

***DITonline*: A journalistic experiment in blended, collaborative teaching and learning**

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ABSTRACT

DITonline is an independent, daily news website run by students, for students at the Durban Institute of Technology in Durban, South Africa. The website is a collaborative project, emanating from blended teaching and learning environments in the university's journalism department. *DITonline* was launched in August 2003, in response to a need for a credible student publication which would be an independent and reliable news source and which would provide a training ground for student journalists. To date more than 100 students have contributed to the site, which now attracts thousands of hits each day. This paper discusses the philosophical underpinnings of the project, and the growth of the site in terms of contributors, content served and its user community. Particular attention is paid to the development of student collaboration in the cyclical context of action research. The paper is mostly narrative, as we seek to document the growth of *DITonline* as a collaborative teaching and learning tool.

Keywords

Blended

Collaborative

Online journalism

Student publication

WebCT

PHP

INTRODUCTION

The idea for an independent, student news website for the Durban Institute of Technology (DIT) was born in a pioneering, semester-long online journalism course of about 30 second-year students in April 2003. Students were exploring the new field of online journalism¹ (also known as “new media” or “Internet journalism”) through the use of a virtual WebCT² classroom in a blended environment. In one assignment, students working in small groups competing with one another developed a basic website for DIT students. The class devised their common project brief by brainstorming it, asking the question, “what would students like to read?” Their answer included sections such as news, sport, features and opinion.

The students found this project so exciting that they regularly arrived early for their bi-weekly face-to-face sessions in a computer laboratory, and always left late. Soon they started to speak of undertaking a student news website “for real”, not just as a once-off assignment. While the students' enthusiasm for the new medium of online journalism was unprecedented, both students and staff in the journalism department had long recognised the need for a student publication to showcase student work. One of the reasons student publications had not been published on any large scale in the past was the prohibitive costs of printing and paper – requirements an online publication would not need.

¹ By online journalism, we mean journalistic content that exists on the Internet.

² WebCT is a commercially distributed and web-based instructional shell which online practitioners use to develop online classrooms.

With this in mind and conviction in the idea borne out by the students' passion for the project, journalism lecturer Tara Turkington approached DIT's vice-chancellor, Prof Dan Ncayiyana, and asked him to fund two third-year intern positions for six months, in order to spearhead the student website. It was to be the first daily updated, student-run publication in South Africa, and it was uniquely conceived of in a virtual format. Ncayiyana agreed.

But before we tell the story of *DITonline*'s birth, it is necessary to mention some of the project's philosophical underpinnings. While the student structures that support *DITonline* and even the look of the website have changed in its first year of existence, the understanding of teaching and learning that underpins the project remains strong and unaltered.

PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The pedagogical philosophies in teaching online journalism at DIT owe much to Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt and Paulo Freire, whose approaches are embraced by the ICT-Ed section of DIT's Centre for Higher Education Development. Two staff members in this unit, Mari Pete and Charl Fregona, conduct a voluntary year-long course for DIT lecturers in online teaching and learning, which they call the Pioneers Online programme. In 2003 Turkington was lucky enough to be a member of this course, in which she imbued much of this philosophy and sought to implement it practically in her classrooms.

In their teaching, Pete and Fregona focus on the transformation of the individual rather than the transmission of knowledge, and their course encourages self-directed, active learning rather than teacher-directed, passive learning. Drawing on this experience, Turkington's approach to teaching online journalism is collaborative and constructivist, and is based on an action research and action learning model, in keeping with the ideas of Zuber-Skerritt (1996). Most basic to this is the idea that knowledge is *constructed* rather than transmitted. Zuber-Skerritt suggests that an appropriate approach to teaching and learning must include problem solving, experiential learning and learning by discovery (eg in small groups). "It is in these active and creative learning situations that theoretical knowledge can be generated by the participants themselves and that generative learning and action research by practitioners into their own practice may advance knowledge in that field." (1996, p10).

Zuber-Skerritt points out: "The process of action research was first conceptualised by Lewin (1952) and further developed by Kolb (1984), Carr and Kemmis (1986) and others. In brief, it is a spiral of cycles of action and research consisting of four major moments: plan, act, observe and reflect. The basic assumption is that people can learn and create knowledge: on the basis of their concrete experience; through observing and reflecting on that experience; by forming abstract concepts and generalisations; and by testing the implications of these concepts in new situations, which will lead to new concrete experience and hence to the beginning of a new cycle." (1996, pp11-12).

Action research, according to Zuber-Skerritt, is *practical*, *participative* and *collaborative* in that the researcher is not an outside expert but a co-worker, is *emancipatory* for both the learner and the teacher in that the approach is not hierarchical, but that all people concerned are equal participants, and finally, is *interpretive* and is *critical* (1996, pp12-14).

The teaching and learning philosophy that underpins *DITonline* subscribes too, to Freire's critical pedagogy in which he posited among other things that the teacher has as much to learn as the student. Bentley sums this up: "For education, Freire implies a dialogic exchange between teachers and students, where both learn, both question, both reflect and both participate in meaning making." (1999, p1)

For the learner, knowledge is most meaningful when it is internalised through personal experience. So students come to *know* because they *do*. For this to happen, they must be exposed to authentic, real-world situations, or what Dunlap and Grabinger (1996) call "REALs" – Rich Environments for Active Learning. REALs encourage student responsibility and decision-making in collaboration with other learners and lecturers, they promote study

within meaningful and information-rich contexts, and they use participation in dynamic activities that promote high-level thinking processes such as problem solving, experimentation and creativity.

“REALs are based on constructivist values including ‘collaboration, personal autonomy, generativity, reflectivity, active engagement, personal relevance, and pluralism’ (Lebow, 1993, p5). Constructivist learning environments provide opportunities for learning activities in which students, instead of having knowledge ‘transferred’ to them, are engaged in a continuous collaborative process of building and reshaping understanding as a natural consequence of their experience and interaction with the world (Goodman, 1984; Forman and Pufall, 1988; Fosnot, 1989).” (Dunlap and Grabinger, 1996, p.66). Finally, REALs encourage students to reflect on the processes and outcomes of learning activities. (Dunlap and Grabinger, 1996, p80)

It is this sort of REAL environment that *DITonline* — a teaching material and process rolled into one — sought to create from the outset.

THE CASE FOR DITONLINE

As noted above, a second-year online class conceived of the idea for an independent news provider at DIT using the online medium. By why in the middle of 2003?

At a departmental level, the divide between theory and practice meant that students didn’t properly try out their new-found skills until they went into industry. Their learning was not authentic or “real-world” enough. On an institutional level, the DIT had just been born out of a merger between Technikon Natal and ML Sultan Technikon. Many students felt that the new institution was crying out for an independent, authoritative voice to help them make sense of the tumultuous times. In fact, the student protests and general dissent within the institution were arguably amplified by the absence of outlets through which student and staff concerns could be expressed.

On a national and international level, the development of *DITonline* came on the back of the phenomenal growth of online journalism internationally and in South Africa. According to Feuilherade (2004), “The number of newspaper websites around the world has doubled since 1999, a study has found. There has been a tremendous boom in the consumption of online editions. Timothy Balding, director general of World Association of Newspapers, said web audiences for newspapers have grown by 350% over the last five years.”

In South Africa, the *Mail and Guardian Online* became Africa’s first “online newspaper” in 1994. Today, most South African media groups have an online presence, including Independent Newspapers (www.iol.co.za), the Naspers group (www.news24.com) and the South African Broadcasting Corporation (www.sabcnews.com). While South African sites can be criticised for being nothing more than “shovelware” (i.e. print copy repurposed for the Internet with little or no original content), the mere presence of these sites indicates the interest in online journalism in South Africa.

This growth has seen the introduction of online journalism courses at second, third and fourth year levels since the beginning of 2003 at DIT. While students were learning about new media and online journalism (with its multi-media, interactive and built-for-the-web elements), as exercised in the USA and United Kingdom, they had no outlet to practice the lessons learned in the classroom. The art of “backpack journalism” – where journalists record events using a pen, a dictaphone and a digital video/still camera and package the story for the web – is generally not yet practiced in South Africa.³

³ Mail & Guardian Online editor, Matthew Buckland, says his publication is considering publishing more uniquely web-based content in the future. (Buckland, personal communication, 2004). He admitted there “is generally a lack of flash, multi-media content from SA’s news websites compared to our overseas counterparts”. Earlier this year, the Mail & Guardian Online published a Flash-based 2004 national elections guide.

In retrospect it is easy to see these influences in the project. At the time, it was more of a case of fleshing out a vision along the way. As journalists we believed in an independent “voice for the voiceless” and as teachers and learners we understood the value in real-world, collaborative learning.

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS: ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE ONE

The first cycle of the action learning and action research project that is *DITonline* was the period between the development of the site from June 2003, to its launch in August 2003, and up the end of November, when publication ceased for the university holidays.

In June 2003, two third year journalism students, Richard Frank and Alec Stafford, were invited to develop the website under the working title “DIT.com” as part of their experiential training⁴. While both students had a firm grasp of the Internet landscape and were computer literate, they didn’t have anything past basic knowledge of web-publishing.

Frank and Stafford settled on using PHP-nuke, a popular open-source content management system (CMS) which is powered by PHP/MySQL. If they knew little about HTML, they knew even less about PHP. Although PHP-nuke is a complete pre-packaged CMS, it needed to be customised to suit the needs of a student news website. Learning how to code in PHP and customise the nuke interface was facilitated by the collaborative approach shared by thousands of programmers across the globe. The open-source community is a by-product of the information age, where the international free-flow of information has allowed programmers to pool resources and develop code which can be used and customised by anyone for free.

Most of their learning was derived from the experiences of others. Forums dedicated to the development and troubleshooting of PHP-nuke and related systems allowed Frank and Stafford to interact with a global community of developers. Most problems they encountered – bugs, vulnerabilities and limitations – were experienced by dozens of others, who had collaboratively developed workarounds and fixes to these problems.

Apart from the global interaction, Frank and Stafford relied on DIT’s ICT-Ed centre for technical and logistical support, for example providing server space for the site and collaborating closely with troubleshooting. Collaboration with ICT-Ed also facilitated the development of WebCT classrooms and “online newsrooms” for the student journalists.

While the development of the website was difficult on a technical level, the development of a committee to run the website was even more challenging. Our first rallying call came in the form of a poster with an Africanised Uncle Sam charging “We want YOU for DIT.com”⁵.

Over thirty applications were received for the *DITonline* executive committee. We settled on an organisational structure with a hierarchy that saw five section editors (news, features, sport, arts and opinion) and four special editors reporting to the Editor and the Web Administrator in an executive committee. Each section editor headed a group of journalists who would file stories in their respective beat. The executive committee would then consult an advisory board, composed of journalism lecturers, if any ethical, legal or financial problems surfaced.

The formation of the committee was not very successful. Executive committee members found it difficult to form the hierarchical or vertical relationships structurally conceived of. The concept of the website was also hard to communicate because those leading it were themselves caught up in a challenging journey of discovery. Finally, resources were limited - cameras and computers had to be borrowed – and there was no budget to work with.

⁴ Journalism students studying the National Diploma in Journalism have to complete a compulsory six-month experiential training component before graduating.

⁵ “Rallying the troops” would become a favourite saying in the newsroom.

Another obstacle was the problem of achieving staff buy-in. Some staff doubted whether the project would work, and once it was up and running, referred to the site disparagingly in their lectures, criticising story selection and editorial quality. This did not help the confidence of the students, and discouraged potential contributors. While attitudes have begun to change, there are still divisions between students who work for the site and those who don't, precipitated to some degree by staff.

The website also suffered technical setbacks. In the initial stages, the *DITonline* news operation was hamstrung by limited access to the administration of the website. A glitch in the institutional network meant that the web administrator did not have root directory access to the site through Frontpage Extensions. The local IT technicians took months to solve the problem, during which time pictures were either emailed to ICT-Ed and then uploaded, or were hosted on a free international image-hosting server. The site could not be maintained or upgraded during this time, and many glitches went unresolved until the December break.

Despite these setbacks, the website enjoyed success far beyond its founders' expectations during 2003. Rising tensions in the institution caused a magnificent run of stories with student and staff protests, court action, bomb threats and sit-ins dominating headlines and attracting users to the site. However, the most read story in 2003 was not a news story, but a feature headlined, "Sex at DIT: The bare facts", which proved the old adage: sex sells. At the end of 2003, the site had recorded 119 830 page hits and had become, in the words of Vice-Chancellor Prof Dan Ncayiyana, "the news provider of choice" at DIT.

While *DITonline* had started off as a purely voluntary exercise for contributors, we had started to experiment towards the end of this first action research cycle with integrating the site and various aspects of the curriculum and course outcomes. We sought to formalise the collaboration in order to keep students interested in the site, and so that they could gain academic recognition for their published work. In this cycle, the journalism department also introduced its first B Tech (honours) level course in online journalism, and committed itself to introducing a semester-long module in the subject at third year level. The opportunity to make these changes to the curriculum arose as the department phased in a new National Diploma in Journalism and a new format B Tech degree⁶. The department was the first in the country to implement this new diploma, with learning areas only broadly described in the South African Qualification Authority's registration documentation. This provided the opportunity to re-curriculate innovatively, taking into account the need to teach new skills required by the international and national growth of online journalism.

One of the outcomes for the B Tech course in online journalism was a "multimedia package" for *DITonline*. This required students to produce a news or feature article with photographs, video, audio or other graphic elements for *DITonline*. While the package was marked by the lecturer, the ultimate decision over whether it would be published or not lay with the editor – at that time still third year student, Richard Frank. Students were particularly motivated to see their work online as, after negotiating a rubric, 15% of their mark depended on publication. All the students in the class saw their work published online for the first time in this way. Through this exercise, the students learnt to negotiate with an editor in a meaningful way, and to deliver a package professional enough for online publication. For most, the amount of work between the submission of their packages and publication exceeded their original effort. The collaboration between the third-year editor and the fourth year journalists was then *vertical*, and helped to break down the traditionally hierarchical academic structure, in which students in separate years of study did not inter-relate or communicate. The collaboration was also a dynamic three-way affair, involving lecturer, student editor and student reporter. The enthusiasm of the students to have their work published, and their delight in achieving publication, reaffirmed the power of the site as a collaborative tool for teaching and learning.

After this first semester of *DITonline*'s existence and the end of the first cycle of action research, most journalism students progressed to the next level of study or graduated, although the two founding senior students – Richard Frank, the editor, and Alec Stafford, the website administrator – remained in these positions for the second cycle, or the first semester of 2004. With the close of the first action research cycle, those involved reflected on some of the shortcomings and successes of the site, and planned for the future. The most burning

⁶ A one-year, part-time, honours-level degree for students who have already graduated with a National Diploma in Journalism.

issue at the end of this cycle was the need for more, diverse content. It was apparent by then that the site had drawn on average more than 1000 hits per day Monday to Friday through October and November, and that this hit count was sustained throughout the first four months of publishing, which was encouraging.

CONSOLIDATING THE BRAND: ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE TWO

The B Tech project in the first action research cycle was a pilot in many ways. Through its success, we were emboldened to try a much more radical experiment in blended collaboration in a semester-long, third year course in online journalism, offered for the first time in 2004. The concept for the class was brainstormed at the beginning of 2004 between Richard Frank, Tara Turkington and Charl Fregona at DIT, and again with the 20 members of the class who selected the online journalism stream of their third year subject, Media Production III. The course was again offered in a blended environment, with the students attending class in a computer laboratory for two two-hour sessions a week.

For the course, we tried to make it as *authentic* a learning space – as much a Rich Environment for Active Learning - as possible. We constructed a WebCT classroom and customised it by changing all the icons to images that had been published on DITonline, in order to give the class a sense of ownership and belonging. Using WebCT, the students in this course became employees in a “virtual newsroom” that was assessed on a weekly basis in terms of how much the class – or editorial team – managed to publish as a team. This was balanced with marks for individual performance within the team context. The lecturer and students negotiated that the basic requirement for the 15-week course for each member would be to publish 10 articles (news, features, sport or opinion) on *DITonline*. Only published work would be assessed, but if students published more than 10 pieces, the 10 best would be used for their final mark. Students strove for negotiated targets each week, so, for example, if they published 15 or more articles with pictures and/or multimedia elements, they would achieve 100% for their group mark for that week. Even students who achieved their 10 published articles quickly were motivated to continue contributing to the class’s output, to ensure a good group mark each week.⁷ Just as a publication is created afresh for each edition, so the class’s group marks were set back to nothing at the beginning of each new week.

The class employed role play extensively. In the first class, we brainstormed which roles would be needed in the virtual newsroom, and came up with: two news editors, two sub editors, a multimedia editor, photo editor, two photographers and 12 reporters.⁸ Each week, students selected to perform a role, and at the end of the week were peer-assessed by their classmates on how well they performed. Roles rotated weekly, so that by the end of the course everyone had had an opportunity to play all the roles at least once. At the same time, they built up impressive portfolios of their work published online. We brainstormed job descriptions for each role, and published them in the classroom. The news editors were ultimately responsible for their class’s performance each week. Their job was to motivate, cajole, plead, threaten, or use whatever means possible to inspire their classmates to work ever harder, in pursuit of a good group mark, and to liaise with the overall editor, Richard Frank, over what would be published or not. The sub-editors edited work for bad writing, spelling and grammar, wrote headlines, and ensured the website’s style was maintained (through a guide that was continuously updated and developed, using WebCT’s glossary tool). The multimedia editor was assessed on how much video or audio material provided by the class was served on the site, and the photo editor on the quantity and quality of photographs published. Thus, effective collaboration - teamwork – was carefully tied in to assessment.

The discussions area of the classroom was the engine of the class. Here students filed stories, peer-edited them and chose to publish them, send them back for additional work, or reject them outright (some suffered the public shame of having at least one story consigned to the “story graveyard” section of the discussions area). The collaboration here was transparent and recorded – anyone in the class could refer to it at any time. Learning was blended in that students attended two extended news meetings each week (unless they had interview appointments for stories), and worked together from time to time in *DITonline*’s small, physical newsroom. But all

⁷ By the end of the course, all 20 students had published 10 articles, while many produced substantially more. The student who achieved the top grade in the course coincidentally published 25 articles in 15 weeks.

⁸ As time went on, we dropped the role of photo editor and reduced the number of photographers to one, as students became more proficient at taking their own photographs for their articles.

of their work was filed electronically, often from off campus and sometimes late at night (such as one scoop, from a student who landed an unexpected interview with poet Antjie Krog). At times, students took several weeks to work on an investigative piece (such as one on the Scorpions investigating DIT for corruption), but would keep in touch through the virtual newsroom.

Each Monday, the class reviewed the work it had produced the week before, while they were able to access an html page in their WebCT classroom providing the lecturer's written comments on the original version of every story published. This was an attempt to break down one-way feedback between lecturer and student, and expose the interaction to all students, in the belief they could learn from one another's successes and shortcomings. Each week, the lecturer would award a small prize for the best article published in the previous week. This helped to motivate the students, and to enhance the competitive edge in the classroom. Below is example of lecturer feedback on an article:

SIPHAMANDLA GOGE

Scholars flock to DIT open day

May 20

This was a fairly neat news piece. It was compact, to-the-point, and had some good sources, for eg. Open Day Co-ordinator Rodney Maharaj and the source from Student Admissions. Well done on interviewing some scholars, too, though I would have liked to see some comments from students and staff actually running stalls - hopefully you can interview these for a follow-up piece. Be careful of making sweeping statements without attribution, such as this one: "about 2500 students showed up during the first day of open day programme..." How do you know this? You need to attribute info like this, or it comes across as your opinion and diminishes the authority of your piece. Also, you made an unforgivable spelling mistake: Port Shepston instead of Port Shepstone. Sies, Siphamandla! Nevertheless, well done for putting this together professionally, and within a tight deadline.

7/10

Students were also encouraged to reflect regularly and openly in the discussion area on some of the things they had learned. This feedback in itself formed a platform for collaborative teaching and learning. Some of the lessons were practical, and related specifically to journalism skills:

"I learnt that stories need to be multi-sourced and a great deal of preparation has to be taken in conducting interviews."

"I have learnt that trying to keep track of a large staff can be quite difficult."

"This past week I have learnt how to handle those big bouncers who protect VIPs and how to run for cover in case of riots. I have learnt that in order to get your story published, sometimes you need to work on Sundays and miss church. I have also learnt that as a journalist you make a few enemies."

"It is not always easy to get quotes from management, no matter how much you hound them."

"Being a sub editor is not as glamorous as it sounds. It requires a lot of patience and is time-consuming. I also had to become friends with the dictionary again. To my horror I also learnt that journalists have the worst grammar and are too scared to use spell check."

"I learnt that it is not easy to convince someone to have their photo taken if they really don't want to."

"When you have a story that falls through it's always good to have backup."

“I must not be afraid to be ignorant and ask for spelling and confirmation. ... I KNOW NOW THAT SPELLING IS OF THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE.”

But some students’ reflections were more personal, and related to themselves as people as much as to their journalistic lessons:

“I learnt to stay determined and believe in myself.”

“I learnt that you have to keep pushing even if you feel the going gets tough. I also learnt that working with your classmates can only make you a better person who is able to communicate with others on any level.”

“I learnt to be persistent. Do not listen to NO!”

After the reflection and review on Monday mornings, the student news editors ran the class, planning for the next week in a news meeting. They assigned stories and set deadlines for their peers (using WebCT’s calendar tool), while all students were encouraged to come up with story ideas.

On Wednesdays, the student news editors ran another news meeting in which they checked story progress, and again motivated their classmates with a mixture of charm and berating. This was followed by a weekly workshop on an area of weakness, including, for example, sub-editing and introduction writing.

This third year course was a turning point for *DITonline*. The depth and diversity of content on the site developed considerably, as did the number of hits on the website. In a period of 15 weeks, the 20 students in the class published nearly 250 articles, hundreds of photographs and dozens of multimedia items. In May 2004, we received the most number of hits ever in a month – over 75000.

The students themselves, while exhausted by the end of the course, believed it had helped prepare them for industry:

“I have learned to write news items. I have learned to sub stories. I have learned even computer skills. To summarise the whole thing, I can say I learned all journalistic skills that the journalist working in the media today needs.”

For some students, the course was more than just learning new skills. It engaged them on an emotional level, too:

“I am crying while writing this last lesson. I have learnt so many things from this course. Online has been more than going out, finding and filing the story. It has been a bonding experience, a self-esteem booster and a great help in showing me that I can write anything as long as I put my mind to it.”

While this course was an example of relatively “formalised collaboration”, it positively influenced “informal collaboration” in other years of study. There was a marked increase during this time of voluntary contributions for the site from students in their first and second years of study.

But of course, the students producing the content for the site are only half of the *DITonline* community; the other half is made up of those that read and interact on the site.

INTERACTIVITY AND THE USER COMMUNITY

The challenges in developing a user community came from the cultural, technological and economic factors that influence the South African browsing experience. It goes without saying that if people cannot access the Internet, they cannot read online news. According to the latest South African Advertising Research Foundation's All Media and Products Survey (AMPS) which surveys media usage by people 16 years and older, 1,724 million people (5.8% of their sample) had accessed the Internet in South Africa in the past four weeks. In the same study, the SAARF calculated that 14,676 million (49.2%) had watched television and 27,318 million (91.2%) adults had listened to radio *in the last seven days*. (SAARF, 2004).

South Africa's overall Internet penetration rate of 6.8% pales in comparison with developed countries like the USA (55.1%), the United Kingdom (42.3%) and Germany (43.6%). (International Telecommunication Union, 2004). Thus, at present, the Internet is still a "marginal medium" (Stewart *quoted in* Alden C, 2004) in South Africa.

What is encouraging however, is that recent research indicates that American 18-34 year-olds are "most likely to use the Internet than any other" age group. The OPA's research concludes that, "18-34 year olds' addiction to the Web manifests itself in above-average likelihood to go online even when they are not in front of their own PCs (OPA, 2004, p.34)."

Whether this data translates into a South African context is debatable. The AMPS study cited earlier does indicate that 524 000 of the 1,724 million people using the Internet, used an "educational institute where they study" as one of their access points.

Research also indicates that where there is flat-rate access – normally associated with broadband or educational network access – the 18-34 year-old's time spent on news sites increases by 72 percent (OPA, 2004b). This study, although American, is instructive considering 90% of *DITonline's* hits come from within the institution – where the limited open-access available is free and purposed browsing is non-essential.

Against this national background, computer usage for ordinary students at DIT is extremely difficult. (Zwane, 2004). Although it is difficult to obtain figures, it is estimated that only a few hundred computers are shared between more than 20000 students. Nevertheless, *DITonline's* user community has grown steadily through the last eleven months, with a range of staff, students, alumni, parents and outsiders prompting diverse discussion in the various interactive features.

The comments section enables instant, unmoderated and anonymous feedback on news items from users. The site has attracted over 1900 comments – many of them critical - on about 600 stories, so student journalists, like their colleagues in the mainstream press, have had to learn to deal with fair and unfair criticism.

The comments have also sparked another form of anonymous collaboration: that between journalist and reader. Sometimes stories that have been unfairly or inadequately reported have been followed up or corrected after complaints from readers. In the normal press, responses are recorded in the letters page days after publication of the article. In the online media, responses can be recorded minutes after the article is published, and a story can be updated or corrected at any time.⁹ Although user comments have bordered on hate speech, users have also posted many affirming messages. Whatever the case, student journalists realise their work is public and that people are reading it.

The interactive community ensures that the site is organic and content is not only imposed on the user. A popular module is the "Shoutbox", which allows any user to enter a message onto the front page instantaneously. The survey polls are another interactive aspect of the site, in which users have voted on questions that range from the serious like, "Has the SRC represented students well this year?", to lighter topics such as, "Should men wear g-strings?"

⁹ Critics of the online media argue that the ease of correction on the Internet leads journalists to be more careless when first publishing work. On *DITonline*, any substantial correction of fact is noted.

While we cannot accurately account for every unique “active user” (a user who returns to the site on a regular basis), we do know that the average number of page-hits per day on the site more than doubled in the site’s second action research cycle, or second semester of operation. *DITonline* received 262 340 hits in the first semester of 2004, compared to 119 830 hits in the last semester of 2003.

CONCLUSION

DITonline has come to the end of its second action research cycle – the first semester of 2004 – and is facing its third – the second semester of 2004. It has established itself as an independent, authoritative news website at DIT and is a useful training ground for student journalists. With the departure of the third year class into industry, we are faced with new challenges of producing good content. Similar to the end of the first action research cycle, the burning issue is creating depth and diversity in content. The student leadership has changed for the first time, which will present new challenges. The short, cyclical nature of student leadership is not peculiar to *DITonline*; it is something that every student organisation must grapple with regularly. But a good foundation has been laid, and we hope that the energy and enthusiasm of the new student leadership will help to consolidate and grow the project as an innovative tool for collaborative, blended, teaching and learning. We plan to continue to experiment with formal and informal collaboration (i.e. collaboration involving assessment and voluntary collaboration), and to implement various cross-curricula projects that will perform the dual mission of growing the site’s user base while allowing students studying in different programmes to interact.

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