The BTech Research Module for Journalism: Developing Research Capacity Through Blended Learning that Includes a Podcasting Component

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Abstract: The paper addresses key issues connected to Higher Degree learning in the Journalism Programme at the Durban University of Technology. The new approach addresses ways to develop students into independent researchers and to harness ICT in situations where the students are employed in industry and attend courses on a part-time basis. The BTech level is a critical one for developing research capacity as it is this stage that research procedures need to be honed in preparation for masters and doctoral study. The introduction of an online component in the Research Module facilitated communication for lecturers and students and encouraged a "community of practice" where learners not only shared resources but constituted a resource for each other.

The blended learning approach outlined in the paper is experiential and outcome-based: learners learned about research processes by completing tasks which more experienced researchers would perform in preparing a research proposal. Assessment of student work was partly formative, using peer and self-assessment, and partly summative, by formal assessment of the research proposal. The online Research Module made innovative use of Forum discussion as both an assessment tool and for public display of student work. The exercise resulted in better quality work and allowed potential mentors to see what was involved in the students' research projects.

The new approach employs a Moodle component operating in parallel with a Blackboard platform. The Moodle component was perceived as particularly user-friendly and was consequently popular with beginner online learners. The Blackboard platform allowed for extensive interactive opportunities and encouraged creative design potential.

The online course proved effective in promoting good quality independent research by novice researchers, many of whom were not from academic backgrounds and who spoke English as a second or third language. The success of the online module was primarily due to effective course design that provided a generic template for research processes rather than the mass of top-down content so often offered in traditional Research Methodology courses.

Running part of the course online appears to have led to more students finishing the course and to an all-round improvement in results.

An unexpected outcome of the online facility was that the accessibility of the course to the public not only attracted experienced higher degree supervisors from outside the university but also acted as a recruiting mechanism for the following year's BTech course.

As an extension to the computer aided learning facility a podcasting resource is in preparation. Some preliminary results from the podcasting component will be available by June 2010. It is expected that a podcasting resource that includes presentations made by visiting practitioners will be particularly beneficial to those journalism students who work to strict industry deadlines and find themselves unable to attend every presentation or seminar.

Key words: blended learning, research capacity, Journalism, university of technology, outcome-based education, experiential learning, collaboration, podcasting.

1. Introduction:

In 2007 a pilot blended learning module was introduced into the BTech Journalism Research course at the Durban University of Technology. The blended learning module described in this paper proved effective in promoting good quality independent research by novice researchers, many of whom were not from conventional academic backgrounds and who spoke English as a second or third language. Rather than depending on academic staff to suggest suitable topics, the students were encouraged to initiate and develop challenging and interesting projects, for example, the social impact of Kwaito music (Blose 2008), the ANC succession race as reported in the Press (Goge 2007), and the authenticity/authority of online journals (Martin 2008). Running part of the course online appears to have led to more students finishing the course, to an all-round improvement in results, and to attracting expert mentorship from outside - as well as within - the Durban University of Technology. Even though their mentors did not necessarily have specialist subject expertise in the field, these (and similarly diverse) projects were successfully completed because they were personal endeavours which had special significance for the students.

This paper tracks the development of the online component and in the process addresses two key issues in Higher Degree learning at a University of Technology: how to facilitate the development of students into independent researchers, and how to harness ICT to this end. Currently the Durban University of Technology is responding to the challenge of clarifying - and fulfilling - its role as a University of Technology. The brief from the Department of Education is to increase postgraduate registration and to "grow" higher degree programs. The BTech level is a critical one for developing research capacity, as it is at this stage that basic research procedures need to be mastered in

preparation for masters, and, later, doctoral study. However, the fact that DUT draws mainly from a historically disadvantaged student pool has meant that a tendency to over-teach occurs at 3rd year and BTech level, with students being seen as dependent learners lacking the resources - or know-how - for self-initiated research projects. This approach does not adequately develop students as independent researchers with the unfortunate result that research can be viewed as a sterile exercise by both lecturer and student, and can lead to mainly derivative work at masters or even doctoral level. The author rejects this approach as reflecting a deficit view of learners, some of whom have used self-initiated research projects even at first year level (where there are larger numbers of disadvantaged students) with successful results.

Another issue caused by the transition of DUT from Technikon to University is that many of the courses are career-focused and, as a result, our graduates can more easily find jobs after third year than their counterparts at traditional universities. This means that our higher degree programs tend to be run on a part time basis, with students having difficulty getting time off to attend research seminars and workshops, or being too tired after a full day's work to participate actively. This is particularly true of our Journalism students, who are often obliged to accept employment in centres other than Durban, and whose hours are far more irregular - and taxing - than the usual office hours. Currently the BTech Journalism course is offered on a part-time basis only. Following the blended learning approach the use of an online component in the research module facilitates communication for both lecturer and part time students and leads to the development of a "community of practice" where learners not only share resources but constitute a resource for each other.

The term “blended learning” can be interpreted differently within a variety of academic approaches. The concept is not new but has been extended to include an online component that combines with face-to-face approaches and allows different times and places for the learning that is usually intended to reduce classroom contact hours. The latter is an important distinction because it is possible to introduce Web-enhanced learning without displacing classroom contact hours (Dziuban, Hartman and Moskal 2004). What is key is that the learning occurs both in the traditional classroom environment and online with a shift from lecture- to student-centred instruction. Blended learning optimises the educational experience through a flexible mixture of learning strategies and delivery methods (Harvey 2004-9). The blended learning approach outlined here is experiential and outcome-based: learners learn about research processes by completing the tasks which more experienced researchers would perform in preparing a research proposal.

Assessment of student work is partly formative (Higgins et al 2002), using peer and self-assessment, and partly summative, by formal assessment of the research proposal. The BTech Research Module makes innovative use of Forum discussion as both an assessment tool and for public display of student work. The latter not only results in better quality work, but also allows potential supervisors (including academics from other institutions) to preview what is involved in the students’ basic research projects. The BTech Research Module was adapted from a Masters Research Module set up on WebCT as part of a web-based learning project undertaken at DUT (then DIT) in 2002 to prepare students for a Coursework Masters in Computer Assisted Language Teaching (CALT). It was, however, set up on Moodle (Modular Object Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) for the BTech in Journalism course. This was because it was

thought (1) that Moodle would be more user-friendly for beginner online learners, and (2) a Moodle course lends itself more to guest access for non-University course participants than WebCT.

Two unexpected outcomes were that the accessibility of the course to the public not only attracted experienced higher degree mentor/supervisors from outside the university (apparently intrigued by the creative research projects which this approach generated) but also acted as a recruiting mechanism for the next year's BTech course. The course also acted as an introduction to web-based learning for the author, who conducts the Research Course in the Journalism Programme. As a result of his involvement he was accepted into the DUT Pioneers web-based learning staff induction programme for 2008. Finally, it facilitated Journalism mentorship for the course designer, Dr Dee Pratt, and allowed her to both monitor and participate in research capacity building in the Faculty of Arts & Design.

2. Course design

The online Research Module is run within the context of the BTech Basic Research Course for Journalism, which has its own more traditional syllabus and content. The Module itself is run in mixed mode, and is andragogical (Pellowe 1995:1) in the sense of allowing learners far more autonomy than is usually allowed to novice researchers, but within a carefully scaffolded framework which offers guidance, structure and support at all stages (Reigeluth 2004). The course can be made more directive or pedagogical depending on learner needs, which are monitored carefully throughout the course. The offline part of the Research Course is carried out in after-hours weekly workshops and seminars, which not all students, however, are able to attend regularly. The online

section is mainly a shell Moodle course, with procedures and minimum content (Milton 2000) fitting Mason's Integrated Model (Mason 1998). The procedures are carefully staggered in the cyclical pattern which will be familiar to experienced academics as the recursive process typical of research (see Figure 1). However, the cyclical pattern does not just reflect the regular recursion which occurs in the research process, but is carefully scaffolded so that the module tasks increase in complexity and scope as well as integrating the results of previous tasks in a process of cognitive layering (Boyle 2000). The course is outcome-based, learner-centred, and project-directed, and makes use of experiential learning. The minimal course content is provided mainly to give novice researchers direction and guidance, but most of the resources are added by facilitators, supervisors and students as the course progresses. The true course content is in fact the research process, encapsulated in the tasks which learners work through in the course of developing their Basic Research Project and writing up a Research Proposal (See Figure 2).

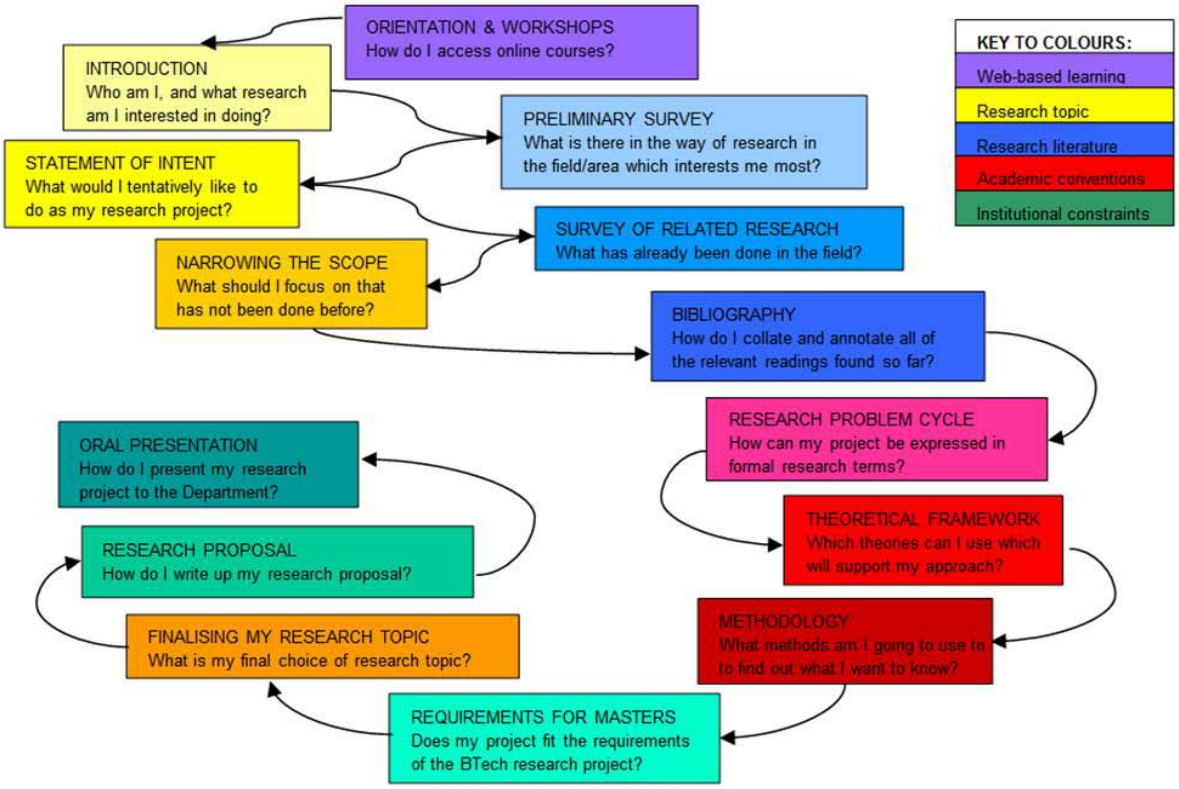

Figure 1: Research "map" illustrating cyclical research processes

Apart from being recursive and layered, the tasks are woven into what has been found to be key aspects of developing research capacity in novice researchers: clarifying the research topic (which inexperienced researchers find very difficult), exploring the resources available, developing key research competencies, and acquiring advanced computer literacy. The module is deceptively simple on the surface; integrating complex processes in ways which makes them seem eminently do-able at face value: having been presented with tasks which apparently could be done, the students obligingly *did* get on and do them. Formative and summative forms of assessment are used in the course, the former being by means of facilitator and peer feedback (tasks 2 - 12), and the latter (13 and 14) by traditional formal assessment of the proposals, with a mark also being allocated for an Oral presentation of the

proposed project (not intended as a formal “proposal defense”, but a chance for students to obtain live feedback on their project proposals by staff and peers).

Finally, while live workshops and seminars contribute personal warmth (see Gutteridge model of blended learning in Pratt 2008:714) to the course, the heightened interactivity afforded by the online forum discussions makes it possible for the development of a true Community of Practice (Wenger 2004, 1998a), a development which would not otherwise be feasible, given the part-time nature of the course, and the irregular work hours and geographical separation of most participants, including the mentors (internal and external). The online peer response mechanism allows students to engage closely with each other’s progress as their fellow students grapple with formulating their research proposals. Through the shared experience an atmosphere of collaborative scholarship flourishes as the candidates engage in dialogue and exchange while reading and commenting on proposals in progress (Pithouse, Mitchell and Moletsane 2009). The constructive peer feedback encouraged by the online discussion facility is deeply motivational and leads to a heightened and creative process of inquiry and exploration. The process develops a sense of trust, security and mutual respect as the candidates who are drawn from widely differing backgrounds experience a “reframing” and begin to see situations through the eyes of others (Schon 1983).

	Tasks	Contextual	Ideational	Interactive	Social	Reflexive
1	Orientation session	X				X
2	Introducing yourself	X				X
3	Preliminary survey of area/field			X		X
4	Statement of research intent		X			X
5	Detailed survey of other research in the field/area			X		X
6	Narrowing the scope of your research	X				X
7	Compiling a bibliography				X	X
8	The research problem cycle				X	X
9	Theoretical framework	X				X
10	Choosing your research methodology			X		X
11	Requirements for BTech research projects				X	X
12	Finalising your choice of research topic			X		X
13	Writing up your research proposal		X			X
14	Giving an oral presentation on your research topic			X		X

Figure 2: The tasks which constituted course content

In Figure 2 the main *focus* of each task is shown (all of the communicative functions are in fact involved in each task). While traditionally "Research Methodology" courses have been predominantly top-down transmission of content and/or a large volume of traditional product, the above analysis shows that the Research Module produces far less formal student output, but that more time is spent on preparing for the formal output. The results so far, as assessed independently by external examiners, have suggested that better quality work is produced than by using traditional delivery. Informal output occurs on a regular basis, but only inasmuch as it contributes to the investigative process and the final formal output. The most significant feature here is that students are involved in a continual process of self-reflection forced by recursion and constant peer and lecturer feedback. It is the reflexive process which governs and regulates the interaction (Pratt 2007:169,181) and, when properly managed, leads to quality formal output. The public posting of tasks on the Moodle discussion forums is the key design strategy facilitating this process: traditional supervision tends to occur in isolated "silos" and with limited scope.

3. Piloting the BTech Research Module in 2007:

While a similar Research Module (CALT) had been run for MTech students, it was piloted for the first time at BTech level in 2007 with Journalism students. The course designer (Dee Pratt, Faculty Research Co-coordinator) took the structure and content of the CALT Research Module which had been set up on WebCT, and set the course up on Moodle at the beginning of 2007, adapting it slightly to BTech level, but keeping the framework generic, so that it could be cloned for use in other disciplines. While the course designer is an experienced WebCT practitioner, Moodle was used, as mentioned above, because it was thought to be more user-friendly for students not familiar with web-based learning, and non-University course participants (e.g. external mentors, visiting Professors and overseas contacts) who would be involved in the course, which might cause problems with the DUT WebCT license agreement. Further adaptations to the online course were made in collaboration with the author, a Senior Lecturer in the Journalism Programme, who was in charge of running the Basic Research Course that year. While he had had no previous experience of web-based learning, he immediately saw the potential of the online Research Module, and was responsible for adding some technical enhancements later (e.g. a recorded sound byte by a student promoting the course).

Two early changes to the course were made, one relating to ease of following instructions, the other to the level at which the content rubrics were pitched (i.e. too difficult for novice researchers at BTech level). In the first case, it was not clear to students - initially - that they had to post their completed tasks in the relevant discussion forums (an innovative use of the forum facility), which resulted in a change to the forums being signalled with the instruction: "Present your [task name] in this forum." An introductory item, "Help with understanding

task requirements" was also added. Unit 9, "Theoretical framework" caused some problems at first because it was pitched at a level of difficulty which turned out to be beyond most students, and both the heading (initially "Understanding research paradigms") and the entry in this section were changed. Students still found identifying their research approach difficult (understandably), but at least now understood what it was that they were required to do in Task 9. As a result of these early experiences, a general "Course feedback forum" was added to the course, so that any difficulties students experienced in engaging with the course could be identified - and rectified - swiftly. By that time, however, facilitators and students had become accustomed to using the course, so that further adaptation of the course shell was not needed.

4. Co-participation in the course:

Setting up the course as a shell with the main "content" being description of task outcomes (and, of course, assessment criteria) with minimum instructional materials offered multiple opportunities for co-participation in the course. When all participants contribute to course content and not just the course designer or instructor, there is a wider pool of resources, and resources are more task-specific, topical and up-to-date. Students also have it demonstrated to them repeatedly that the learner as well as the teacher is involved in the construction of knowledge, and consequently feel more in control of their own learning. Guest speakers and external specialist presenters and staff could contribute to resources which reflected their own particular emphasis of favourite notes, which also added to the sense of real community of practice emerging as the course proceeded.

Apart from the fact that the course designer could quickly correct, adjust or add to the course as necessary, course "content" contributions were made by the following means:

- General discussion and news forums (these included online notifications by the lecturer in charge).
- Student task postings, as well as ensuing discussions and responses (e.g. bibliographies in Task 3. and 7., particularly those with online links)
- Links - or websites - contributed in passing by students and facilitators (e.g. the Communication Theory website).
- Specialist notes contributed by facilitators and/or guest lecturers (e.g. Professor McKenna's notes).
- Links to exemplars of more traditional student work (e.g. research proposals and research reports).
- Technical enhancements added by staff and students (e.g. Maud Blose's "sound byte" advertisement of the course).

In a sense all participants also contributed to an ongoing resource: the course itself as artifact and repository. The Moodle cloning option, combined with guest access, meant that the course could easily be archived (i.e. without technical assistance) to provide a resource - as well as a model of an online course - for subsequent year's staff and students.

5. The role played by discussion forums:

The Moodle “topic” course format was used rather than the “social” format as the latter did not allow for the listing of tasks or addition of other Moodle activities. Moodle discussion forums can, on the other hand, be added in an extremely flexible manner to a course with the topic format, and where a key feature of the course in heightening interactivity as well as in providing course content from participants. They also served as an assessment mechanism, as follows. Public display of student work had been a feature of the CALT (i.e. computer Assisted Language Teaching) Research Module. However, CALT students had been obliged to master elementary web-page design so that they could publish tasks in the WebCT Presentation Tool. While this was an appropriate competence for students to develop over a two-year course, it was not a viable option for part time Journalism students over a much a shorter period.

The quickest and easiest pro tem solution was to require students to post completed tasks in a discussion forum attached to that Task Unit (see Figure 2). Forum discussion is a rather unorthodox platform for assignments, in that all completed tasks can be viewed by all students as well as by the facilitators. However, as students were encouraged from the start to choose personally meaningful topics arising out of their own interests, situations and life experience (as in Task 2), it was found that public display of projects in fact discouraged rather than encouraged plagiarism (students clearly wished to demonstrate that their personal preferences were unique). Not only did it share out assessment - and interaction - between all participants and not just the facilitators, it also encouraged offers of help from peers, which meant that students were now acting as a resource for each other. Public display of completed tasks spurred on competition, “named and shamed” the dilatory (as the other students could see whose postings were missing) and offered models of how completed tasks might look to the more tentative or timid students. Public display could of course have acted as an

inhibitory factor, but Journalism students actually like writing: their discipline also prepares them to write (usually under time pressure) for a wide public audience, so that this was not an issue here.

It must be noted, however, that by the time students had reached the stage of writing up their proposals and, later, research reports, they were collaborating mainly with their mentors, and this in the context of private meetings and email, so that the discussion and news forums reverted to their more usual function of keeping participants in touch socially, and communicating course information and news. Using the discussion forums for display of completed tasks had another effect, and this was to make the forums more serious and purposeful than the somewhat superficial (not to say artificial) exchanges one tends to find in online courses where students are prompted to "discuss", that is, discuss *anything*, when they would rather get on with the business of the course. This meant that a true community of practice began to build up, where students as well as staff took on the roles of professionals involved in real work, moreover, of experts and sources of help and/or information.

6. Technical/operational problems experienced

The problems experienced in the pilot project, apart from those already mentioned in other sections, were mainly operational and/or technical. The course designer was not able to participate as fully in the course (i.e. in the face-to-face workshops and seminars) as anticipated because of taking up the position of Acting Faculty Research Co-ordinator in March 2007. There were regular power cuts that affected the server even before "load-shedding" was introduced, mainly because of building operations on that campus. The server link was through the University homepage, which was frequently updated (and

therefore offline) in 2007. A server running on Linux and Ubuntu was used for the Moodle course: the server was a converted PC, which meant that it did not have the capacity or robustness of a regular server. Funding had to be found for a UPS that at least allowed 45 minutes of battery backup. The worst problem was the unpredictable tripping of power over the weekend: this meant that the hapless students were regularly sent into a panic each week, as submission day for online tasks was Monday (this was because the live workshops and seminars were held on Monday evening). While Journalism students are notorious for last-minute submission of written work (it comes with the territory), it must be remembered that, for those employed, the weekend was the only time they had to focus on their studies, and sometimes the power was tripped as early as Saturday morning. That particular problem was solved by the introduction of the UPS, as the power was not usually off for longer than 15 minutes. Fortunately the technical issues have since been largely addressed and research candidates on the course in 2008 and 2009 experienced fewer problems with accessing the Moodle website.

7. Results of using a blended learning approach:

One of the results of using a blended learning approach was that students appeared to have less trouble in choosing an appropriate research project fairly early on in the year, as they were encouraged from the start to pursue their own interests, and the online module enabled students to explore topics at their own pace. The module tasks also obliged them to work through the consequences of choosing a specific topic, so that they could jettison unsuitable options early on in the year. We believe that the good results obtained from using this approach had a lot to do with the fact that the topics had intrinsic interest for the students and were articulated and delimited clearly relatively early in the course. The variety of diverse

topics proposed, while desirable in providing intrinsic motivation and encouraging independent learning, initially posed a problem in terms of finding specialist supervision. Fortunately the novelty of an online option in the course, as well as the fact that potential supervisors could preview the students' proposed research topics online, meant that all students but one were able to obtain suitable mentors, including Professor Jonathan Jansen, Professor Sioux McKenna and well-known broadcasting presenter and personality, Alan Khan. Professor Jansen (then DUT Administrator) not only participated in the course as a mentor but also publicly commended the BTech Research Module as an exemplary teaching and learning practice (Jansen 2007 pers comm.).

Course effectiveness cannot be measured only in terms of examination results, but as throughput is a crucial issue for both students and the institution, it was very reassuring to find that there was a significant improvement not only in the Research Report marks, but also in the overall Basic Research Course result. This was a marked improvement on the results obtained in 2006 (using the same Examiners and Moderators), when a traditional lecture/workshop approach was used: then five out of ten students completing the course passed, with the highest mark being 61%. In 2007 all 10 out of the 10 students completing the course passed (two, however submitted their reports after the deadline had expired, and were required to repeat the course in 2008). Of those that passed in 2007, four students obtained marks over 61%, with the highest mark being 71%. The student who obtained the highest mark (i.e. the 71%) used the advanced computer literacy skills she acquired during the course to research online publishing, and to construct and carry out an online survey as part of her data collection (Martin 2008). Another candidate, Maud Blose, was encouraged by her research experience to apply for a Fulbright scholarship and is now completing her Masters in Journalism at a university in Chicago.

8. Conclusion:

Piloting the course in 2007 constituted a learning curve for all course participants, especially the author, who became immersed in the kind of "pedagogical evolution" referred to by Mason (1998). The success of the module was primarily due to effective course design, in that it provided a generic template for research processes rather than the mass of top-down content frequently offered in traditional Research Methodology courses. The online Research Module is outcome-based and presented to students as a series of scaffolded and layered tasks, rather than as the production of text (i.e. the final report). This provides students with a type of social algorithm (Blunt Bugental 2000) for acquiring research competence. The notion was reaffirmed that there are advantages in using a blended learning approach. One of the significant advantages is that most of the preparation is done in advance, and resources are added easily and quickly later. This allows academics the freedom to focus on the multiple learning interactions the course set in place. Another advantage is that the online option promotes the use of the Internet as a resource, as well as a communication tool for sharing of resources without all participants having to attend in person at a given time, which is the main problem with part time courses, particularly in the case of Journalism.

The online option makes it possible for learning to continue outside of tuition times, and participation takes place as and when convenient, which assists both working students and pressurised staff, and means that campus disruptions are minimised if not avoided completely. Even the ongoing power cuts did not pose a serious obstacle, as most participants could access the online course some of the time. However, the issues of good equipment and technical backup are crucial and require constant vigilance.

The BTech Research Model pioneered in the Journalism Programme has since been set up for the BTech Television course and another clone has been initiated for the Department of Fashion and Textiles. It was found that the pilot 2007 online module also acted as a recruiting mechanism for potential students for 2008. The 2008 course was already set up at the start of that academic year so that students could preview the research course requirements and start working through the tasks at their own pace, even before registration or commencement of lectures. The continuing contribution of the online module to the Journalism research project has steadily convinced research candidates of the value of the blended learning approach to scholarship.

The sound byte added to the Web-site in which a student uses an audio reflexion to affirm the value of the online component has proved popular with prospective research candidates and encouraged the author to experiment with m-Learning in the form of pedagogical podcasting. The emerging audio mode of learning allows candidates to clarify and review what was covered in class when they are in informal settings away from campus such as while travelling or at home while carrying out everyday activities (EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative 2005). The podcasting facility will be set-up to include student-generated content and gradually shift the control over the pacing of learning activities from the teacher to the candidate. The new opportunities for learner convenience are particularly appropriate for the part-time research candidates in the Journalism programme.

In closing, an extract from the reflective report submitted by current Journalism research candidate Langa Khanyile (2010) indicates the effectiveness of the online module. Khanyile is a reporter at Independent Newspapers in Durban:

Useful and indispensible are adjectives that best sum up my feelings about the Moodle website. Working research candidates couldn't have asked for a more supportive and revolutionary tool in undertaking their research. Kudos to the inventor(s).

Its interactivity is a boon in navigating the research process, allowing students to actively engage in scholarship as a community of practice.

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