



Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) project:

Practical and pedagogical issues around the use of Moodle by academics in higher education

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What where the broader and specific issues?

Institutions of higher education (HE) constantly have to evaluate their teaching and learning policies and practices to accommodate new pedagogies and educational technologies. Driven by the adoption of digital information and communication models and their enabling technologies by a new generation of students with different learning styles, expectations and information literacy needs. For example the pedagogy Connectivism (Siemens, 2004a in Evans, 2013) acknowledges that language, together with media and technology, act as conduits of information, that can promote greater student participation, collaboration and interaction between networked learners. Within the proposed HE ecology, well-rounded learning outcomes should be offered through blended multithreaded learning networks of face-to-face, e-learning, research, experiential learning, mentoring, self-learning, informal learning and community outreach. It has also been noted that other than the traditional language literacies of reading, writing and finding information, learners also need to acquire important new literacies, including computer literacy, network literacy, media literacy, visual literacy and cultural literacy (Lapuz, 2014) to be truly considered 21st century graduates. Academics need to expand their perception of creating learning environments from not just structuring content but also to encouraging students to engage with the content to enhance critical and creative thinking (Hornsby, Osman, & De Matos-Ala, 2013). I identified blended learning as a trend in HE that could advance some of these traits and literacies, together with Moodle's platform of activities and resources, which could create more engaging learning environments. It has been acknowledged that teachers in HE need to become knowledgeable of content, together with pedagogy and technology to facilitate good blended learning (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). Advancing the need for this trilogy of knowledge and initiating change amongst academics at the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) and within HE provided the rationale for my TAU project.

What did I do?

I worked closely with the Teaching and learning centre and applied for University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) funds to offer Moodle training workshops for staff development. The application and its three-year R660 000 budget was approved by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Attendance was voluntary and workshop adverts were broadcast to all staff emails through the communications and marketing department, as well as by word of mouth. In total 14 Moodle training workshops were held at UNIZULU, while collaborating with Dr Upasana Singh in another 2 workshops at the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) between 9th February 2018 and 15th February 2019. In total 174 staff members across the two institutions attended these workshops ([see appendix 3](#)). The scope of the training sessions consisted of an introduction to TAU, the broader and specific issues mentioned above and a conceptual introduction to blended learning. While the main objectives of the workshops were determined by the participants and achieved through hands on training on how to use the various Moodle activities, resources and third party plugins that academics identified to promote blended learning and content engagement in their lectures. After each training workshop evaluation forms were analysed, and constructive feedback was noted in order to try improve future training sessions.

What did I find?

From the voluntary participation in training it can be seen that there is wide-spread interest in using Moodle at UNIZULU even with minimal institutional support and limited infrastructure. Tragically the research data from an online questionnaire that was distributed to academics signed up for training was lost when the website (www.stellarsurvey.com) became unavailable in 2019 leaving my TAU project with only the pilot study and workshop evaluation data. During the period of training the teaching and learning centre introduced a new evaluation form so a total of 48 responses were captured on the old forms (reported here) and 16 on the new forms. Table 1 summarises a portion of the quantitative feedback from participants regarding the training.

Table 1: Quantitative feedback on Moodle training sessions held at UNIZULU (n=48).

RATINGS : 5=Strongly Agree 4=Agree 3=Neutral 2=Disagree 1=Strongly Disagree	DATA ANALYSIS					(n=48)
	RATINGS (%)					
	1	2	3	4	5	
1. The objectives of the training were clearly defined.	2	0	0	19	79	48
2. Participation and interaction was encouraged.	2	0	0	21	77	48
3. The topics covered were relevant to me.	2	0	0	31	67	48
4. The content was organized and easily to follow.	2	0	6	35	56	48
5. The materials distributed were helpful.	5	0	5	41	49	41
6. This training experience will be useful in my work.	2	0	0	21	90	42
7. The trainer was knowledgeable about the training topics.	2	0	0	11	87	46
8. The trainer was well prepared.	2	0	0	13	85	46
9. The training objectives were met.	2	0	0	26	72	47
10. The time allocated for the training was sufficient.	2	9	19	28	43	47
11. The meeting room and facility were adequate and comfortable.	2	0	0	35	63	48

When asked what the participants liked most about the training, qualitative responses included an appreciation for the hands on (Resp6, 12 and 16) practical (Resp8, 14, 20

and 37) nature of the workshops that covered theories about teaching pedagogies (Resp14, 24 and 34) and a good coverage of Moodle topics (Resp11, 12 and 27) including but not limited to quizzes (Resp35, 36, 47 and 48), assignments (Resp11 and 35), forums (Resp19) and using the Turnitin plugin (Resp19 and 47). When asked what aspects of the training could be improved many suggested that more time could have been allocated (Resp1, 5, 7, 12, 17, 23 and 39), while others would have preferred the workshops to be held in computer labs (Resp43 and 45) with network points (Resp24) as WIFI connections on staff laptops were often slow and unreliable (Resp8 and 43). Others (Resp4 and 21) would have liked handouts/ worksheets to reinforce the training conducted. When participants were asked how they hoped to change their teaching practice as a result of this training, the responses included using Moodle to make teaching and learning more interactive and engaging (Resp10, 11, 13, 20, 28 and 30), help in teaching and managing large classes (Resp9 and 11) and to assist them in providing students with valuable feedback (Resp11, 14, 47). Resp12 stated “I feel excited that I will be able to use Moodle more actively and will empower students on its use”.

From the analysis of the responses after each session I kept most of the training the same. However I noted the time constraints, which have been increased this year (2019) and the request for more supplementary materials, where I now link the content covered in training to Moodle docs (<https://docs.moodle.org>) materials, making it easier for participants to follow and obtain more information if necessary.

So what?

At our Faculty of Arts 2018 teaching awards I received two certificates in recognition of the outstanding contribution both in the Faculty of Arts and University ([see appendix 1](#)). The director of teaching and learning also provided me with a reference letter to confirm my contributions and support my application for promotion to associate professor ([see appendix 2](#)). I also received positive feedback and acknowledgement from participants of the training ([see appendix 3](#)).

What's new?

The project has collected and shared information around using the Moodle learning management system (LMS) in order to facilitate collective decisions and actions to enhance the quality of blended learning at UNIZULU. Being a change agent has included the training mentioned above as well as advocating with both the 2018 and 2019 DVC's and deputy deans teaching and learning, Faculty of Arts teaching and learning committee, e-learning committee, the teaching and learning centre, and ICT department for the institutional support of Moodle. In terms of policy development, I have advised the DVC teaching and learning that an e-learning policy should not be a standalone policy but rather integrated into the teaching and learning policy and that it becomes mandatory for staff to use the LMS at the institution, for teaching and learning, tutoring programmes and student evaluations. I have also contributed to revising the e-learning strategy of the institution, through the e-learning committee, by highlighting the need to prioritise student access to e-learning platforms, together with staff and student support and infrastructure developments before the proposed policy can be realistically enacted. The number of academics using Moodle at UNIZULU has increased since the project started, and they can now act as additional change agents (Rogers, 2010) to encourage further uptake and serve as advocates for greater

institutional support. Since 2009 this has included an e-learning specialist appointed in the Teaching and Learning Centre in 2018 and a yet to be advertised position in the ICT department, who will take over the back-end administration duties from myself and three other academics who currently volunteer their services to administrate each faculty instance. The project stopped briefly after the workshop in August as it was decided that future training should take place after the imminent upgrade and consolidation of the Moodle instances, which was commissioned by Teaching and Learning Centre. Unfortunately, the server hosting the new instance went down during load shedding and never came back up. Training has now continued in 2019, with the hope that these issues can be resolved shortly.

References

- Evans, N. D. (2013). *Predicting user acceptance of electronic learning at the University of Zululand*. (PhD), University of Zululand, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa.
- Hornsby, D. J., Osman, R., & De Matos-Ala, J. (2013). *Large-class Pedagogy: Interdisciplinary Perspectives for Quality Higher Education*: AFRICAN SUN MeDIA.
- Koehler, M., & Mishra, P. (2009). What is technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK)? *Contemporary issues in technology and teacher education*, 9(1), 60-70.
- Lapuz, E. B. (2014). Information literacy through the eyes of teachers and librarians. Retrieved from https://www.slideshare.net/fahrianas/informationliteracyintheeyesofteachersandlibrarians-100214185558phpapp01?qid=cd59e1e2-d0e1-4d23-b9fe-841091e25f33&v=&b=&from_search=2
- Rogers, E. M. (2010). *Diffusion of innovations*: Simon and Schuster.

APPENDIX 1

- 2018 — Certificate awarded to Dr N.D. Evans in recognition of the outstanding contribution in the Faculty of Arts and University
- 2018 — Certificate awarded to Dr N.D. Evans in recognition of the outstanding contribution in the Faculty of Arts



Prof Dennis Ocholla, vice dean research and internationalisation, Dr Neil Evans and Prof Antonia Thandi Nzama, vice dean teaching and learning, Faculty of Arts teaching and learning awards 2018

APPENDIX 2



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LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION FOR DR NEIL EVANS

I write this letter in support of the application for promotion to position of Associate Professor by Dr Evans. Currently, he serves as a member of the e-Learning Committee at the University of Zululand where I am employed as Director Teaching and Learning.

Dr Evans is highly motivated and always determined to succeed in whatever he does. He has demonstrated his indebtedness to student-centered teaching and learning. In his capacity as Head of Department, he has produced guidelines that he uses as blue print towards its quest to harness student-centered teaching and learning.

He has championed the enhancement and promotion of quality in the Department, supporting the development of its existing teaching and learning proficiency and quality, with a strong focus on the First Year Experience and general student support, and the pedagogical development of its staff.

His core duties include providing administrative and academic leadership in the Department of Information Studies, as well as induction and research programmes with various university communities. These activities are core to the university academic business of promoting teaching and learning.

From the inception of the Teaching and Learning Centre, we have seen a phenomenal growth and development in the uptake of e-learning. This is crucial if we want our students to fit into the world with relevant graduate attributes and professional skills and competencies.

Dr. Evans assists in the undertaking of Moodle training for academic staff members at the University. He also undertakes presentations at e-learning workshops conducted by the Teaching and Learning Centre. He is also a member of the University's e-Learning Committee that assists in driving of the University's e-learning strategy. Dr. Evans also plays an important role in the sourcing and approval of suppliers pertaining to e-learning.

Dr Evans has represented his department at various levels, and his passion for teaching and learning is well-known in the Faculty of Arts and the institution of the University of Zululand. His involvement in, and contribution to higher education, as mentioned in his CV, is greatly valued.

Based on the training and professional output of Dr Evans, I strongly support his application for Associate Professorship. This is particularly pertinent given the current strong emphasis of our government on involvement of Institutions of Higher Learning in engaging with communities through Community Engagement activities, research, and teaching and

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learning. His expertise and experience is needed now more than ever before to drive programmes seeking to increase the throughput rates of research and teaching and learning. His position within the Faculty of Arts, as well as UNIZULU, is that of an academic and researcher. His promotion to the position of Associate Professor would deeply reward and motivate him to dedicate his energy to teaching while filling the gap where the institution is experiencing challenges: getting experienced and dedicated staff that could enhance e-learning at institutions of higher learning.

On the basis of the above, I, without any reservations, strongly recommend that Dr Evans be favourably considered for the position he has applied for.

For further clarification, do not hesitate to contact the undersigned.

Kind regards,



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APPENDIX 3

Table 1: Moodle training workshops conducted for TAU project

Workshops date	Institution	Number of delegates
9 th February 2018	UNIZULU	9
16 th February 2018	UNIZULU	11
9 th March 2018	UNIZULU	11
6 th April 2018	UNIZULU	11
13 th April 2018	UNIZULU	7
20 th April 2018	UNIZULU	11
25 th May 2018	UNIZULU	14
23 rd July 2018	UNIZULU	7
24 th July 2018	UNIZULU	17
27 th July 2018	UNIZULU	7
3 rd August 2018	UNIZULU	8
28 th September 2018	UKZN- PMB campus	11
28 th September 2018	UKZN- Westville campus	27
1 st February 2019	UNIZULU	10
7 th February 2019	UNIZULU	5
15 th February 2019	UNIZULU	8
16 workshops across	two institutions involving	174 participants

From: Xolani Henry Makhoba

Sent: Friday, 06 April 2018 3:55 PM

Dear Dr Evans

Thank you very much for a wonderful training on e-Learning, you have opened my eyes even on how I should approach my classes in terms of teaching and learning. Do you have any document or book that you could recommend that I can read on teaching and learning, assessments strategies focusing on HE? I would really appreciate your kind help. Thank you

Best regards

Dr XH Makhoba

From: Xolani Henry Makhoba

Sent: Monday, 09 April 2018 7:14 PM

Dear Dr Evans

Wow I don't think I have thanked you enough, after going through the papers you gave me, you have given me the weapons and great tools to sharpen my teaching skills, its exactly what I have been looking for. Thank you very much once again.

Warm regards

Dr XH Makhoba

From: Paul Stewart <paulfinlaystewartkzn@gmail.com>

Sent: Wednesday, 30 January 2019 4:47 PM

To: Neil Davies Evans

Dear Neil,

Thank you for your sterling help today!

I managed to get my Learner Guide, welcoming messages and all readings for one of my courses up.

This means first year students have direct access to the whole of my (concise) textbook.

It is a personally significant breakthrough for me to have left behind the dreaded and expensive 'Reading Pack'.

Necessitated by cost-savings as per our Departmental meeting last year in these times of global financial austerity, this means the course is technically now 'paperless' although the Learner Guide will still be printed in hard copy.

This makes us thoroughly up to date, something I have never managed to do before. Our students are the new 'digital generation' after all!

I will be at your next e-learning training session and copy in colleagues some of whom I gather are thinking or acting along similar lines.

Who said you can't teach an old dog new tricks? This is thanks to you.

Appreciated!

Paul

From: Adelaine Candice Austin

Sent: 01 February 2019 08:27 AM

To: Neil Davies Evans

Hi Neil

Just wanted to say thank you for the training this morning. It was very informative and helped me get around the issues that I have been having. I really appreciated you taking the time out of your schedule to help tech-unsavvy people like me get with the times.

I could see today how wonderful and efficient this utility is going to make my classes and I look forward to using it.

Regards

Candice

From: Gift Tapiwa Marovatsanga

Sent: Tuesday, 12 February 2019 4:58 PM

To: Neil Davies Evans

Dear Dr Evans,

Thank you for the session we had last week. It was really worth it and I've really engrossed myself with Moodle now. It is working perfectly well with the one module you linked me to. I will drop off the Evaluation and Feedback Forms tomorrow. May I kindly request that you link my second module with the following details: APVA321 Directing 3A.

Other colleagues are yet to confirm which ones of their modules will be administered via Moodle for this semester. Others still need training so for those, I will advise accordingly.

Regards

Gift.