



E-Learning under the microscope: The Experience at FRST

By// Dr. Ling Teck Yee

When the IT-oriented Unimas came into being in 1993, the majority of us were computer illiterate. The idea of using E-Learning was the goal right from the start for the university curriculum, but we had to overcome the obstacles of computer illiteracy and phobia first. Now, almost 10 years older, and 10 years wiser, we can laugh at our good old days of fearing of "loss" of all our documents when the screen saver came on, or whenever we accidentally pressed the wrong keys or icons. Once upon a time, not too long ago, there was no 'word wrap' tool in MS Word, and we had to use our own wisdom to judge whether there was enough room at the end of a line to complete the words we were typing. We were appreciative to Unimas for providing us with a desktop computer each, and for offering training programs to help us start off in the IT era. On top of that, some of us even bought our own laptops (that had cost more than RM10,000.000 10 years ago) with the loans made available by the university. We were an unselfish and motivated 'bunch', teaching one another word processing, spreadsheet, and

presentation tools, plus simple PC trouble-shooting strategies.

Right from the start, we digitized our lecture notes. Due to the lack of LCD projector, most lectures were delivered using OHP from slide printouts. In July of 2001, three of our colleagues embarked on online teaching and learning for the courses they were teaching, using Quickplace, a software application hosted by CALM. To date, we have a total of 67 (57%) courses online and 87% of our colleagues are already involved in handling online courses. At the moment the role of online learning in our faculty is both complementary and supplementary to the conventional face-to-face classroom teaching and learning. Most of the courses are presented on *PowerPoint* slides, where students can access whenever and wherever they are. Lecture notes in *Microsoft Word* format are also made available. Communications in the form of class announcements, and the exchange of ideas and resources took place online. Group projects and assignments are conducted and submitted

online too. As for courses involving mathematics or statistics, the theories were presented in *PowerPoint* slides, and examples of the problem solving aspects in the course were conducted using the regular 'chalk and talk' method, which was observed to provide students with better learning experience until better courseware design is put in place.

As an increasing number of student intake affected our course registry, which have grown to sizes of over a hundred students per class, it was convenient to make announcements, post assignments and other information at any time, without having to delay or wait until the actual class time. Images in the lesson content were easily incorporated. As many students were residing off-campus, they had the flexibility of accessing information at any time from their own homes. During lecture sessions, students did not have to rush copying notes. As such, they were able to focus more on the content of the lesson. More effective learning also took

effective learning also took place, as students were able to access the notes before the lesson, and they were able to clarify doubts about the content of the course during class time. Online learning also provided a non-threatening environment for the shy ones, introverts or academically challenged students, to express their views or to ask questions, as compared to a normal/conventional classroom setting. At times, when we were away in the field, students were still able to continue learning through the contents on Quickplace. From our experience, materials for learning are not limited to what we provided as there were related website that were linked to our online course website. Interaction between students occurred through their discussion on the bulletin board and also the opportunities provided by small group projects.

For the most part to lecturers, online teaching and learning is

certainly a time-consuming activity but we have witnessed some good outcomes. We are by no means satisfied with our achievements. Hopefully, with further assistance from CALM, we will see learning content to be designed in highly interactive manner, through the use of more appropriate software designed with sound underlying learning theories and educational philosophies (Ring & McMahon, 1997). Due to phenomenal increase in student-teacher interactions and communications, our mailboxes have frequently exceeded the allotted space. As for the students, they have consistently reported of inaccessibility to the course materials, and the limited number of computers for their use in campus. This poses a challenge to our teaching-learning infrastructure. As Malaysia implements smart learning in smart schools by using technology as the prime enabler (Kaur, 1997), we at the higher institution will be getting students

who are ready and eager for online learning. Therefore, we should not be unprepared for the future generation. Finally, the potential of online teaching and learning should be fully capitalized in order for us to be part of this competitive age of technology and knowledge explosion.

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References

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The Biggest Word in The Unimas Classrooms: The EMS



The Educational Multimedia Systems (EMS) is an integrated lecture system, made up of teaching equipment such as an LCD projector, notebook, document visualiser (that doubles as an Overhead Projector and Direct Projector) and related audio-video tools. The EMS enables technology aided teaching-learning practices to happen more frequently, in a simpler manner, and with less preparation time. In short, EMS

helps introduce the usage of technology in the teaching-learning process. This is in synch with the renewed initiative within public Institutions of Higher Learning in Malaysia, to encourage more significant use of ICT-related skills among educators. In-directly it is hoped that this would drive a more focused technology-enhanced teaching, to help elevate the quality of teaching and learning at public universities in Malaysia.