

Exploring the online learning environment Elmien Waring



Elmien Waring

The need to keep our promise to introduce our learning management system by going online became obvious almost immediately after the DIGI-FACE 'kick-off' meeting in Port Elizabeth. As countries began locking down and travel was suspended, Elmien Waring sprang to the rescue by hastily creating her 'Exploring the Online Learning Environment' course.

She offered what was initially an emergency remote teaching programme via Zoom to two clusters of African-German Centres of Excellence, namely the East African and Southern and West African (Anglophone) clusters. The six-unit course aimed at covering the basics of using Moodle, explored logging in, setting up profiles, creating activities, using interactive presentations, assessments (quizzes and assignments) and using video. Johan van Niekerk and Mike Swanepoel ably assisted by going into more detail on some of the functionalities within the system.

Merlin Kull reported that Alexandre Martinez, a digital training expert adapted and replicated the course in French for the Francophone Centres (with support from Ewald Eisenberg and Merlin). These centres were divided into two cohorts, Niamey with Bamako (both CEGLA) and Dakar (CEGLA) with Niamey (WAC-SRT) and Kinshasa (CCAM). Five training sessions were offered per cohort.

Merlin said "These sessions provided the participants with rich experiences via simulated digital course material. They created short videos and tested the extensive toolboxes available". He added "This first introduction course was an empowering starting point for the digitalisation of the Centres and allowed CEGLA to mirror the structure on Moodle in anticipation of developing and adapting their own curricular needs in a digital format."

An important aspect of the training was for the participants to experience online learning both as a student and as a lecturer. A practice course site was provided and the attendees were tasked with creating course material on their own. Participant feedback in forum posts was very positive.

On the basis of such positive feedback, further offerings of the course were made.

Professor John Chang'ach and Dr Susan Kurgat, CERM-ESA Project Leader and Co-ordinator respectively, took things one step further and became the first 'multipliers' in DIGI-FACE by presenting the course to 19 of their peers in the School of Education at Moi University, Kenya. See Susan Kurgat's article Digital Multipliers of Online Education at Moi University.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

"I have been using our MUSOMI (Moi University System of Managing Instruction) but on a limited scope. I am now getting re-energised by this platform and will definitely hit the road running.

Thank you for this opportunity!"

"This platform will revitalize our energy during this difficult time to reach our colleagues and students. Bravo DIGI-FACE and the dedicated team."

"Waiting for the next training, the introduction course was fantastic."

"I feel encouraged to up skill my knowledge on online teaching. Indeed Digi-face provides an opportunity for me to expand my capabilities on teaching online using electronic gadgets; smartphone and computers. In fact, it will be useful for me to learn more about zoom meetings. I look forward to getting more engaged in this course."

"The platform is easy to navigate through. There are many options to upload materials in the Moodle. I am very eager to learn the remaining parts. Kudos to the whole Digi-Face team."

"The platform is very interactive and useful for teaching and learning."

Digital Multipliers of Online Education at Moi University

Susan Kurgat

After completing the Exploring the Online Learning Environment course offered by our Nelson Mandela University colleagues, it was our privilege to replicate the course with 19 academic staff members who teach and supervise our CERM-ESA scholarship holders in the School of Education at Moi University. Seventeen out of the 19 lecturers persevered to the end of the course. The two who dropped out due to personal reasons opted to join our second cohort offering which will take place at a time when they will be able to take the course without interruption.

John Chang'ach, lead presenter of the course said, "In the initial stages we had a multitude of challenges. We had to learn how to teach lecturers who have deep knowledge in their field of study, but who still revel in traditional methods of knowledge transfer. Other challenges included unexpected things like getting everyone to log into the platform, the time it takes familiarize 'digital immigrants' with the layout and functions of the LMS, and generally getting everyone to communicate online. It took

two hour-long Zoom sessions to bring everyone onto the 'same page' before we could delve into the course itself."

Despite, or perhaps because of, the multiple challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the lecturers broke out of their comfort zones and embraced the DIGI-FACE online platform with far more vigour and enthusiasm than we had expected. Many lecturers engaged with us on various occasions in the 'remedial sessions' we offered out of the official times set aside for the online training course.

Our technical expert in the team, Ray Sawe, had this to say;

"I facilitated and offered guidance to one lecturer who was struggling with how to remove and add content in the platform that her own students would find valuable. Through numerous conversations via phone and online, I took the liberty to guide her in a user-friendly manner how to overcome those bottlenecks preventing her from achieving personal fulfilment with the programme".

In closing, our mandate turned out to have been larger than we first anticipated, however, the value we created far outweighed the problems we faced while conducting the tutelage. This is a journey that we were honored to take with the team and look forward to establishing online education as the next leap into the future. We owe a great deal of gratitude to the DIGI-FACE project leadership and our initial trainers, Elmien, Johan and Mike.

Bravo to us all as we touch and transform lives through Education.



Susan Kurgat, Ray Sawe and John Chang'ach



Questions & Answers

Since the 'Kick-Off' meeting in port Elizabeth in March this year there have been a number of questions about DIGI-FACE. We have answered four of the more interesting/challenging ones below.

How safe are my materials and intellectual property if I put up a course on the DIGI-FACE Moodle platform?

The first question was "how will institutions and individuals retain their patents and copyright of materials and resources once they have been loaded onto the platform?" The source of this question was the belief that materials and resources would be freely accessible to all institutions in DIGI-FACE.

The answer is that your content and materials are perfectly safe (or as least as safe as they are when you do normal classroom teaching). Any course on the DIGI-FACE learn platform can be made visible at the owner's request, but no one can access them without their permission. The following description illustrates how the development process ensures such safety.

- An academic user (teacher) wants to present an online course on the DIGI-FACE platform.
- He or she contacts the DIGI-FACE Moodle administrator and requests a blank course template.
- A template is opened that only the teacher and the administrator can see the empty course.
- The teacher populates his/her course.
- The teacher identifies his/her course participants and enrolls them on the course. Only the teacher and the students who have been enrolled can enter and see the contents.
- The teacher opens the course for his/her students on a certain date and closes it on another chosen date.
- Once the course is over the teacher un-enrolls the students and they cannot enter it anymore.

As can be seen, no other centre or persons can access your materials or teaching programme unless you want them to – you can enrol whoever you want to view your course and can un-enrol them whenever you like. The power stays with you. Your work is your IP and the materials belong to wherever they come from according to your institution's regulations.

One point of weakness is that, as is the case in any normal classroom teaching situation, once your students get the material you can't control what they do with it. Apart from that your material is safe – by creating a course you are not making it available to anyone else (unless you want to).

Can I take my course off the DIGI-FACE platform and put it on my university's server?

Yes you can, but only your own courses, not anyone else's.

Where can I keep my videos?

At the moment, your videos can be securely stored on the DIGI-FACE Moodle server in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. However, due to the size of videos and the forecasted growth of using multimedia one possibility is to enrol in online video hosting and streaming services. In such a case you can upload your videos onto this online platform and only embed a link to this video in the Moodle course. The benefits are that the streaming server will handle the compression of the video stream to the client device and provide the best stream based on the connection speed of the client. We will let you know when and if there are changes to an online provider.

When are we going to get our equipment and be trained to use them?

The only answer we have at the moment is 'Who knows?' Perhaps by the time you have received this newsletter COVID-19 restrictions will have changed and we will have a plan.

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www.african-excellence.de



DAAD

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