

It was 1989, South Africa: a hot, lazy day. Outside, at the swimming pool of a beautiful white middle class home, lush gardens, meat on the braai, lager in hand, 'As long as I live, there'll never be a black Prime Minister', said one of my friends. I clearly remember the horror and incredulity, yet at the same time the strange elation I felt at this statement. Primarily, that a friend of mine could be so damn naive – and secondly, elation in the sure knowledge that he was so wrong and that I knew it. I wanted to challenge him immediately, yet realised that in present company it would be pointless. I'd wait for the inevitable and be satisfied eventually that I'd saved myself the hot air, time and energy.

I've had that feeling again lately. Perhaps because Information Technology is my thing, I really do believe that the DCSF have got their act together on their vision for 21st century anytime, anywhere learning; by having insisted on online learning platforms being introduced into state schools by spring 2008. There is no doubt that we will all encounter challenges along the way; that some educators who have used the didactic approach for years (decades?) could feel challenged, even threatened by this 'new' technology. (It's not; it has been around for years.) It's been too easy for some traditional environments to point to a series of good results and say, 'We're doing well, we don't really need the technology,' whilst not truly embracing, nor recognising that our teenage learners have become different beasts, spending large percentages of their 'down' time online.

Many anti Virtual Learning Environment diehards will happily tout ideas of 'individual learning styles', 'learning collaboration', 'best practice', and 'embedding ICT' as suggestions to raise the bar on achievement and teaching; yet will systematically destroy all arguments on the benefits of a VLE. Some traditionalists choose to see a VLE as the demise of sound teacher pupil relationships; the tragedy of modern living where the world has embraced mobile phones, ipods and other wireless devices. (All sound educational media, if used well.) 'We can deliver individual notices to students which they can get anytime they log on.' I say. 'Or, I can just give them the message in the classroom corridor' is the rejoinder. 'A piece of work can go backwards and forwards, between teacher and student, without once being printed off.' 'I like to give out pieces of paper and need the eye contact with students when I collect them in.' 'Its too much work', 'It's too many clicks to get to what I want.' 'None of my notes are in digital format, how am I going to get worksheets online?' (Heaven help us with educators who haven't updated a piece of work for... how long?) The frustrating, pointless arguments are endless. And, we haven't even begun to broach the real benefits of a VLE; the possibility of opening up discussion forums in the evenings, the ease of tracking and motivating poor achievers, assisting the disorganised with calendar and homework delivery; to name only a few.

Nobody has ever suggested that Online Learning Platforms in schools should replace face to face contact with students or colleagues. Something that all students value highly are one to one sessions with their teachers. It is imperative that carefully constructed and balanced blended learning environments are in place for all learners: a VLE does not undermine teaching; it merely supports the earlier premise.

What really took me back to SA in 1989 were the, 'I'll never mark a piece of work online' and 'I'll never allow my year group to do online roll call,' comments.
We'll see.

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