engine Google Scholar was used most often. The above discussion highlights a possible concern relating to the use of the e-learning tool as it is easy for academics in a less traditional face-to-face environment to neglect the social context of the student and have greater expectations based on the assumption that the youth are technologically literate. In this regard, creating a supportive platform where academics can engage with recent literature on using e-learning in teaching and learning, including aspects such as its advantages and disadvantages, could be most beneficial. Palloff and Pratt (2010) refer to the skills of using the online tool in an interactive and facilitative manner as electronic pedagogy and suggest that even seasoned academics should be trained in electronic pedagogy. From this intervention, it is also apparent that to gain maximum benefit from the inclusion of e-learning into the curriculum, students must be technologically literate. Hence, a suggestion would be to extend the duration of the computer literacy course (mentioned earlier) to a 1-year course. However, a point to note is that while expertise in using the e-tool and physical access to technology is important, it is not sufficient for epistemological access (Morrow, 1993). Lelliott, Pendlebury and Enslin (2000, p. 49) argue that while “epistemological access to the educational goods of ICT requires students to become computer-literate as well as conventionally literate and numerate” they should also be “able to handle information technology at a level appropriate to different fields of study and be equipped to employ it appropriately to further their cognitive development in the future.”

On a positive note, participants readily assisted one another in attaining computer literacy as illustrated by Sindi's quote: “*I don't know how to use the computer so well. I sat next to. . . She helped me.*” In fact, many of the participants first sought assistance from their peers and only consulted the technicians/facilitators if their peers were unable to assist. To this end Lave and Wenger's (1996) notion of COP is clearly relevant where the “new-comers” or novices are assisted by the “old-timers” or more experienced participants. However, despite assistance from their peers and technicians/facilitators, the “novices” required much more practice to become adequately accomplished.

A major concern for the writers is the limited impact which an intervention that was designed to be slow-paced and nurturing had for some of the participants. These findings sound a note of caution to lecturers who have built in e-learning tasks as part of their assessment and to those lecturers who expect students to deliver on e-learning assignments without ensuring that their students have adequate computer literacy skills. Consequently, while e-learning tasks should not be excluded altogether, the writers suggest that they be built into the curriculum as scaffolds with adequate support for students. The implication of this finding for the EED curriculum is that the e-learning tasks should not form a major summative assessment task, so as not to disadvantage any group of students. However, for greater success it is evident that the EED course needs to be extended to a year programme so that more e-learning sessions could be included. With computer

literacy and EED being converted to 1-year courses, greater success would be achieved in assisting students acquire the technological literacies as well as the discipline literacies. This strong foundation would leave room for academics in the CHS Faculty to build in more online tasks into their curriculum. However, the challenge now remains for the writers to convince the relevant stakeholders of the need to extend both the courses to a year. The findings of this intervention also point to the fact that apart from computer literacy skills students need a basic level of competence in English—the medium of instruction—to be able to successfully acquire the literacy practices of their discipline.

The second point drawn from the quote by Mandla related to the difficulty in writing and a general lack of proficiency in the English language. During the online discussions some students were found to have difficulty in articulating their thoughts and did not seem to have adequate knowledge of their topics and therefore struggled to write Message 1 despite the class discussions on their topics prior to the interventions. Some students only managed to write about two to three sentences at the most and some of these sentences were not very coherent. As a result, some of the Message 1 postings were at a very superficial level. Students who experienced difficulty in articulating their own ideas resorted to emulating information already posted by their peers. Many researchers, for example, Pretorius and Machet (2004) show that students from well-resourced schools tend to attain higher literacy levels than students from high poverty schools. In this intervention, students coming from advantaged backgrounds and to a certain degree language-enriched environments (ie, environments which promote the development and acquisition of language skills) were found to show greater enjoyment and engagement in the task and requested more online lessons. In fact, a study conducted by Stanz and Fourie (2002) showed that academically stronger students benefited most from e-learning. An additional point to note is that the written text is final and subject to different interpretation unless very well written. Some students, who were less proficient in the English language, stated that they preferred the face-to-face discussions held in class as they were able to ensure that their meaning was understood in the way they intended. In hindsight, for some students the possible fear of being misunderstood could have limited their online discussions. However, regardless of the level of participation, in the online discussions all students felt obliged to participate by their mere presence in the venue and being in front of a computer—unlike face-to-face discussions where one person usually dominates. Generally, in face-to-face discussions, shy students “shy away” from participating. Interestingly, Palloff and Pratt (2010) argue that introverts generally appear more extroverted online as they become more verbal and interactive when not having to display the cues essential in face-to-face communication (for example, facial and body language cues). In this intervention, language proficiency seemed to have more of an impact on students’ performance than the nature of the student. This finding may be linked to Cummins (1995) distinction of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). While some of the students in this intervention had BICS which enabled them to participate in the face-to-face discussions, they lacked CALP which is more cognitively demanding.

As early as the 1960s, Bernstein (1962) distinguished between the middle classes using elaborated codes of language and the working class using “restricted codes” while entrapped within their own socio-economic group. This distinction could be used to explain the point Mandla raises about his poor English. Since the 1960s many other researchers have made similar claims using different terminology. For example, the NLS in the work by Gee (1990, p. 151) makes a distinction between primary Discourses (the way we learn to do and be within our own family) and secondary Discourses (the way we learn to do and be outside our family). Our primary Discourses may either be “close to” (ie, similar to) or “away from” (ie, different from) our secondary Discourses. However, if our primary Discourses are “away from” our secondary Discourses, then it becomes

more difficult to perform within the secondary Discourse. The majority of students at UWC are English Additional Language speakers and come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Their home and school literacy practices are often not congruent with the literacy practices of the institution and their disciplines. Therefore, these students often experience difficulty in coping with the academic requirements of the various disciplinary tasks. The above point in no way suggests that the students from middle-class backgrounds did not experience any difficulties completing the assigned tasks. However, it was noted that with additional assistance and guidance, they were able to cope quite comfortably compared with students from disadvantaged backgrounds. According to Gee (1990) for students who use middle-class conventions at home, learning to write academically becomes a process of acquisition rather than formal learning. Such students acquire writing techniques gradually and with relative ease. Hence, academics should be cautious when using e-learning in their teaching as Njenga and Fourie (2010, p. 209) state that “technology is just a medium, a means to achieve something and not an end in itself.” Technology is not a substitute for the academic. Students still need the support of an expert and the social interaction with their peers in order to engage in face-to-face discussions on topics prior to e-learning interventions. Furthermore, as suggested by Njenga and Fourie (2010), learning materials should be designed to exploit technology.

Use of e-learning as a pedagogical tool

From the discussion above it is clear that the students literacy levels as well as prior exposure to ICT will have an impact on the ease or difficulty with which they are able to accomplish an online writing task and the impact that it has on their learning. In this intervention while some students experienced difficulty with the actual writing up of their messages they nonetheless indicated that they enjoyed the use of technology. The writers acknowledge that some students' lack of expertise in using the e-tool may have resulted in anxiety which then impacted negatively on their writing ability. Clearly then, for these students the e-learning intervention became more of a hindrance rather than a tool to enhance learning.

Over the years, there have been conflicting arguments in the literature around the use of e-learning. Some researchers argue that ICT has the potential to enhance the quality of teaching and learning while others argue that ICT is a vehicle to deliver instruction and does not influence student achievement. Another concern around computer-mediated communication (CMC) is that writing changes in the electronic medium and questions might be asked whether these changes are beneficial or harmful to writing. To this end despite students being reminded that the online discussion was an academic task and therefore they had to use formal academic register, an analysis of Message 1 postings showed that many participants used language very informally, almost seeming “to write as they speak.” Not much attention was paid to punctuation, spelling and construction of paragraphs or layout. Some students made use of symbols, contractions and emoticons as a way of expressing themselves or to emphasize meaning. It is evident from their casual use of discourse that they are engaging in a medium that might be considered a hybrid of written and spoken language (Yates, 1996). Warschauer (2001) argues that the use of emoticons and other features should be considered as a different register which might be used in the classroom as language exercises and encourages educators to use the Net to match their pedagogical goals. His view is that CMC can help bridge the gap between speaking and writing, by facilitating second language interaction “that is linguistically complex yet informal and communicative” (Warschauer, 2001, online). Interestingly, Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) who argue that a traditional text-based computer-mediated classroom lacks social cues found in their study with distance education students that emoticons were used by students to compensate for the lack of social cues.

Prior to the Message 2 postings, students were again reminded that they had to apply academic conventions and some of the Message 2 postings did shift to become more formal in comparison

with Message 1 postings. However, students expressed their dissatisfaction with having to write using formal academic register as they felt that it restricted their freedom and reduced their enjoyment of the task. It is evident that students perceive the Net as a place/tool to say and write without any restrictions. While it is acknowledged that only two online tasks are not sufficient to determine the impact on learning, this intervention did contribute to an alternative learning environment which was positively received by students despite the challenges that some students experienced. Of importance, it was found that students were able to transfer what they learnt in the online classroom on formal language usage to a textual assignment later in the semester although this was not evident in their online discussions thus reinforcing an earlier statement that students perceive the Net as a tool to use without any restrictions. In view of the fact that some transfer of learning did occur, it is argued that technology can be used as a tool to expedite the learning process.

Kannan and MackNish (2000) argue that online course components influence learner motivation and self-directed learning. From the writers' observations it was apparent that most students enjoyed the independence of the task and appeared to be self-directed. To this end, great excitement and enthusiasm was evident when the online task was explained to students. It was noted that students became very excited during the Message 2 postings when they received a reply to their original message and some of them immediately responded to the message without being asked to, thereby continuing the discussion thread throughout the duration of the lesson. Furthermore, some students reported that they continued discussing their topics outside of the classroom environment. However, as discussed earlier, students with low literacy levels were unable to perform at this level and were therefore less impressed by the online tasks.

In addition to the above points, there were other challenges faced by the writers and participants which impacted negatively on the teaching and learning process. For example, while conducting e-learning training the Internet connection was slow and this caused a delay in training. Moreover, the simultaneous access of the e-tool by students especially in the larger classes led to a bottleneck which caused a slower response rate; web browser "time out" error messages and freezing of the computer screen. These technical problems frustrated the participants as well as the writers and can be "off putting." The implication for higher education institutions is that their infrastructure needs to be upgraded to match the demands for the use of the e-tool. It must be noted that despite these challenges, students were still able to successfully complete the task at hand because they had a week in which to do so. It is therefore important for academics to factor in possible problems leading to delays when setting time frames for the completion of e-learning tasks.

Finally, in reflecting on the inclusion of e-learning into the EED curriculum, the writers are of the view that despite some constraints as discussed above, overall the intervention was successful in that it provided a different platform in which learning took place and therefore should remain a part of the EED curriculum. On further reflection, it was also decided that in order to assist students in acquiring some of the writing norms and conventions, the EED Lecturer should model a message and a response to a student's message. The method of modelling is in keeping with the views of Palloff and Pratt (2005, p. 22) who argue that "the best ways to encourage a certain way of participating is to model that behaviour for students." Modelling the desired behaviour also enhances social presence which contributes to building a sense of community among students and increases student participation and success of online collaboration.

Since the completion of this intervention, the findings therein have been presented and discussed at a departmental seminar. As a next step, through the University's Senate Teaching and Learning Committee, a presentation will be made to a wider university audience including teaching and

learning specialists of all faculties in the university. It is through this forum that university-wide strategies to improve teaching and learning via e-learning will be decided upon.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges experienced by some participants, in particular, lack of expertise in using the e-tool and lack of proficiency in the English language, overall the inclusion of e-learning into the EED curriculum was beneficial as it forced all students to participate in the discussions and also led to students interacting and sharing information with each other both within and outside the online space, thus encouraging a community of practice. Moreover, the findings indicate that while many students did not adhere to the academic conventions of writing during the online tasks, reinforcing the view that the Net is generally not considered an academic forum, nonetheless, they were able to apply what they learnt to a textual assignment. However, it must be noted that while integrating e-learning into the curriculum may be beneficial, some students are unevenly challenged and still require additional support. Therefore lecturers need to be cautious when including e-learning as part of their assessment. It is also imperative that university-wide teaching and learning strategies and policies take into account the potential benefits and challenges when encouraging the use of the e-learning platform. Furthermore, the infrastructure within the institution must be conducive to providing the necessary level of academic support. Within the South African context, there is a definite need for increased investment in upgrading resources both in schools and at universities. This article emphasizes that for maximum benefit of e-learning interventions, students need to be technologically literate as technology can expedite the learning process. Additionally, academics need to be kept abreast on the current literature on the rapidly evolving field of ICT.

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