

E-LEARNING PLATFORMS AND HUMANITIES EDUCATION:
AN AFRICAN CASE STUDY*

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Abstract The advent of e-learning has been a welcomed development in African universities, especially in countries where the demand for university education far outstrips capacity. This form of instruction not only has helped in reducing the problem of managing and testing large classes, but it also has helped lecturers in providing valuable assistance to students who would otherwise not have such access. The limitations of the e-learning platform coupled with a distorted student-teacher ratio has raised concerns about quality, especially for traditional humanities disciplines where the emphasis on argumentative rigor and critical thinking are at odds with the science-leaning orientation of e-learning platforms. This concern is especially important because the technology is relatively new and there are problems of access not only in terms of infrastructure but also in terms of the relevant computer literacy skills required of users of the technology. This essay examines the problems associated with the use of e-learning in teaching and examining traditional humanities courses in general but especially the problems encountered in using e-learning in teaching and assessing critical thinking courses at the University of Botswana. I argue that although certain aspects of e-learning are structured, confining, and therefore unsuitable for traditional humanities disciplines, e-learning can still be an appropriate tool for the humanities if used appropriately and creatively.

Keywords: classroom interaction, e-learning, e-assessment, humanities disciplines, University of Botswana

INTRODUCTION

Enrolment in African universities has witnessed considerable growth over the past fifty years, changing from the modest numbers that characterized their early days as small franchise colleges of various overseas universities to the huge numbers that are common today. This surge in enrolment is in part a reflection of the desire of African youths to reach for higher levels of educational attainment and thereby be properly positioned to take the social and economic advantages that come with education. It is also a reflection of the increasing reliance of African governments on local universities for training highly skilled individuals for African economies. This has resulted in a situation where the demand for access far outstrips available places, and universities are sometimes forced to increase enrolment beyond the capacities they were designed for and in some cases introduce part-time and/or distance learning programmes to cater for excess demand. This expansion of access to university education is especially beneficial to youths from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who in the old dispensation could not access higher education because of the prohibitive cost of attending universities abroad. As with other African universities, the University of Botswana has witnessed a steady increase in enrolment over the years and has been forced to be innovative in balancing the demand for greater access with the need to maintain the quality of its programmes. Between 1990 and 2009, for instance, student enrolment increased from 3,383 to 14,420.

The increase in student enrolment resulted in a lot of pressure not only on the physical infrastructure but also on staff members who have to cope with larger classes, heavier teaching loads, and atypical scheduling of classes. Whereas student enrolment has been growing over the years, there has not been a commensurate increase in the number of staff and academic space within the university. For instance, student enrolment grew by 426 percent between 1990 and 2007, but staff size only increased by 243 percent over the same period.

This increase in the workload of staff and the need to reach out to students studying at a distance informed the adoption of e-learning by the University of Botswana as one strategy for coping with increased demand for higher education. The decision to integrate e-learning into the academic culture of the University of Botswana, therefore, was not borne out of a desire to join an elite club of technologically savvy universities but was out of the need to solve practical problems relating to access and the quality of learning experiences.

The University of Botswana adopted e-learning in 2001 and in doing so defined it as 'the appropriate use of ICTs for advancing student-oriented, active, open, collaborative and life-long teaching-learning processes.'¹ Although e-learning was conceived of as a student-centred learning innovation, it turned out to be highly beneficial to lecturers at the University of Botswana, especially in the management of large classes. Eyitayo, for instance, observes, "it provides

a great help in assessment management. Some of the highlighted benefits of electronic submission of assessment materials include easy tracking, time stamped enforced deadlines and easy return to students.² Uziak identifies the benefits of e-learning to include; 'extending the teaching and learning processes beyond time and place constraints of the physical classroom;... handling large classes more effectively than by traditional face-to-face approach only;... equipping students with certain critical skills and competencies (e.g., information literacy, ICT, social and communication) essential to live and function effectively in the 21st century, which are not easily transferrable through traditional face to face classroom interactions.'³

Although e-learning is sometimes looked upon as web-based learning, especially to facilitate learning at a distance, this is not the case at the University of Botswana which conceives of e-learning to 'include all forms of ICTs such as overhead and digital projectors, PowerPoint presentations, video conferencing, and online learning using the e-learning platform.'⁴ To this end, relevant infrastructure and support staff were put in place and faculty trained on technology-enhanced course design, use of smart classrooms, video conferencing, and other technologies associated with e-learning. Faculty were encouraged and given adequate support to adopt e-learning as one of the approaches to teaching and learning. All staff who welcomed the innovation adopted the blended approach that combines online learning with the traditional face-to-face instruction. Evaluations of different aspects of e-learning have variously been made, including those on the perceptions of students on the impact of e-learning, by Oladiran & Uziak,⁵ Uziak,⁶ Batane & Mafote,⁷ Van der Merwe and Giannini-Gachago,⁸ on the perception of faculty on the adoption of e-learning by Mapoka and Eytayo,⁹ and on individual experiences in experimenting with e-learning by Lamande et al.¹⁰ These studies have either been of a general nature or have been biased towards the sciences that are traditionally held to be the primary constituency of e-learning. The current work attempts to complement these various studies by looking at the experience with e-learning in the humanities, especially as it relates to issues of course management, access to academic resources, e-assessment, and the promotion of academic discourse. These issues border on quality assurance as well as the traditional roles of teaching and learning in the humanities.

METHOD

The study, conceived as a means of evaluating the efficacy of e-learning as an instructional and assessment tool in the humanities, was primarily designed to:

1. Determine whether e-learning is effective in the management of humanities courses.

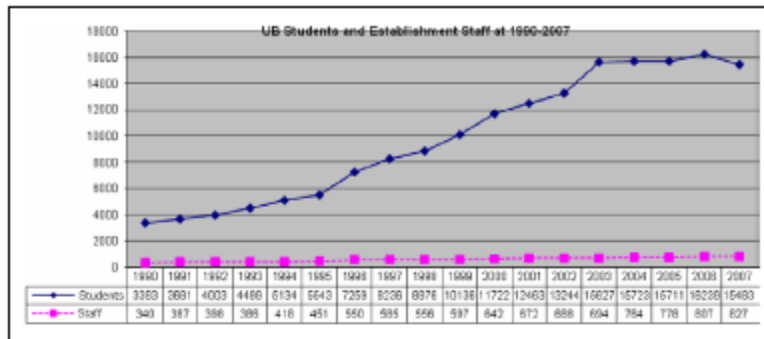


Figure 1. Variations in student enrolment and staff size between 1990 and 2007.
Source: Department of Institutional Research, University of Botswana.

2. Determine whether the use of e-learning has any desirable impact on the development of students' critical thinking abilities.
3. Determine whether the relative anonymity of the e-learning platform can help to improve classroom interaction.
4. Determine whether e-assessment can be effectively used by traditional humanities programmes.

Although the primary focus of the study was on humanities courses, it was not possible to review all the humanities courses within the university. To this end, the study was limited to two philosophy courses, viz., Introduction to Logic (Deductive Logic) and Critical Thinking (Inductive Logic) because data from these courses had been preserved over the study period. The study draws its primary data from information left by students on the e-learning platform between 2005 and 2009. Although it is customary for courses to be rolled over or reset (i.e. content of courses for the previous semester are erased from the platform in readiness for new content), the need to resolve issues arising from having to deal with a large number of students made it necessary to create new courses each semester instead of merely resetting the old course and using the same content in a new semester. Thus, data existed on the 3,528 students that had taken the courses between 2005 and 2009 when e-learning was functional. The data consisted of student assignments, quizzes, and other forms of e-assessment, exchange of mails between lecturer and students, as well as student discussions on the platform. Data was also drawn from the information given by students in the mandatory Students' Evaluation of Teaching and Courses (SECAT) between 2006 and 2010. In reviewing information from SECAT, primary attention was paid to data relating to students activities on the e-learning platform, especially as it has to do with its limitations as well as function as an assessment tool. Since

such data was not structured in any particular way, no attempt was made to give it a quantitative analysis; rather, interpretation of the data focused on identifying specific trends in the interaction of the students with the platform and discussing such trends in relation to the research questions.

HUMANITIES COURSE MANAGEMENT AND E-LEARNING

The humanities disciplines at the University of Botswana have shown sufficient enthusiasm in adopting e-learning. Of the 1,655 courses that were created on the university's e-learning platform between 2002 and 2009, 245 were from the Faculty of Humanities, 243 from the Faculty of Social Sciences, 153 from the Faculty of Business, 268 from the Faculty of Education, 36 from the Faculty of Health Sciences, 148 from the Faculty of Engineering and Technology, and 273 from the Faculty of Science.

As shown in Figure 2, the humanities faculty lagged behind only the faculties of business and science in the number of courses created on the e-learning platform, even though Department of French did not create a single course on the platform over the period and more than a third of the courses listed as General Education Courses are offered in the Faculty of Humanities.

The above data may give the erroneous impression that 1,655 courses are active on the platform. This, however, is not the case as some of the courses have been created more than once while others have been abandoned after being tried for a period. The data merely illustrates the relative interest of various faculties in the technology. The actual data for active courses are presented in Figure 3.

Figures 3 and 4 show that in 2009 there were 671 active courses on the e-learning platform, made up of 289 new courses and 332 reset courses. Given that 1,655 have been created on the platform, it follows that 1280 courses (77.32 percent) either have been abandoned or left inactive on the platform, with the number of active courses representing only 40.54 percent of the total number of courses created. Based on the above, one could argue that the initial enthusiasm for e-delivery does not always guarantee sustained usage of the technology over time. In the first semester of the 2003/2004 school year, only two courses were reset while 21 were new courses. This shows that five of the courses offered in the corresponding semester of the 2002/2003 school year were either abandoned or left inactive on the platform. Again in the first semester of the 2009/2010 school year, only 226 courses were reset while 149 were new courses. Eighty-eight courses either were abandoned or left inactive on the platform. In making this observation, however, allowance should be made for the fact that designers almost always create new courses when they take over courses that was taught by someone else. Also, designers sometimes want to retain the data from their old courses and consequently create new courses rather than reset the old courses.

Academic Unit	No of Depts.	Courses on Platform	Percentage	Average per Dept.
Business	3	153	9.24%	51
Centre for Cont. Education	3	95	5.74%	32
CSSU(CAD)	1	83	5.01%	83
General Education	–	106	6.40%	–
Education	8	268	16.19%	34
Engineering & Technology	6	148	8.94%	25
Health Sciences	4	36	2.17%	9
Humanities	7	245	14.83%	35
Science	7	273	16.49%	39
Social Science	9	243	14.68%	27

Figure 2. Courses created on e-learning platforms by academic units.
Source: Centre for Academic Development, University of Botswana.

	Sem 1/02	Sem 2/03	Sem 1/03	Sem 2/04	Sem 1/04	Sem 2/05	Sem 1/05	Sem 2/06	Sem 1/06	Sem 2/07	Sem 1/07	Sem 2/08	Sem 1/08	Sem 2/09	Sem 1/09
Active Courses	7	21	23	21	42	64	121	147	179	190	258	182	314	296	375
New Courses	7	21	21	13	22	53	96	106	93	79	138	34	165	140	149
Reset Courses	0	0	2	8	20	11	25	41	86	111	120	95	149	156	226

Figure 3. Growth of active online courses from 2002 to 2009.
Source: Centre for Academic Development, University of Botswana.

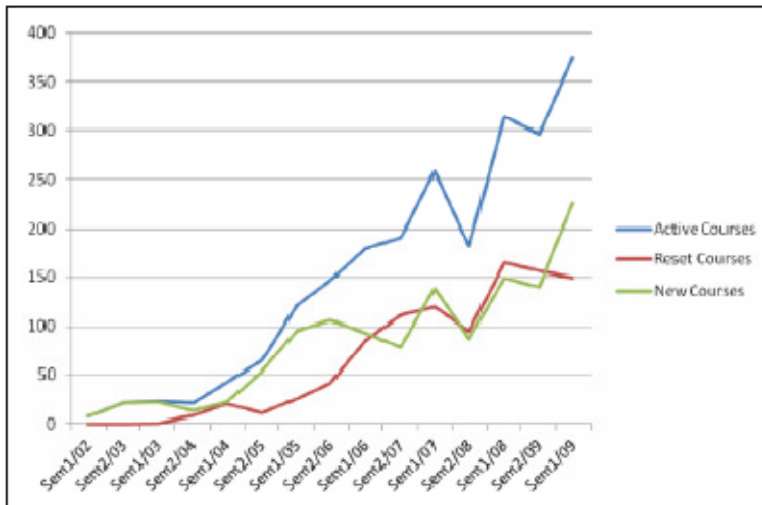


Figure 4. Total number of active and new courses from 2002 to 2009.
Source: Centre for Academic Development, University of Botswana.

Faculty	Sem 1/02	Sem 2/03	Sem 1/03	Sem 2/04	Sem 1/04	Sem 2/05	Sem 1/05	Sem 2/06	Sem 1/06	Sem 2/07	Sem 1/07	Sem 2/08	Sem 1/08	Sem 2/09	Sem 1/09
Business	0	4	7	6	8	7	9	11	17	17	24	18	32	48	40
Education	2	3	5	5	9	13	19	22	19	27	31	24	34	61	71
FET	0	1	2	1	3	3	5	9	5	1	21	10	21	28	39
Humanities	2	3	1	1	3	9	11	15	13	12	15	14	18	40	53
Science	2	2	2	2	8	12	20	14	17	17	28	20	59	50	79
FSS	0	1	1	3	1	3	9	12	15	15	24	13	31	43	56
CAD	1	2	2	1	3	1	2	1	1	0	1	0	9	10	19

Figure 5. Different designers per faculty from 2002 to 2009.

Source: Centre for Academic Development, University of Botswana.

This however does not completely explain the large gap between the number of courses created on the platform and the number of active courses. It is safe to assume, therefore, that many designers abandon the technology after trying it and thereby leave a lot of dormant courses on the platform.

The picture becomes a little clearer when we compare the growth in the number of active designers between faculties over the years and juxtaposed this with the number of active courses.

The Faculty of Humanities started out with a small number of active designers in the first and second semesters of the 2002/2003 school year. In the first and second semesters of the 2003/2004 school year, the number had dropped to a single designer per semester, whereas the numbers for the faculties of business, education, engineering and technology, science, social science and Centre for Academic Development (CAD) either remained the same or increased. Also, by 2008/2009 the business faculty, which began with four active designers in 2001/2002, had increased its number of active designers dramatically, whereas the Faculty of Humanities which started with five active designers posted fewer active designers over the same period. Thus, apart from CAD, which is not a teaching unit, the humanities faculty recorded the lowest growth in the number

Academic Unit	No. of Departments	No of Courses	Active Designers	Average per Dept.	Ratio – courses/designer
Business	3	191	40	13	4.77
CAD	2	–	19	10	–
Education	8	385	71	9	5.42
Engineering & Technology	6	341	39	7	8.74
Humanities	7	464	53	8	8.75
Science	7	376	79	11	4.75
Social Science	9	367	56	6	6.55

Figure 6. Ratio of courses to active designers.
Source: Centre for Academic Development, University of Botswana.

of active designers. The slow pace of growth in the number of active designers in the faculty of Humanities suggests that more designers from the humanities faculty abandon their courses after experimenting with the technology than those from other faculties.

The ratio of courses to active designers in Figure 6 reveals that despite creating more courses on average, the Faculty of Humanities has the least ratio of courses per active designer than any other faculty of the university. This seems to support the contention that the enthusiasm shown by designers in the Humanities declines faster than those of other faculties. For instance, the departments of African language and literature, history, and French have maintained less than four courses per semester on the platform. But even where courses have been reset and maintained over time, many of the features of the e-learning platform

remain unused; instead, the platform serves as mere depositories of course outlines and other lecture materials.¹¹ The benefits of e-learning for lecturers variously identified by Eyitayo and Uziak – assessment management, extension of teaching and learning beyond the physical classroom and handling of large classes – do not appear to have been appreciated by designers in the humanities.

HUMANITIES COURSES AND E-LEARNING/E-ASSESSMENT

The courses that form the basis of this study are GEC 232: *Critical Thinking: A Life Tool* and GEC 233: *Introduction to Logic*. They were designed as enrichment courses for the theology and religious studies programme but later were adopted as part of the general education curriculum to develop the critical thinking skills of students. Both are second level undergraduate courses but are sometimes registered for by students in the third and fourth years. *Introduction to Logic* is more traditional and teaches the formal rules of reasoning and the intricacies of deductive arguments, while *Critical Thinking* focuses on inductive arguments but aims to achieve the same goal in a less formal way by engaging the problem of reasoning in everyday settings. The two courses are usually offered in the first semester but GEC 232 was repeated in the second semesters of 2005 and 2008 because of increased demand. The need to adopt e-learning first became apparent in 2003 when uncontrolled registration resulted in a class of 687 students for GEC 232, 522 for GEC 233. But even with the registration controls, demand for the courses remained very high with the number of registered students per semester per course fluctuating between 150 and 400.

The courses are delivered using the blended learning approaches consisting of face-to-face class interactions and online learning. Initially the face-to-face delivery consisted of the traditional lecture method, but this later evolved into the use of PowerPoint presentations. Online delivery started with the posting of course outline on the e-learning platform and later progressed to include the posting of relevant lecture materials, PowerPoint presentations, audio based e-lectures (the platform had no capacity to accommodate video) and links to external resources. The two courses were not resourced equally, however. The number and quality of content was higher in GEC 232 and consisted of the course outline, PowerPoint presentations, complete audio-based e-lectures on each topic on the course outline, self-tests, a sample of the assignment and links to external resources. GEC 233, on the other hand, had no PowerPoint presentations and only two topics that used audio lectures, but it had a lot of reading materials on each of the topics, course outlines, self-tests, and links to external resources. The disparity in content was not intentional but was due to the availability of support services like studio time and equipment for recording the e-lectures.

An important aspect of the online mode of delivery in the two courses is e-assessment. Although e-assessment 'historically focuses on questions with well-defined answers, and therefore primarily within mathematical and scientific disciplines',¹² the need to keep track of the large number of students registering for the courses and to examine their work on time was an important consideration. In 2006, for instance, two students who registered for GEC 232 claimed that their grades had not been processed and published alongside those of other students. Upon tracking them, it was clear that they had never recorded a single hit on the platform where assessment was done. Prior to the adoption of e-learning in the course, it would have taken days to establish that the students never did any assessment, but with e-assessment it took only a few minutes. In GEC 233 e-assessment accounts for all course assessments, while in GEC 232 it accounts for only half of them because the nature of answers to questions in GEC 233 is more structured and therefore better suited to the e-learning platform than those in GEC 232. E-assessment usually consists of a mix of multiple choice questions, short answers and long answers. The assessments are usually done at the weekends when computer labs are readily available and Internet traffic is greatly reduced.

Initially, students of the two courses kept their interaction with the platform at the barest minimum. Students in the class of 2005 actually insisted on getting hard copies of the course outline even when the course outline was available online. By 2009, however, 22 percent of students had registered hits on the course outline before the commencement of lectures. Also, in 2005 students' interaction with the platform was limited to e-assessments, and many had to be shown how to log on during assessment despite having taken an introductory course in computing. In 2006, for instance, more than 35 percent of the students had never logged-on to the e-learning platform prior to the first e-assessment, whereas by 2009 all students had recorded at least five hits on the platform prior to the first e-assessment. Although this may be cited as an indication of a greater acceptance of e-learning, allowance should be made for the fact that the content material in 2009 was higher than what was available in 2005 and the class of 2009 had more access to similar technology than their 2006 counterparts.

E-LEARNING AND CLASSROOM INTERACTION

A feature of most e-learning platforms is the online discussion forum. Students are encouraged to hold discussions on the forum not only to interact with each other but also to enable the course lecturer gauge their understanding of the course. The deliberate emphasis on online discussions was in an attempt to break what Akindele and Trennepohl¹³ refer to as the 'culture of silence' in the classroom. According to them, 'it seems that their culture, which is enshrined in the principles of *Botho* has a strong influence in the lives of the society as well

as the way students are educated particularly in the primary and secondary levels of education. [*Botho* is the humanist principle that emphasises consideration for others, based on the understanding that each person exists and thrives because others contribute to his existence and survival.] *Botho* seems to underscore the manner in which school children at the lower levels of education are trained and brought up, and this affects their participation in class activities. They become passive and non-responsive when they do not understand what is being taught and are afraid to ask questions.' The authors also argue, that 'Botswana culture encourages children/students to keep quiet and never query any point of view or opinion. This consequently leads to a culture of silence, inactivity and lack of participation in social activities, and indeed in the classroom.'¹⁴ Although the authors do not say how this principle contributes to passivity in the classroom and it is not evident that youth participation in other social activities has in any way been affected by the traditional culture, the participation of students in class discussions has always been an issue of concern in both GEC 232 and 233, and it was believed that the relative anonymity of the platform will help to break this culture of silence and engender a culture of robust argumentation.

The efforts to encourage online discussions notwithstanding, data on the platform suggest that online discussions are not very popular and are usually driven by a small core of participants. In 2006, for instance, there were only two threads of discussion in GEC 233, with 18 postings contributed by 6 students, despite a class size of 330 students. In 2009 the threads increase to eight with 43 postings contributed to by 18 out of a class of 205. This appears to corroborate the results of Eyitayo's¹⁵ study in the same university which showed that 24 percent of students did not read anything on the discussion forum and of the 55.3 percent that regularly visited the discussion forum, 21.3 percent did not post anything. This shows that discussions on the forum were driven by 30 percent of the students registered for the course. This position, however, is in sharp contrast to the findings of Mary Dengler that 'online forums provide a more comfortable space for non-native English speakers to contribute to debates.'¹⁶

Although there were online discussions in the two courses, there was a remarkable difference in the nature and content of the discussions in each course. In all the years, more online discussions took place on GEC 233 than on GEC 232. Also the scope of the discussions was different. The online discussions on GEC 233 had a richer academic content with students asking each other for assistance on concepts that were not clear, showing-off their understanding of difficult concepts, quizzing each other on successive new topics, questioning the fairness of the assessment method, seeking information on the scheduling of events, and wishing each other success in the examinations. On the other hand, online discussions on GEC 232 were totally lacking in academic content and centred mainly on general greetings, scheduling, complaints about the delay in getting feedback on assessments, and even the occasional protest on the services

at the cafeteria and the bookstore. A likely reason is the structured nature of GEC 233 and its emphasis on understanding the rules of reasoning and applying them appropriately. In their discussions, students try to benchmark their ideas on those of their colleagues, confirming the views of Rohleder, et al.,¹⁷ that students are positive about e-learning because they benefit from the collaborative and reflective interaction with other students. Another reason for the difference in the nature of the discussions in the two courses could be because the online content of GEC 232 is richer than the online content of GEC 233. GEC 232, for instance, had audio-based lectures online, whereas the same was not the case for GEC 233. Thus, when students were unsure of content in GEC 232 they referred to the audio e-lecture; in GEC 233, where such facilities were not available, they had to depend on each other.

The culture of silence appears to be the only reasonable explanation for students deliberately avoiding discussions with the lecturer. Upon promptings from the e-learning technical and support team, the lecturer started a discussion thread with each new class between 2006 and 2009. Students, however, never joined the lecturer's discussion but readily contributed to discussion threads started by other students. And whenever the lecturer joined a discussion, the particular thread usually ended or remained dormant for a long period. This suggests that students assume any posting by the lecturer as a pronouncement on the discussion (despite attempts by the lecturer to encourage views to the contrary) and therefore an end to the discussion. Comments on any discussion by the lecturer, either in class or online, appears to increase interest in the discussions with the discussion forum registering more hits on the day(s) immediately following the comment. This situation in which a relatively small number of students participate in discussion but a larger number follow the discussions confirms the finding of Eytayo¹⁸ that a lot of students are silent readers.

A worrying trend in the online behaviour of students is the tendency to use abbreviations and short message formats on the e-learning discussion forum. This may be due to the fact that the forum is identical to other social networking media that students use and the switch to the language of that media is unconscious. This circumstance notwithstanding, there is need to be concerned about the cumulative effect that this behaviour could have on the ability of students to express themselves in formal situations. Another source of worry is the tendency of some students to lapse into different languages on the forum that are not intelligible to others (including the lecturer). This behaviour supports the view of Özdemir that 'supplying different types of communication tools in e-learning does not guarantee students' interaction with each other and with teachers if they do not feel any need to do so.'¹⁹ It seems reasonable to conclude that the general nature of the web environment conditions students to exhibit behaviours that do not readily support academic rigor and that, students

may need professional assistance in order to be able to switch from social networking thinking to e-learning thinking. This tends to corroborate the views of McPherson & Nunes that 'learners often feel compelled to engage with this new environment without being properly equipped with the basic skills required to be successful.'²⁰

STUDENTS AND E-LEARNING EVALUATION

Although the Student Evaluation of Courses and Teaching (SECAT) is not primarily for the assessment of e-learning, it has become a forum for student to vent whatever frustrations they may have even when such frustrations have nothing to do with teaching and courses. It is not uncommon to have students comment on the prices of books at the bookstore, quality of meals at the cafeteria, and other services while assessing teaching and courses. It is therefore to be expected that when students are dissatisfied with the mode of course delivery or its infrastructure, their views will be reflected on their assessment of teaching and courses. A cursory look at the evaluation report for GEC 232 and GEC 233 confirms this view: students routinely vent their frustrations concerning access to computer hardware, internet speed, noise in computer labs, and other issues that affect their interaction with the platform. Although every such comment is important in evaluating e-learning, the current exercise will be limited to those comments that directly refer to the two courses that form the basis of this review. It should be noted that the SECAT instrument consists of both open-ended and close-ended questions and that responses that are specific to e-learning did not originate from the structured questions but were generated by the students as responses to open-ended questions.

In 2006, for example, 81 students elected to evaluate GEC 232 and of this number over forty percent (35 students) made comments that were specific to e-learning. Of this number, twelve requested that lecture notes be posted on the platform, two wanted sample assignments to be put on the platform, eight wanted group discussions outside the platform, and another twelve were dissatisfied with e-assessment and wanted the course to be assessed offline. One student went against the usual pattern of complaints to recommend making e-learning a component of every course delivery. In their overall assessment of the course, the assessment system was given the lowest score (3.1 out of 5) out of the eleven items. This however may not necessarily be an indictment of e-assessment as the departmental average for course assessment stood at 3.3. By 2009, only eight out of 54 students who elected to assess the course posted comments that were specific to e-learning. Of this number, four wanted group discussions outside the platform, three disapproved of e-assessment, and one commended the use of the platform to disseminate information about the course.

The score for the assessment variable of 3.7 (out of 5) was higher than such other variables as provision of handouts.

In 2006, 123 students elected to assess GEC 233 and of this number 42 made comments that were specific to e-learning. Twelve were not comfortable with online discussions and wanted group discussions to be organized outside the platform. One student wanted self-tests to be posted online to help prepare for examination, one wanted invigilators to be vigilant and watch out for cheats during e-assessment, five disapproved of the random selection of questions from item banks and wanted the questions to be identical for all students, and 23 disapproved of e-assessment. In 2009, 82 students elected to assess the course, and of this number 22 made comments specific to e-learning. Eleven wanted to have group discussions outside the platform, one complained about the absence of exercises (even when the exercises were online), one wanted to be able to review answered questions during e-assessment, and ten wanted e-assessment to be replaced by paper assessment.

Data from the two courses indicate a steady decline in the percentage of students that elect to make comments about e-learning. One possible reason for this is that whereas e-learning was new to the class of 2005, it was not so novel to the class of 2009 and therefore found more ready acceptance by that class. However, allowance should be made for the fact that, since the mode of delivery was new, the students of 2005 felt that they could influence the adoption or otherwise of the mode, whereas by 2009 the mode of delivery was regarded as a normal mode of delivery which they had no power to change. Allowance should also be made for the fact that there was much more to complain about in 2005 than in 2009 as information and facilities on the platform for the class of 2005 was rudimentary when compared to the facilities available to the class of 2009. The demand by the class of 2005 for lecture notes and a sample of the assignments seems to support this view rather than the view that their readiness to comment on e-learning resulted from a lack of acceptance.

The data also revealed that e-assessment has been consistently unpopular over the years, with a higher percentage of GEC 233 students disapproving of e-assessment. This is probably because it accounted for all assessments in GEC 233, whereas it accounted for only half of the assessments in GEC 232. The difference suggests that disapproval of e-assessment is less where a blended method of assessment is adopted as opposed to where e-assessment accounts for all the course assessment. The disapproval by the GEC 233 class of 2005 of the random selection of questions in e-assessments appears to corroborate the findings of John Dermo that 'the one specific concern that did emerge was about e-assessment that selects random questions from item banks: clearly there is a perception among students that these are unfair.'²¹ Their corresponding concern about cheating tends to portray e-assessment as a viable tool for assessment; that is, if we take for granted that the tendency to cheat was due to the effectiveness

of the instrument as an assessment tool. If on the other hand, we assume that the students cheated because of the failure of the instrument to sufficiently guarantee the integrity of the examination, then the complaints concerning cheating could be regarded as an indictment of e-assessment. However, the fact that item ranking for course assessment by the GEC 232 class of 2006 in their overall assessment of the course improved to 8 where the class of 2005 gave it the lowest ranking (11) appears to suggest that problem had less to do with capacity of the instrument to guarantee the integrity of the examination and more to do with its effectiveness as an assessment tool.

The data shows a consistent demand by the students for discussion forums outside the platform. This is in sharp contrast to the perception of Akindele and Trennepohl that students tend to shy away from such discussion. There will be need for another study to investigate the extent to which smaller offline group discussions could redress this culture of silence and engender a more vibrant participation by student in discussions. All indications from the current study tends to suggest that the relative anonymity of the e-learning platform did not encourage participation in online discussions and, as such, the culture of silence continues to be as prevalent online as in the classrooms.

E-LEARNING AND ARGUMENTATIVE RIGOR

The advent of e-learning was followed by a steady decline in the quality of assignments submitted by students in GEC 232. In 2005, for instance, there was greater variety in student assignments, and students displayed greater argumentative skills and rigor. Also, the language of the assignments was more formal and generally greater care was taken to avoid spelling and grammatical errors. By 2009, however, the quality of assignments had dropped significantly. A worrying trend in many of the assignments was the increased currency of non-formal language such as the abbreviations common on the short message services (SMS) of cellular networks as well as other colloquial and coded language. It is not clear how much of this could be blamed on the discussion forum on the e-learning platform and how much of it is as a result of extracurricular online activities by students. But there is a temporal correlation between the advent of non-formal language in academic discourse and the increased popularity ICT technology and by extension, online learning.

The advent of e-learning also preceded a decline in the quality of research done by students. In 2005, students were more likely to enrich the quality of their work and overall learning experience by consulting materials outside the recommended text, but by 2009 students were more likely to restrict themselves to materials provided online. If these appeared inadequate, online material such as is searchable on Google were used as additional material. 2009 also saw the increased currency of Wikipedia as a reference tool, whereas such websites

and other internet sites were not common in the 2005 assignment papers. Even where links to external resources are provided, few students took the time to visit these referred external sites for information. The data on the use of the e-learning platform for the two courses show that reading materials provided by the lecturer registered ten times as many hits as all the links to external resources combined. It appears that the concentration of so much study materials in one place tends to lull the students' interest in external sources of information and convey the impression that e-learning is a complete learning package and that students need not stray from it. It is not clear how much of this is specifically due to the influence of e-learning and how much is due to the rise of positivism and anti-intellectualism. It is worth noting again, however, the temporal correlation between the decline in the quality of research and the advent of e-learning.

The absence of argumentative rigor is not limited to assignments but is even more evident in e-assessments. The social culture of the web appears to dictate that whatever needs to be said should be said in the most frugal way and this appears to affect online answers to questions. Even where questions demand sustained argument and reference to relevant examples, students were more likely to be economical with their answers and even then to use abbreviations and shorthand. This tendency was found to be more likely where a box is provided for answers, which gives the erroneous impression that the space for answers is limited and that effort should be made to confine answers to the visible area of the box. This tendency to use coded words and abbreviations was not evident in questions that required short and specific answers, however. Here, students were meticulous in ensuring that their answers were strict and spellings correct. The disparity in the approach of students to the two types of questions suggests that the online environment discourages the rhetorical embellishments that are the hallmark of argumentative discourse in the humanities.

E-LEARNING AND THE HUMANITIES

Although e-learning has proved to be useful in assessment management and in the tracking of students in large classes, it comes with some challenges which need to be confronted creatively. As Harden (2008) observes, 'the question is not whether e-learning works or not (it does!) but how it can be used most productively.'²² Concerning the humanities, a few answers from experience appear obvious. First, it is clear that the relative anonymity provided by the e-learning platform does not help to improve academic interaction between students. Between 2005 and 2009, there were no increase or improvement in either online or classroom discussions. In breaking this culture of silence on the e-learning platform, it may be necessary to make online discussions mandatory and use the quality of contributions as part of e-assessment. The expectation here is that a vigorous online discussion culture will eventually spill over into

the classroom. It is also clear that the online culture did not evolve as a critical thinking culture. This is evident in the general decline in argumentative rigour and the tendency to accept online views as given rather than make an effort to unearth more information on the issue. In view of this tendency, there is need to balance the desire to make online academic resources available to students with the need to empower students towards independent and quality research. It may also be necessary to allocate rewards and penalties for the use of online resources – rewards for using materials from the links provided and penalties for using such unreliable sources as Wikipedia. It may also be necessary to allocate specific assessment points to library research and variety in academic sources used in research and assignments. Again, a practice that has proved to be useful in ameliorating the boxed-in mentality and the resulting tendency to resort to coded words and abbreviations is to encourage students to answer questions on a document template and submit same through the assignment submission portal. These do not by themselves answer all the questions that arise from the intersection of e-learning and the humanities but should be seen as a contribution to an on-going dialogue.

END NOTES

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