



Virtual University

The School of Information Systems and Technology's (IS&T) NextEd Program (Next Education) has received a boost of R1, 3 million from the Association of African Universities.

The NextEd program is essentially about enabling people to communicate, and hence learn through digital media such as the internet and cell phones.

There has been a huge surge in the use of Web 2.0 technologies including social networks such as Facebook, virtual worlds like Second Life, and video sharing sites such as YouTube.

Students spend vast amounts of time in these environments and are used to communicating through these digital channels. It seems logical that educators should be using these channels to connect with their students.

One of the courses in the NextEd programme, Computer Mediated Communication, specifically explores these issues with students and how this technology can be used to enhance social interaction, business applications and education.

Computer mediated forms of teaching and learning are increasing at a rapid rate all over the world. The NextEd program is based on trying to enable students to build their knowledge together (social constructivism), rather than simply have it talked at them (instructivism).

This programme is an exciting initiative for students as it enables them to be teamed with students from universities outside their own physical location. It was developed by IS & T's head of school, Professor Manoj Maharaj, and senior lecturers Mr Craig Blewett and Ms Rose Quilling.

"We are very excited about this funding. It will enable us to extend our programme and especially focus on virtual collaborations with other African universities," said Mr Blewett.

"We want to make sure that students learn in a way they are familiar with. Today's students live, connect and communicate through the web and cellular phones. Students are no longer able to associate with stand-and-deliver lectures in big lecture theatres. Often they are busy sending SMSs or chatting with Mxit during lectures. We need to connect with them, teach them in the place they are familiar with. It's time to embrace the Next generation of Education", added Mr Blewett.

"Unlike traditional ways of teaching and learning, courses that are delivered as part of the NextEd programme, are delivered in virtual environments. This means that their formal learning experience takes place in Virtual Universities situated in 3D virtual worlds, in Social Learning Networks (similar in concept to Facebook), through video podcasts (such as delivered via Youtube) and even instant messaging through cellphones."

"The explosive growth in the adoption of technology and especially Web 2.0 technologies by the "next" generation is ample warning that if educational paradigms and approaches are not changed, we will soon not be able to connect with students in the way and in the spaces that they understand."

Some of the partners in this project include Daystar University in Kenya and Makerere University in Uganda. UKZN has already run shared courses with the University of Massachusetts.

The objectives of the NextEd programme include:

Virtual – The objectives here focus on the virtual space and supporting technologies that are employed to deliver NextEd learning. The overarching objective is to ensure that appropriate, generationally-aligned technologies are employed to support and deliver the learning material to the students. This technology is not bound to computers and may include mobile devices or any other technology that become appropriate by virtue of its assimilation by the learners.

Collaborative – This part of the vision underpins the core values of NextEd. As such the objective of NextEd is to employ technologies which foster and enhance collaborative learning. Web 2.0 and its underlying paradigm of equality of participation, empowered content creators, etc is the guiding value for all technologies and approaches adopted within the NextEd projects.

Educational – A key objective is to embrace social constructivism, constructionism and other collaborative-style pedagogies in the delivery of learning material. Further to this is the objective of continually expanding and adopting generationally-aligned pedagogies in the deployment of courses.

Network – The final objective relates to the connection of individuals within NextEd. Ultimately the goal is to facilitate a collaborative network for not only institutions but individuals to connect and grow. Further to this is the objective of empowering participants to propagate their learning through to their networks, thus resulting in a viral growth in the learning and benefits.

- Sabelo Nyuswa