

Digitalizing Learning Contents in Cameroon's Higher Education: Toward Standardizing a Critical Theory Course Site in the University of Yaounde I

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Abstract

This paper examines the digitalization of teaching, learning and research content in Cameroon's higher education, paying distinctive attention to the construction of a course site on Critical Theory and Practical Criticism in literary studies which would enhance flexible online and offline activities. The inadequacy of print resource material, the non-documentation and updating of libraries, the necessity of following modern technological trends in providing quality contents and the desire to improve and sustain capacity building and performance, the move towards efficient and flexible time management, are the motivating factors of this new and rapidly advancing techno-pedagogical approach. After having briefly discussed the ICT situation in Cameroon and the Ministry of Higher Education, the essay focuses on the University of Yaounde I's ambition to practically institute an elearning platform on which a diversity of teaching contents is made available to its students. The Critical Theory course site is modeled on the Moodle learning management system and tailored to suit the needs of Master 2 students. Dominantly student-centred, but at the same time requiring teacher presence in classroom interaction, it provides digital resource material, web links and a variety of activities that engage effective involvement and competence in elearning and the use of ICT in this domain of research in literary studies. The essay views some of the stakes and challenges and situates future perspectives with regard to the relevance of ICT in literary studies and theoretical criticism.

[**Keywords:** ICT, digitalizing content, elearning platform, e-pedagogy, critical theory, normative and empirical variables, blended learning.]

Higher education is now situated in an open information environment in which national borders are routinely crossed and identities continually made and self-made in encounters with diverse others. We can begin to imagine higher education as a single world-wide arrangement: not as a unitary 'global system' but as a more complex combination of (1) global flows and networks of words and ideas, knowledge, finance, and inter-institutional dealings; with (2) national higher education systems shaped by history, law, policy and funding; and (3) individual institutions operating at the same time locally, nationally and globally...Relations are structured by cooperation and competition; and there are fecund mutual influences, doggedly persistent differences, and often surprising similarities of approach within and across borders.

Simon Marginson

Introduction

The contents of the above excerpt express Simon Marginson's introductory remarks in his insightful essay "Dynamics of National and Global Competition in Higher Education" (2006).

These remarks have far reaching implications in the present study which wrestles with ICT in Cameroon's higher education in general and the attempts at effective institutionalization of digital teaching, learning and research contents in particular. In other words, ICT is a vast and multifaceted domain of discourse and practice which is characterized by international institutional networking and cooperation, localized realities and global variables and the move toward general consensus in such complex networking and inter-connections.

This essay streamlines its discussion to the domain of elearning and research at the university level, paying specific attention to the practical phase of theoretical speculations on the significance of ICT. The paper comprises four parts. The first part provides a brief overview of ICT in Cameroon within national and international perspectives. The second specifies the context and appropriation of ICT in higher education and the third articulates the practical actualization of ICT and elearning in the University of Yaounde I: the case of blended or mixed mode learning in Critical Theory at the level of Masters II. The fourth part discusses the stakes and challenges of empirical practices and success of ICT in the University of Yaounde I.

Cameroon's Ambitions and Realizations: Modernization and Emergence

Cameroon is an ambitious country, having top decision making policies and millennial goals to be an emerging nation in 2035. This involves multi-tasking, internal collective participation and international collaboration. The country is conscious of the input of technological advancement in the domain of economy, culture, governance and education. With regard to Information and Communications Technologies, the Cameroonian government has put in place a strategy of conceiving and implementing efficient and reliable programmes in all state sectors, inscribed in a document entitled *National Development Strategy on Information and Communication Technologies*. (2007). This text is prefaced by Paul Biya the president of the Republic of Cameroon, an undoubted indication that the state prioritizes ICT in all spheres of political, economic, cultural, social and educational life. There is hardly any speech articulated by the head of state without strongly insisting on Cameroon's active involvement in the wake of technological advancement in a rapidly changing world. More importantly he has placed the youth at the fore front of meeting these challenges, and the learning environment is that conducive sphere where they are expected to be impacted with the technological know-how to improve living conditions and competence within the global arena. The reality on ground demonstrates that it is neither a political talk show nor a loud sounding nothing.

Another important text on Cameroon's ICT ambitions and advancement is documented by Tchinda Jousué. It maps and traces the extent to which the country is involved and has evolved in ICT in terms of varied initiatives, projects and experiments by the public and private sectors. The situation in Cameroon, the text clearly points out, is an ongoing one with difficulties but excellent promise. Entitled "ICT in Education in Cameroon" is extracted and modified from the *Survey of ICT in Education in Africa*.

Supported by infoDEV, it provides a country specific inventory on the progress of ICT in different African countries and can be accessed on www.infodev.org/ict4edu-Africa. In the subtext, state policy on education, research and training is once more reiterated:

- Modernizing the educational system through the introduction of ICTs in schools
- Introducing ICT application training modules into national universities
- Preparing a sectoral ICT policy for the educational sector
- Training teachers in the use of ICTs
- Equipping all schools with ICT facilities
- Multiplying pedagogic resource centres for teachers and students

- Establishing distance training facilities
- Providing support for the production of ICT teaching materials
(“ICT in Education in Cameroon” 2007: (www.infodev.org/en/Document.390.pdf))

Cameroon has multiple international affiliations in terms of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. In strengthening technological ties, ICT has a vital place in Central African (CEMAC) sub regional ambitions in higher education. Cameroon is signatory to the 2005 “Libreville Declaration” which aimed at constructing a space for higher education, research and professional training. It was followed by a conference of ministers of higher education to work on strategies of implementing reforms and new technologies in university systems. There is no doubt that Cameroon has distinguished itself in attempting to materialize the use of ICT in its higher education sector.

From the above discussion ICT in Cameroon is unquestionably a reality and not a myth. Cameroon's insertion of ICT into all aspects of national life shows its priority at modernization and competition in the global arena. Decision makers, internal and external stakeholders, technical experts and a variation of actors are participating to achieve millennial goals. Whatever the difficulties, the enthusiasm is strong and the way forward is promising.

Research and Teaching in Higher Education: The Implications of ICT

All sectors of education are fundamentally important in acquiring, modifying and putting knowledge at the service of any country. Cameroon has an uncompromising political road map in achieving its set objectives of an emergent state. The Ministry of Higher Education therefore has the overwhelming responsibility to streamline issues of ICT to suit its contribution to nation building via state owned and private universities and higher institutes of learning.

The implications of ICT in Cameroon's higher education sector are multivariate. While the ministry sets the pace as the supervisory body, state and private institutions of higher learning grapple with the empirical or practical realities in the implementation of programmes, strategies, cooperation and partnerships to enhance successful teaching, learning and research. Cameroon has eight state universities and several private universities and higher institutes of learning. Each structure defines its specific and context based ICT priorities within the general framework of the ministry's prescriptive line of action. The factors important in the implementation, integration and updating of ICT concord with innovation and obligations to modernize every aspect of higher education. The ministry has a budgetary line from which it gives subvention to both state and private structures with feasible projects in the domain of ICT.

This paper proposes to use Björn Stensaker et al. (2007) in appropriating the situation in Cameroon's higher education and subsequently the University of Yaounde I and the course site under construction. The paper underlines two main frames of reference; the normative and the empirical. The normative perspectives wrestle with prescriptive measures for the effective assurance of quality ICT in higher education, and the empirical variant grapples with the concrete applicability in university contexts. With regard to the normative Björn Stensaker et al. accentuate on

A well defined institutional ICT strategy, a professional organisation of the ICT - focused strategic process, a commitment and involvement of institutional top management, the need to link ICT to organisational development initiatives, the availability of financial resources, the availability of technical support and skills, and the development of comprehensive and relevant documentation related to the process. (419)

Carefully examined, Cameroon's Higher Education is moving in line with such normative ambitions, and it ensures the empirical dimension with regard to every structure of higher learning. The engagement of national and international expertise, the building of staff and student capacities, the procuring of appropriate material and infrastructure, the establishment of international cooperation in this domain are the primary concerns of the ministry. We have already made mention of the effective participation of the minister of Higher Education and Cameroon universities in very important higher education encounters with ICT priorities in a bid to keep the pace of techno-advancement.

Standardizing Course Sites in the University of Yaounde I: Critical Theory and Practical Criticism in Literary Studies

The University of Yaounde I is Cameroon's pioneer university and, is supposed to be the leading university in the country. In matters of technological insertion and advancement this university has recorded significant strides, and though much is still to be done in the domain of ICT, the current report is quite good and forecasts a rich future. This section, obviously the core of this paper, presents the initiative of the university to create an elearning platform with a repository site for a multiplicity of course contents, for both online and offline exploitation. The specific course here is Critical Theory and Practical Criticism in Literary Studies for Master II. It outlines the pedagogic implications of integrating ICT as an innovative technological approach to enhancing effective learning and research in the said domain. Having received instruction through ICT in a European university and having taught for more than ten years in my home university using traditionally oriented methods and not very conventional ICT tools, the pressing need for pedagogical innovation and improvement has motivated this venture. As a university lecturer facing the challenges of the twenty first century ICT is unequivocally inextricable to my career.

Otang Ebot Achale et al. (2007) addressed research questions among which was Cameroonians' and students' perception of the contributions of ICT towards improving the quality of instruction (2). After establishing from its empirical findings that both lecturers and students have a positive perception that the use of ICT can enhance the quality of instruction, research, easy resource accessibility and convenient time economy, (2, 22 – 23) the authors provide salient suggestions for further research:

- A study with an experimental design on the impact of ICT on the quality of Education in Cameroon state universities,
- The impact of ICT on the quality of Cameroon higher education,
- A detailed study of the effect of ICT on the quality of instruction in Cameroon state universities,
- A detailed study on the effect of ICT on the quality of Administration in Cameroon state universities. (29)

Toward standardizing a course site on Critical Theory is certainly context based experimentation in line with the first three suggestions raised above. It is an actualization of the University of Yaounde I's commitment to the modernization of university knowledge acquisition by effecting the use of ICT for instruction and research. However motivated I was to develop a course, the materialization would not have been possible without the ambitious University of Yaounde I's e-learning vision, because it is very difficult financially and pedagogically to personally create a course site.

The University Yaounde I E-learning platform initiative (available at <http://elearning.uninet.cm/moodle/course/view.php?id=6>) therefore offered the golden

opportunity to attempt a concrete materialization of digitalizing my teaching content. The project is sponsored by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The University of Duisburg-Essen initially acted as Coordinating Organization before the management was continued by Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University-Germany. Partner universities include the University of Capetown, South Africa, Kenyatta University, Kenya, and United Nations University, Bonn, Germany. This prestigious enterprise aims at providing quality pedagogic methodologies to a group of lecturers who in the long run are expected to continue the chain of training to make effective elearning and teaching in Yaounde I both to lecturers and students. The project identifies some of the major issues plaguing learning at the university to advocate an ICT - focused solution based on an innovative perspective:

The larger problem which is addressed in the activities for supporting eLearning in the University of Yaoundé I, Cameroon is the provision of a too low skilled workforce to the Cameroon labour market. Especially in areas where a quick adoption of new knowledge, skills and competences is becoming increasingly important, often HE in Africa in general fails to equip students not only with a suitable and up-to-date body of knowledge but also skills, competences and practical experiences. Universities which use ICT in education often organise education in the same transfer-oriented way which they use without eLearning. This situation is a consequence of an impact chain, leading to the ineffective use of eLearning in universities, largely neglecting the potential of new technologies to strengthen capacities of higher education institutions.

One can discern explicitly from the excerpt that the goal of the University of Yaounde is to avert the ineffective use of ICT and engage in a process of strengthening capacities and competences of its institutions. The ambition is to provide, foster and sustain new e learning methodologies and techniques to improve teaching, learning and research of credibility and quality. The objectives are therefore to provide more learning materials to more students, provide programmes to different target groups than campus students only and to start a reform process of education by providing the means to change from transfer oriented concepts to study and learning concepts of education through the provision of e learning materials.

Accessibility to multiple and re-adjustable sources, greater opportunities particularly academic and research networking between or among lecturers and students, flexibility of managing time and content, and confidence in positive outcomes all translate the ambition of digitalizing Critical Theory. It is a course site that strongly engages change from a uniquely print culture and traditional instructional strategies to a mixed or blended platform offering online, offline and face to face interactions, putting the student at the centre of learning. It is a course that aims at adding more impetus to construing critical theories and constructing multiple strands of semantic implications of literary texts.

Brief Retrospection and General Site Construction

In order to concretize the objectives of the implication of ICT and construct a lasting and efficient platform, the e-learning project has been organised in four e-schools, each serving as an upward phase towards accomplishment and subsequent dissemination. Three e-schools have been held so far for a target group of lecturers who in future will assist other lecturers as resource persons in the multiplication effective ICT use. The schedule of the e -schools and specific engagement is presented as such:

- July 2011 e-school 1: elearning in higher education, conceptions and templates

- December 2011 e-school 2: Content development and content organization for elearning
- April/May 2012 e-school 3: Teaching and learning with elearning; different models
- November 2012 e-school 4: Quality assessment and review of elearning content and learning processes. While the first three e-schools have been home based at the University of Yaounde I's Information and Technology Centre, the fourth will take place in the Baden-Württemberg Cooperate State University-Germany as an enlarged international conference.

Course Design and Development

As said earlier Moodle is the online learning management system the University of Yaounde I is using. Disciplines differ and so content digitalization differs. Critical and creative thinking is different from the empirical sciences. Critical theory content therefore offers different strands of interpretative thinking, giving room to multiple and highly controversial dimensions to literary texts. ICT models may be same, but contents and activities depend largely on the kind of discourse. Critical theory is a complex branch in literary studies and related disciplines in the humanities. An elearning course site must have a well defined scope in this perspective. The site (<http://elearning.uninet.cm/moodle/course/view.php?id=6>) is under construction and development, not yet available to public use as concerns logging into the system, but visible and immensely promising with regard to e pedagogy and e technology. There is effective team work (Forster, 1992) going on as I am assisted by ICT experts to develop the site. The following lines are an excerpt extracted directly from the introduction of the site:

Reading and interpreting the multidimensional and enigmatic nature of human existence and experience in literary texts involves a complex and intriguing network of intrinsic and extrinsic theoretical sources.

*This course gives an overview of Literary Theory and Criticism. It highlights the construing of Criticism, Theory, and the dynamism of literary textuality and demonstrates how this dialogic relationship functions. **Most importantly, it integrates ICT as instructional innovation with regard to the elearning platform that orientates student-centred online and offline digital learning and researching.***

Objectives

To critically assess the reception of different theories and approaches, proponents and arguments, taking into consideration the context in which these are appropriated.

To identify the different discourses within the same theoretical paradigm, pointing out dimensions of convergence and divergence.

To situate the context in which literary theory and practical criticism are mutually inclusive in enhancing the reading and interpretation of texts.

The objectives are indicative of the kind of material which is required to be designed and put in the repository for availability and accessibility to learners once they start logging into the site.

Subject Matter and Content Management

Moodle incorporates a learning content management system (LMCS) which provides software tools that ascertain storage, use and reuse of prepared content. In other terms this system guarantees accessibility, modification, alteration, recycling and updating of content by the course instructor. In this vain several files have been uploaded into the Critical Theory site. Learners and researchers can download material at any convenient time for use. Besides, many links to good quality web sources have been made available for exploration in the field, and print material has also been referred to in a general bibliography that has been provided. The table below presents an overview of the course:

Course Planning for Critical Theory and Practical Criticism

Nature: Mixed Mode/Blended Learning (F 2 F & Online)

Week	Subject Matter	Procedure	Duration/Hours
1	General Introduction to Critical Theory	F2F & Online	2
2	The Complexity of the Literary Text	F2F & Online	2
3	Reader Oriented Criticism	F2F & Online	2
4	Psychoanalytical Criticism: Sigmund Freud	F2F & Online	2
5	Psychoanalytical Criticism: Harold Bloom	F2F & Online	2
6	Psychoanalytical Criticism: Harold Bloom	Online	2
7	Psychoanalytical Criticism: Harold Bloom	F2F & Online	2
8	Feminism & Literary Discourse: Introduction	F2F & Online	2
9	Feminist Discourses -a) First wave Feminism -b) Liberal Feminism -c) Marxist Feminism -d) Psychoanalytical Feminism	F2F & Online	2
10	Feminist Discourses -e) Lesbian Feminism -f) Queer Theory Contextualising and Decontextualising Discourses	F2F & Online	2
11	Feminist Discourses -g) Black Feminism and Postcolonial Theory -h) The African/Oriental Experience -i) The African American Paradigm	F2F & Online	2
12	Postmodern Criticism -a) Poststructuralism & Deconstruction -b) Resistance to Theory	F2F & Online	2
13	Ecocriticism & Literature	F2F & Online	2
14	General Revision and Final Evaluation	F2F & Online	

As concerns the procedure specifically, the course adopts the mixed mode or blended learning which requires both face to face interactions and online activity. The reason is evident; students are being introduced to this ICT modeled teaching for the first time. This requires patience and gradual mastery before eventual full time online learning. It is without doubt that ICT has not come to completely dislodge the lecturer from his conventional role in higher education. Each lecture has its introduction, objectives, activities, print and e textbook resources and online resources such as web links.

Strategies and Activities

What activities are in the course site? How effectively can these activities be used strategically to assess learning achievements? I have been using what I would coin traditional strategies before this ambitious project. Dealing with students whose awareness is good online social networking sites like Yahoo, Google+, Skype, Twitter, and Hi5, it has been quite rewarding engaging them in one to one and one to many communication. In this regard Yahoo and Google have served a good purpose as sites for email and news group interactions. Mailing lists have been created which I use to give instructions and also provide material that can be downloaded. With the Moodle platform and with appropriate expertise it is a move toward professionalising ICT.

Pic 1. A view of a lecture on the site featuring contents and activities

Som Naidu (2006, 1) proposes types or modalities of elearning which can be appropriately contextualized in our case:

Individualised Self-paced e-Learning <i>Online</i>	Individualised Self-paced e-Learning <i>Offline</i>
Group-Based e-Learning <i>Synchronously</i>	Group-Based e-Learning <i>asynchronously</i>

Individualised self-paced online refers to elearning with accessibility to online data resource bases. Individualised self-paced offline applies to elearning with accessibility to offline but digital material from gadgets like DVDs, CD ROMs, and USBs. Group-based elearning synchronously refers to one or two-way audio and videoconferencing with learners working together online and in group-based elearning asynchronously learners engage in “on-line discussions via electronic mailing lists and text-based conferencing within learning managements systems” at different time axes.

The dynamism of the lecturer, the multiple involvements of learners, motivational aspects in ICT like giving students allowance to initiative all militate in favour for an effective elearning atmosphere. With the above modalities there is guarantee to a multivariate approach which can allow learners to study even in advance of timed lectures. The course site provides such activities as forums, chats, feedback, quiz, workshop, and wikis. An activity will depend on the lecture and the need for an elastic methodology. In a lecture like "The Complexity of a Literary Text" a discussion forum would be an appropriate activity which may require learners to give their diverse views on what they consider to be a literary text. Learners can download critical material on a discourse in feminism, read and assess the material and then upload their feedback in pdf format. They can be asked to apply a theoretical discourse to a literary text and posit their work into the course site for evaluation.

I am aware that a pertinent digital age problem is academic dishonesty as it is easy for students to cut and paste digital or electronic material in violation of scientific principles in academic writing and appropriation of intellectual property. In whatever activities the learners will be involved in they are referred to sites like www.plagiarism.org and www.writecheck.turnitin.com to ensure honesty and quality use of material from web search.

I have provided useful accessible sites through which learners can browse to activating their capacity and competence in ICT and literary criticism. General sites on ICT related content include www.elearningcourses.org and www.elearning-courses-online.com. With regard to sites from which resourceful material on critical theory and practical criticism can be accessed and obtained there are examples like www.literature-study-online.com, www.postcolonialweb.org/index.html, www.jstor.org, and www.doaj.org/. For specific sites with standardized courses on critical theory and literary criticism good examples are Kristi Siegel www.kristisiegel.com/theory.htm, Bruce Harvey www2.fiu.edu/harveyb/brucetheorynew.htm and Dino Franco Felluga www.cla.purdue/english/theory. It is certain that after the fourth e-school the course site will go operational.

Stakes and Challenges: Future Perspectives

The stakes and challenges this course site faces fall under the general overview of ICT problems of the University of Yaounde I. I would focus on the specific context of this course site within the larger framework of the challenges of implementing effective ICT. Laura Czerniewicz and Tony Carr (2011) are incontestably right in asserting that

Educational technologists are acutely affected by the rapid pace of technological change and by developments within a new and emerging profession. In African universities technology initiatives often face further challenges relating to infrastructure, staff capacity, limited access to professional networks, sever resource constraints and until very recently exorbitantly expensive and highly unreliable bandwidth.

Tim Unwin (2004), Bhupendra Yadav (2004), Peter Limb (2005), Willinsky J. et al. (2005), and Bjorn Stensaker et al. (2007) have also expressed similar concerns. Such problems have been encountered even as the Moodle platform is under construction, but the University is appropriately addressing them on long term basis. In solving problems new problems are created, no doubt, but modernizing course contents is largely enriching and profitable and remains a priority with excellent promise.

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