

Using virtual interactions to enhance the teaching of communication skills to information technology students

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of virtual interactions in a Communication class at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT)-South Africa. It demonstrates how synthesising virtual and other computer-assisted exercises as well as traditional classroom-based activities can enhance the teaching and learning of communication concepts. The paper is based on the experiences of 1st-year Information Technology students at CPUT, and the data was gleaned from observations, questionnaires and course reflections during one semester of an academic year. The findings of the investigation revealed that despite the burgeoning interest in computer-centered teaching and learning at CPUT, traditional methods of teaching are still valuable given the differences in the learning styles and technological experiences of students. In this light, this paper subscribes to “complementarity” as the most expedient teaching approach because it can cater for the student diversity in this learning space as well as promote quality peer interactions and collaborative learning. It can also transform the process of learning into an invigorating experience especially because these students are dispassionate about communication.

Practitioner notes

What is already known about this topic

- Technology in education
- Virtual teaching and learning
- Collaborative teaching and learning
- Traditional versus computer-mediated teaching approaches

What this paper adds

- Student diversity and teaching dynamics in South Africa
- The challenges of university of technology students in South Africa and the value of computer-mediated teaching and learning
- The role of communication in developing cognitive skills of South African students.
- The technological challenges at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT)-South Africa and the implications for teaching and learning

Implications for practice and/or policy

- Use computer-mediated teaching and learning as a complementary tool in context of South Africa
- Develop curricula that promote collaborative teaching and learning either in class or online.
- Place communication at the core of teaching and learning in the Information Technology (IT) department at CPUT-South Africa in order to develop critical soft skills.

Introduction

One fascination of the 21st century is the way computers and other mobile technologies are reconfiguring the lives of human beings (Martin & Madigan, 2006). Today, many schools and universities are equipped with different technological devices, compelling learners and teachers to immerse in mobile and computer-mediated activities in a very uncharacteristic way (Shana, 2009; Yang, 2009). Digital interactivity has therefore “provided both teachers and learners with an alternative avenue” to construct and reconstruct knowledge (Yang, 2009, p. 12). It has also introduced them to new literacies such as digital, media and cooperative literacy (Martin & Madigan, 2006). Furthermore, the increasing presence of technology in teaching and learning spaces suggests that traditional approaches, characterised by “the roles of authoritarian teacher and passive learning,” are dissipating rapidly, creating new spaces for more constructivist learning (Shana, 2009, p. 215).

But is this the end of the road for traditional models in South African universities? In this paper, I answer this question by scrutinising computer-mediated communication activities administered to 1st-year students in the Information Technology (IT) department at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). In this learning space, I envisioned emancipating students from a largely theoretical subject, often taught in a pedantic style. Also, I hoped to uncover how the virtualisation of communication teaching, a road less travelled especially at CPUT, can impact on teaching and learning. The paper presupposes that in the age of social media, the teaching of communication skills to this generation of learners engenders the formulation of innovative teaching strategies, which can stimulate the construction and exchange of knowledge beyond the confines of a classroom. However, channelling all our efforts to online teaching and learning could become counter-productive in the nearest future, considering the pace at which technology is evolving. To guard against this rapid technological evolution, the paper subscribes to “complementarity” as the most expedient teaching approach. This approach provides a prism through which students from diverse schooling backgrounds, such as those at CPUT, can construct and exchange knowledge as well as socially interface within and beyond the brick walls of a classroom (Andreatos, 2007; Pata, 2009; Shana, 2009). To legitimise the preceding claim, this paper discusses IT students’ virtual and classroom experiences and the implications for teaching and learning. It focuses on the demerits of visual interactions and the challenges of computer-driven teaching and learning at CPUT.

Conceptualising computer-assisted teaching and learning

Before the irruption of technology in education, teaching and learning was informed by an objectivist or traditional model. This model imaged teaching as the transfer of knowledge from the omniscient teacher to the learner. It was primarily teacher centered and reductionist, restricted visibly by time, space and place (Crawford, 1996; Piccoll, Ahmad & Ives, 2001). Today, the scholarship of teaching and learning has taken many detours, opening space for myriad instructional paradigms. For example, the inception of social constructivism has revolutionised

the transfer of knowledge. Pioneered by Lev Vygotsky, this theoretical conception contends that knowledge is enmeshed in personal experiences that are socially and culturally constructed. For Vygotsky and his followers, teaching and learning should therefore be learner centered, collaborative and negotiated heuristically through different social interactions either in a traditional classroom or in a virtual space (Crawford, 1996; Driscoll, 1994). Furthermore, the increasing presence of technology in schools and universities has led to the proliferation of the virtual learning environments (VLEs). This proliferation can be blamed on the claim that technology-mediated teaching and learning improves student performance, dispel students' attitudes towards learning and increases their levels of social interactions (Dillon, 2004; Longhurst & Sandage, 2004; Piccoll *et al*, 2001; Williams, 2008). These different teaching and learning models have provided educators with the opportunity to blend different strategies in the same learning space.

Moreover, studies on educational technology have repeatedly echoed the ubiquity of computers and other digital devices in schools/universities and the way it impacts on teaching and learning (Scharber, 2009; Shana, 2009; Yang, 2006). This is because the current generation of students are more technologically conscious and brings to tertiary institutions "a wide range of life experiences and interests" (Lillis, 2003, p. 192). For instance, in schools and universities, learners spend hours interfacing with their peers on computer or mobile devices (Carter, Foulgar & Ewbank, 2008; Saeed, Yang & Sinnappan, 2009; Wintour, 2009). Some of these activities involve memorization, motivation and, to some extent, modelling of different behavioural patterns. For social learning theorists and proponents of VLE, these mental activities can enhance the cognitive development of learners. In contrast, the introduction of technology in education at CPUT is still fraught with challenges such as uncontrollable disruptions, an overwhelming lack of commitment from students and the diverse interests that South African learners bring to the university (Ng'ambi, 2003). Also, virtual interactions mean learners are able to access huge amounts of information and also connect with a wider population of peers. Seemingly, these dynamics have had negative implications for the way students socialise online and in the classroom (Cross, 2004; Wintour, 2009).

I am not insinuating that computers and other mobile devices are not suitable for teaching and learning. Neither am I mystifying the application of virtual interactions in any learning environment. Epistemologically, the increasing presence of "web technologies such as blogs, wikis, instant messages ... podcasts and vodcasts" has compelled educators to be more imaginative and encouraged the use of teaching methods that are more stimulating and appealing to learners. For example, Virvou, Katsionis and Manos (2005) encourage the use of games to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning. The paper argues that given the complex nature of learning, using educational games does not only enhance students' ability to think critically and collaboratively but also makes teaching and learning more stimulating and less stressful. This suggests that "learning is not just about knowledge, but also about motivation, engagement and social interactions" (Dettori, Gianneti, Paiva & Vaz, 2006: 5). The text advocates creativity and innovation when designing curricula, given that computer gaming is an emergent media literacy in today's learning environment. Additionally, in the context of communication teaching, educational games are likely to enhance critical, analytical and problem-solving skills as well as enhance students' abilities to synthesise knowledge. However, promoting a gaming culture at CPUT can be quite challenging, considering the quality of its current technological facilities and the disturbing reality that most of its students are from underprivileged backgrounds and might not be able to afford games designed specifically for educational purposes. Even if the university had to provide computers with educational games, most 1st-year students might lack the meta-cognitive ability to apply the gaming experiences to their own academic development (Ng'ambi, 2003).

Nevertheless, digital technologies have provided endless opportunities for exchanging “understanding, interpreting and organizing ... knowledge” across different boundaries using different tools (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 157). Yang (2009), on the use of blogs to enhance critical reflection, reinforces the importance of computer-assisted conversations in promoting collaborative learning. For Yang, blogging provides an unrestricted and more accessible space for learners and educators “to exchange and localize new information based on their personal needs and living environments” (Yang, 2009, p. 12). This paper lends itself to the Vygotsky-based theory that learning is a process of social constructivism, shaped today by the quality of virtual relationships and dialogic engagements with peers and educators inside and outside the conventional classroom. Significantly, this type of interaction stimulates peer teaching, positioning the learner at the epicentre of teaching and learning. It can also enhance learners’ critical and reflective thinking skills—key objectives of communication (Jeong & Frazer, 2008; Lim & Chai, 2007).

The shift to virtual interactions seems to signal that the traditional scholarship is phasing out, creating avenues for technologically enhanced learning spaces that can drive meaningful interactivity and intellectual exchanges between students and educators (De Freitas & Jameson, 2006; Martin & Madigan, 2006; Shana, 2009). This new pedagogical trajectory can offer “learners of all ages, myriad opportunities for informal, collaborative and autodidactic learning outside ... any traditional boundaries whether ... geographical, temporal or pedagogical” (Dyer & Jonson, 2006, p. 183). For the purveyors of VLE, learning in the age of technology should be a borderless social experience, involving intellectual collaboration and exchange between students and lecturers. In this light, Dettori *et al* (2006)’s *Technology-Mediated Narrative Environments for Learning* re-engages with the notion of socialisation and collaborative learning in a unique way: story telling. The text recreates an ancient tradition through open narrative-oriented software, capable of integrating different communicative skills such as speaking, listening, writing and reading. It re-affirms the value of story telling as a prism to connect repertoires of human skills such as the ability to remember episodes in a systemic way and imaginatively reconstruct them to appeal to an audience. This interplay of different skills is essential in handling communication tasks such as academic writing, public speaking, debates and oral presentations.

These studies foreground computer-assisted teaching and learning in this day and age, seemingly oblivious of the peculiarity of each learning context. In several African schools and universities, the application and development of VLE have tended to suffer from the lack of sufficient human and material resources, students’ inability to manage vast and complex information from varied Internet sources and increasing social demands as well as the discrepant learning styles and personalities of students. Despite these challenges, virtual teaching and learning is arguably a fascinating approach especially considering the rapid technological changes and how these changes are reconfiguring human lives. Virtual interactions between students and educators promote “greater cognitive flexibility” (Wolfe, 2001, p. 6), which can enable students to interact in a less intimidating and socially oriented atmosphere. It can also enhance the dissemination of knowledge to a wider community of learners (Jeong & Frazer, 2008; Ng’ambi, 2003; Oxford, 2006). Here, learning is depersonalised, inviting the shy and marginalised—who are often intimidated by their classmates—to add their voices to discussions on teaching and learning (Maier & Warren, 2000; Martin & Madigan, 2006).

This does not mean the traditional model has become obsolete and VLE is the replacement. At CPUT, the traditional classroom-based style is still essential because it caters for the learning needs of students with weaker computer skills. This category of students lacks the intellectual acumen and/or the sense of commitment as well as the cognitive development to compete with the few intelligent and highly computer-literate peers. And because their computer skills are unnerving, they often battle to interpret the complex bodies of information gleaned from different

Internet websites. To address this challenge, I blended the different models in my Communication classes. This strategy did not only promote imaginative thinking and creativity, but it also helped to transform the process of teaching and learning into “socially situated discourse practice” (Lillis, 2003, p. 192).

Methods of data collection

The data for this paper were gleaned from several online and classroom-based activities with my 1st-year IT students—approximately 180 students. The students were diverse in terms of race, sex, learning styles and social backgrounds. However, black males from previously disadvantaged communities constituted the majority. The data collection process began with myriad online activities facilitated on my social network—*Kommunicare*. Here, I closely observed and managed the activities during and after the lectures. I was a participant observer, engaging with students on different levels and on a range of topics. During observations, I monitored and recorded the way students responded to topics on *Kommunicare* and the emergent social relationships after the interactions. Several oral discussions also crept in during the observations, where students intermittently shared their online experiences. Key online activities included discussions, feedback, blogging, language exercises and debates. I then interlaced the virtual interactions with classroom-based face-to-face activities such as role-playing, simulated oral interviews and oral presentations. In class, I videotaped and photographed some of the face-to-face activities, and the footage and photos were populated on *Kommunicare*, and learners were invited to critique the way their peers handled those activities. I also administered online questionnaires to students at the end of the semester. The questions focused on students’ online and classroom experiences and the implications for teaching and learning. After the collecting the data, I analysed my observation notes, the completed questionnaires and the visual images. Here, I concentrated on emerging patterns, trends, phenomena and student experiences that hinged on the complementary approach proposed in this paper. I also examined the impacts of online course reflections, feedback and discussions as well as classroom-based activities on the teaching and learning of communication concepts (see Appendices).

Discussion of virtual interactions on a social network *Kommunicare*

Essentially, *Kommunicare* was set up to explore alternative ways of teaching critical skills such as writing, reading, analytical and problem solving skills using less frightening computer-mediated activities and other virtual interactions. With this approach, I reckoned students would have more time to engage with communication-related discussions and issues. I also hoped to encourage collaborative learning through online knowledge exchange (Chiang & Fung, 2004; Jeong & Frazer, 2008; Kayler & Weller, 2007). The space was therefore designed and equipped with tools and virtual spaces for discussions, free writing, debate and other social interactions between students.

The discussion forum provided an unrestricted space for students to blog and exchange views on a myriad of topics. Here, students were able to conceptualise and independently facilitate discussion topics and blogs with their peers. The topics ranged from key themes in the field of communication to topical socio-political issues in South Africa. These discussions did “not only allow the learner to be more flexible in terms of where and when they participate in a dialogue. They also allow a wider audience to read and participate in a discussion” (Wolfe, 2001, p. 246). Despite the risk of infantilising learners’ minds (Wintour, 2009), the social network still managed to create a convivial teaching space for both extroverts and introverts to analyse and debate issues. This approach repositioned students as important stakeholders in the process of teaching and learning. In addition, the forum enhanced students’ ability to conceptualise topics, interpret, state claims and persuasively argue these claims using relevant supporting evidence. Taking students

outside the usual physical space into a VLE, where they could engage in online conversations on topical socioeconomic and political issues provided communication teaching with an unusual flair.

The social networking approach also sought to encourage the exchange of reading, gaming and movie experiences through regular online reviews. To achieve this objective, I set up a review page to stimulate the sharing of diverse social experiences. Here, students with an affinity for games, movies or books reviewed and reflected on these social art forms. By reviewing books, articles, movies and games, students were able to practise analytical, critical and summarising/or paraphrasing skills, in a “self-rhythmed” and less traditional way (Emig, 1977, p. 126). Interestingly, students used these skills in other important activities such as online debate and free writing.

Online debates and free writing activities attempted to stimulate a “powerful multi-representational mode for learning” and how it can drive academic writing (Emig, 1977, p. 125). For example, free writing ignited the passion for writing because students were able to subvert some of the rules of academic writing, giving them a “greater sense of ownership” (Maybin, n.d.: 64). This approach boosted students’ confidence and enhanced their commitment to writing, inadvertently facilitating the introduction of academic writing. Most importantly, online activities offered students the chance to share their writing experiences and equally participate in reading and commenting on the writings of their peers. Moreover, in order to enhance their writing skills, I included some basic language exercises in the pool of activities, and students were able to download and engaged with them, on and off campus, “expanding their language study and learning community beyond the physical classroom” (Blackstone, Spiri & Naganuma, n.d.: 1). Although “on-line written communication suffers from a lack of social presence and many metalinguistic and pragmatic cues” (Wolfe, 2001, p. 245), students found “the flexibility and lack of time pressure more convenient and conducive to deep thought” (Wolfe, 2001, p. 246).

Finally, I interlaced the online collaborative learning with anonymous online course reflections. Through the same medium, I provided students with formative feedback on their assignments and class activities accessible anywhere and at anytime. The reflections were valuable because they gave students the freedom to critically reflect on their own academic journey and my teaching strategies in an uninhibited way. Reflective exercises can also be facilitated in a traditional setting; however, the online approach generated more objective participation from students, especially because the reflections were asynchronous and completely anonymous (see Appendices).

Discussion of some key findings from questionnaires

This discussion attempts to excavate and interpret student activities and feedback using some basic research procedures and protocols. Here, I compare and discuss interesting varying experiences in different learning spaces and how they legitimise the blended approach heralded in this paper. The findings discussed below emerged out of student reflections on VLE and their myriad practical experiences in the different learning spaces. The reflection questions were directed primarily at students’ perceptions of communication, my teaching strategies, the computer-mediated activities and how the different online interactions could support classroom-based activities. They also focused on the implications of online and classroom experiences for students’ understanding of key communication concepts (see Appendices). The findings are categorised into two themes: the benefits of virtual interactions and the demerits as well as the challenges in the context of CPUT.

The benefits of virtual interactions in a Communication class at CPUT

Student reflections revealed several values of social networking and the implications for teaching and learning at CPUT. The responses captured familiar benefits of social networking in a com-

munication context. Some of the benefits mentioned in the questionnaires were endless interactivity, the construction of virtual identities, a sense of community through shared experiences, unintimidated participation in discussion and knowledge exchange (Ng'ambi, 2003; Redfern & Naughton, 2002). In response to a question on the benefits of online discussions, one student interjected:

... I like using *kommunicare* because it gives me the opportunity to share my views with students in other groups. Also, it eases the sharing of files and information with students, instead of informing each student separately, or relying on word of mouth. We can post announcements and they are available for every one to see ... (Student response)

This student echoes the value of information sharing and how social networking can facilitate collaborative learning especially in a context in which time is a major constraint. For him, using this medium enables a majority of students to access information at the same time. The testimony highlights the importance of peer learning and knowledge exchange at tertiary institutions and the implications for students' academic development. When students share knowledge, they establish deeper relationships with peers and the lecturer, even beyond the concrete walls of a classroom. Through social networking, learners were able to negotiate different identities in different social spaces through writing and reading. This promoted the development of different literacies and provided a platform to stimulate a culture of reading and writing among technology-oriented students (Carter *et al*, 2008; Williams, 2008).

Unrestricted knowledge exchange meant easier accessibility and internalisation of information. Virtual spaces such as *Kommunicare* therefore provide a friendlier and less nerve-wracking space for articulating experiences and knowledge sharing. The following excerpt captures a student's response to a question about the values of virtual interactions. For this respondent, *Kommunicare*

... enhanced teaching because it allowed members who do not even know one another to communicate effectively via *kommunicare*. [sic] It built good relations between some people; some people made good friends. It has taught some people how to communicate effectively and formally ... more people are able to participate unlike in a class—an environment where others are too shy I guess to speak ... (Student response)

Firstly, this response reiterates the significance of student participation in a Communication class and how a culture of participation can facilitate the understanding of basic communication concepts. Secondly, it underscores the primacy of social relationships in the process of learning. Interestingly, this was evident from the new web of friendship, which developed after only a semester of virtual interactions. For this respondent, this site fostered “increased opportunities for collaborative activities,” enabling students to be more enmeshed in the content material of the course (Carter & Click, 2006, p. 1).

This new wave of online relationships was symptomatic of the diversity in the IT department and the agency of cultural integration among students from different racial and cultural backgrounds. For some respondents, this approach also provided an alternative learning platform for students with cultural inhibitions and other phobias such as the fear of public speaking. The quote below articulates one respondent's opinion on a question that focused on the impact of online discussions on students' academic development:

... *Kommunicare* offers space to students who are not confident enough to speak in front of the class to express their opinions and that makes *Kommunicare* better than traditional teaching methods [sic] ... it gives them the spirit to participate in discussions with their classmates. Most of us black students are always intimidated by white students, we feel inferior and this prevents us from participating in class discussions ... (Student response)

The findings indicated that respondents supported this mode of teaching and learning because social networks provide a comfort zone for those intimidated by face-to-face communication. They are avenues for the often-silenced voices to subvert the social differences in South African

universities by wrestling with peers on different topics without thinking of race or class. Here, the disturbing sense of difference, which often impedes the academic development of many South African students, seemed to dissipate, opening space for students to negotiate new identities in their own social spaces (Considine, Horton & Moorman, 2009; Williams, 2008). Although virtual interactions undermine the value of public speaking and affect learners' self-confidence, this respondent claims the quality of online discussions nurtured an imaginary sense of ownership and freedom, key motivators for student academic development especially in post-apartheid South Africa.

Moreover, students imagined this space as a community of practice for IT students. The following respondent capitalised on the online collaboration between learners and how it produced new cross-cultural social relationships, which could foster an invigorating learning environment. For him, these relationships paved the way for the process of constructing knowledge.

... I've talked to students on *kommunicare* that I've never met on campus beforehand [sic]. I now have a greater understanding and knowledge of these students and how they can contribute to my own academic development, something I believe I would never have been able to accomplish this otherwise [sic] ... I am getting to know them better, especially those from other groups ... (Student response)

This student attempts to respond to a question about active participation on *Kommunicare*. Here, they attempt to establish a link between social relationships and learning, espousing the social constructivist notion of "collective generation [and exchange] of meaning" (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). These relationships were formed through wrestling over provocative topics, and the intellectual boundaries created by the traditional group work model are subverted, forging a collective identity from a diversity of experiences. This means communication and a sense of community can occur not only when students are physically co-present (Wolfe, 2001).

The demerits and challenges of social networking in a Communication class

Student reflections on virtual interactions in a Communication course echoed the values that this model brings to teaching and learning in the context of CPUT. We cannot overstate the quality of learning and social relationships that can emerge out of the virtualisation of teaching and learning. However, one issue that featured prominently in the reflections was the novelty of social networking at some South African universities and the challenges encountered by these universities. Some of these challenges include incessant disruptions during classes and the lack of human and material resources to effectively manage the avalanche of online activities. One student responds to a question on the challenges of social networking.

... I still prefer the old teaching method because at least the lecturer can control students and what they do. Here lecturers cannot control what students do in large computer labs. Very often students do not do the exercises. Instead they are busy chatting with their friends on Facebook or playing games that are not very useful. These activities are usually very disruptive because sometimes they chat and laugh unconsciously disturbing the entire class ... (Student response)

Computer-assisted teaching and learning seeks to give students the opportunity to take ownership of their own learning. It also seeks to emancipate them from traditional methods that sometimes stifle the freedom to socialise with peers within and beyond the classroom space. However, the usefulness of VLE approach is often hindered by learners' inability to apply their minds to their academic growth. Because this model offers students the freedom to access information using mobile devices, the different functionalities of these devices tend to refocus their minds from learning to play.

The migration from learning to play through social networking certainly affects students' academic performance. For example, learners with the fear of public speaking, resign to online activities as a way of dealing with this phobia. This hampers the development of persuasive and oral presentation skills. In this case, many students were not oblivious of the many benefits of

social networking but argued strongly that this approach often undermines the value of other relevant skills such as those chronicled in the previous paragraph. The excerpt below attempts to explain the implications of increasing online activities for the development of vital workplace skills such as oral presentation. Here, the respondent attempts to comment on a question about the merits and demerits of online interactions:

... I like communicating with my peers online because I am free to think with my friends and not try to understand things alone. But I am also an extrovert. Since my high school years, I have always enjoyed presenting topics in class and participating in debates [sic]. This was good because it made me to be bold, which is a quality we need here and when we start working. But if we spend a lot of time chatting online, we are not going to develop this skill. Also teaching is a personal, face-to-face communication channel where students are addressed directly, and their responses can be assessed ... (Student response)

This response exemplifies one of the pitfalls of social networking: the neglect of non-verbal transmission of message through face-to-face interactions. Incidentally, “merely providing students with access to the web, does not guarantee constructivist learning. The lecturer is required to provide some guidance or coaching ... [and] allow students to create their own meanings” (Ng’ambi & Johnston, 2006, p. 246).

Managing social networks efficiently and effectively requires dedication from the facilitator. This involves ensuring that there is uninterrupted participation from students. It also involves updating the web space, editing responses and responding to concerns and discussions regularly. Over and above this challenge, IT students at CPUT were very reluctant to sign up and engage actively in virtual interactions on *Kommunicare*. From the findings, many students considered participating in the online activities an additional burden especially because they often struggle to cope with their major subjects. One respondent comments:

... my work load is just too much and I don’t have the time to waste on some online activities. I submit assignments almost every week in my core subjects, so chatting with my peers on *Kommunicare* is the last thing on my mind. My Facebook experiences have taught me to avoid social networking because the topics are usually frivolous and the university is unable to manage the type of things students exchange on social networks ... (Student response)

This excerpt illuminates the limits of social networking at CPUT like “the disconnect between the literacy skills that [students] develop in their social environment and the literacy environment” of the university (Considine *et al*, 2009, p. 479). In this space, students tended to use language expressions and/or Facebook slang in academic discussions. During such discussions, most of their comments were fraught with slang, encrypted words and abbreviations used in digital text messaging. This style of writing impacted negatively on their academic writing skills. Unfortunately, my gate keeping efforts could not deal with this challenge adequately.

Conclusion

Research on social media in education has produced varied outcomes. This is because virtual learning has generated myriads of interpretations globally. It has also been received with mixed feelings in many African universities including CPUT. Supporters of VLE argue for the suitability of asynchronous teaching and learning especially for this generation of learners. However, critics of technology in education contend that overexposure to social networks, such as Facebook, infantilises learners, affects academic performance and sometimes creates false impressions about learning (Considine *et al*, 2009; Scharber, 2009; Wintour, 2009). Interestingly, my findings also highlighted the different meanings of social networking in a Communication class. This was evident from the discrepant responses, which either supported computer-mediated teaching and learning or largely discredited this approach. These discrepancies signal the different ways in which this generation of learners understands the role of technology in education. They also reinforce the multiplicity of perceptions about social media and the way they are reshaping the lives of teachers and learners especially in the African context.

The findings exposed the limits of social media and other technological devices to unilaterally drive teaching and learning at CPUT and the values of traditional teaching approaches in this age of technology. Communication lecturers should therefore try to blend the two approaches, especially given challenges of this university. For respondents, lecturers should not attempt to reinvent the wheel but rather they should attempt to synergise the two approaches in the same learning space. This approach has the potential to innovate teaching and learning in this context. Noticeably, the findings pointed to the many benefits of such a complementary relationship and the way they can be brought to bear on the quality of tuition at a university with an eccentric cohort of students and with increasing technological challenges. Implicitly, computer-assisted activities can offer a platform to coordinate the quality of “interactions which occur in the learning environment-between teachers and learners, among learners themselves; among the learners and the community ...” (Landsberg, 2005, p. 70). And traditional strategies can cater for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds with mediocre IT skills or replace virtual activities in the event of technological failures.

Appendix 1

Questionnaire for reflection on Kommunicare

Dear student,

In the last term, we spent a substantial amount of contact hours discussing with peers and engaging with several class exercises on Kommunicare. I would like us to reflect on that experience by responding to the following questions. Please note that the purpose of this exercise is to exchange views on the effectiveness of online interactions and the impact on teaching and learning of communication concepts.

1. Are you a member of Kommunicare?
2. If yes, what do you like or dislike about the social network and if no, why?
3. Have you been participating actively in the discussions? If yes, how and if no, why?
4. Do you think the online activities have helped to make Communication lectures more interesting? If yes/no please explain how and/or why.
5. Explain how using a social network like Kommunicare to discuss communication concepts is different from the traditional methods of teaching.
6. Explain how the discussions on Kommunicare have enhanced your relationship with your peers.
7. Do you think debates with your peers on Kommunicare have had any positive impact on your academic development? If yes, please explain how.
8. What were the constraints and challenges that you encountered during your interactions on Kommunicare?
9. Any suggestions to make the social network more useful as a tool for teaching communication?
10. Any other comment(s)?

Thanks for your contributions.

Pineteh Ernest Angu (Lecturer)

Appendix 2

Observation checklist

1. Frequent users of the social network—Kommunicare during and after lectures.
2. General discussion topics attracting more attention.
3. Communication related topics attracting more attention from students.
4. Student attitudes and responses to the different online topics.
5. Relationship between students before Kommunicare.
6. Cross gender, race and class relationships during and after the virtual interactions.
7. Student attitudes and behaviours during traditional classroom activities.
8. Types of discussions generated during online interactions.
9. Student body language during virtual interactions.
10. Different social groups and their interests during online interactions.
11. Type of photos posted on kommunicare by students.
12. Student reactions to photos uploaded on kommunicare.
13. The way students share experiences online and offline.
14. Students' facial expressions at the end of an online activity.