IN MODULES WE TRUST

Unlike the conventional university which relies on lectures to deliver content knowledge, OUM utilises the printed module as its main teaching-learning tool. OUM's learning modules are unique in that they encapsulate not only the curriculum but also the content knowledge in digestible form which learners need to master within a semester of studies. Also, in contrast to lectures which are held within the confines of what is essentially private space, OUM's modules are in the public domain, exposing them to public scrutiny and critique, which makes it all the more crucial that they be of the highest standard. This issue of TCX examines the centrality of modules in OUM's provision of higher education and OUM's continuing efforts to produce modules of impeccable standards.

REGULARS

FEATURES

TCX
TUTOR CONNEXXIONS

EDITOR'S NOTE

What's Godzilla doing on the cover, you ask? Think of it as a multiple symbol for the theme of TCX24: In Modules We Trust, which had the original working titles of Modules R' Us and Modules vs. Textbooks. Precisely what it figures is up to the reader.

Godzilla could be read as modules overtaking textbooks, the costs of which have been rising steadily over the years, scandalizing many students around the world. Godzilla could be OUM subject matter experts consuming available textbooks in order to re-condense a given body of knowledge in module form. Godzilla could also be viewed as OUM learners as the powerful final arbiter of what constitutes good learning materials. The choice is yours!

We hope the contents of TCX24 will serve as food for thought on the uses of learning materials and the potential they have to enhance teaching and learning. As usual, we look forward to receiving your feedback on the features.

One final note: The main features on the web version of TCX now come with a rating system and a comment box for your input. We hope you'll find them useful.

All the best in the new September 2009 semester.

Dr David C.L. Lim
Chief Editor

THE USE OF ENGLISH TO PRODUCE QUALITY GRADUATES

I would like to congratulate TCX for the recent issue on quality graduates. I believe that our students need to improve their command of the English language. Hence, even if some OUM tutors teach in both Bahasa Malaysia and English, I only teach them in English because I am confident this language will be useful for them in their careers.

Also, I am saddened by the lack of involvement of tutors in the myLMS forum. There is a column in myLMS which allows them to communicate with each other but it is not utilised well. I hope more tutors will make use of it for the sharing of knowledge.

Abd Rahman Ahmad
Batu Pahat Learning Centre

SHARING OF OPINIONS

Basically, I am quite happy with the quality of TCX newsletters. I have read the past issues and I find that it is a good place for tutors to share their personal opinions. In fact, I find the information and articles both informative and beneficial.

Ganesan a/l S. Kuppusamy
Penang Learning Centre

NO SME MODERATING FORUM

I would like to express my disappointment with SMEs for not replying to questions posted by tutors in myLMS. At the end of the day, tutors are answering the questions of other tutors. This should not be the case. I hope something is done to correct this problem.

Jeya Chitrah a/p Muniswaran
Penang Learning Centre

For your information, the SME-Tutor forum has been removed from myLMS effective from the May 2009 semester. If you have any queries regarding a subject, please contact the respective faculty directly.

OUM STUDENTS ARE HIGHLY MOTIVATED

Sometimes we hear people saying that OUM graduates are of low quality but I do not think so. I have taught in other universities as well and find that OUM learners are motivated to learn. In fact, they show the potential to be quality educators.

My tutorials are always full and I enjoy teaching them. Sure, there may be a few students who are uncooperative but I try to reach out to them by phone calls or SMS. For me, being highly motivated to study is a key part of being a quality graduate.

Julita @ Norjietta bt Taisin
Kota Kinabalu Learning Centre

We welcome letters from our readers on any issue that may be of concern to you. You may use a pseudonym if you wish but please mention which learning centre you are from. Please e-mail us at tcx@oum.edu.my.

IMPORTANT DATES

OMES Deadlines

PROGRAMME	ACTIVITY	DATE (2009)
Undergraduate	Key in marks for assignment and quizzes*	9 – 22 Nov
	Key in marks for online participation*	1 – 7 Dec
	Except for seven MCQ-format subjects	
Postgraduate	Key in marks for Assignment 1	26 Oct – 8 Nov
	Key in marks for Assignment 2	23 Nov – 6 Dec
	Key in marks for online participation	19 – 27 Dec

Upcoming Activities

ACTIVITY	DATE (2009)	REMARKS
Malaysian Qualifications Agency Visit/ Interview	24 - 25 Oct	Sarawak Learning Centre: Bachelor of Multimedia Communication with Honours (BMC).
	7 - 8 Nov	Melaka Learning Centre: BMC
Monitoring of New/Senior Tutors and Facilitators	Tutorials/ Seminars 1-5	Observation during tutorials/ seminars will be conducted by Lead Tutors and academic staff.
Teaching Permit Application	Tutorial 3	Submit your application form to the administrator at your learning centre.

MODULES VS. TEXTBOOKS

By Harvinder Kaur Dharam Singh

Learning materials are vital to open and distance learning (ODL) because they replace teachers and classroom learning. Like many other ODL institutions, OUM takes pride in designing and developing learning materials in the form of print modules, CDs, web-based content and others for the purpose of enhancing and sustaining its blended pedagogy.

OUM develops the learning materials through a stringent process which is supported by academic experts and instructional designers. However, there have been some comments from some learners and tutors on the need to improve certain modules. Should improvements be made to the modules or should these be replaced with textbooks? To answer this question, first let's understand the differences between modules and textbooks.

A typical ODL module contains a course guide, learning outcomes, activities, summaries, key terms and self-marked tests. It will have a friendly style of writing with learners addressed as "you," lots of examples, a highly structured layout with many headings, various signposting devices, less text than a textbook and structured spaces for learners to write responses for activities. A textbook published in present times will also have almost all of the above. But it will probably have more text, fewer signposting devices and less space for learners' responses. Both modules and textbooks can be published in print or digital format.

Modules have an advantage over textbooks in that the former have clear objectives and are more concise and straight to the point, making them appealing to OUM learners. Modules encourage self-learning and usually contain examples set in the local context, which are hardly found in renowned textbooks as they focus on the international arena. In addition, it is more economical to print modules than purchase textbooks in larger quantities.

On the other hand, textbooks are written by field experts and undergo a rigorous editing process which makes them fundamentally free from grammatical errors and plagiarism. Textbooks also have better presentation than modules because of the colours and graphics used.

Nevertheless, in comparing modules and textbooks, the emphasis should be on the actual value of learning, which is determined by neither the cover nor the colours of the books. Instead, it is about providing quality content and presenting it pedagogically. While some modules need to improve in terms of quality, they also need to remain centred on the importance of meeting the needs of ODL learners.

Modules ought to facilitate the transmission of a meaningful learning experience, knowledge and skills to learners as stipulated by the learning outcomes. Prevention and early detection of problematic content in modules are crucial to avoid affecting learners' performance. Similarly, the other forms of learning materials should also be well devised for learning. Poor pedagogical instructions in learning materials will result in high dropout rates and affect the University's reputation.

Although the quality of a few OUM modules needs to be improved, OUM does have some excellent modules. One of these is *OUMH 1103 Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners*, which received the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) Excellence in Distance Education Award for Distance Education Materials. This is a great example of what OUM is capable of achieving in terms of providing its learners with learning materials of high quality. TCX

INTERVIEW WITH PROF DR MOHD KIDIN

By Teo Hui Thian

PROF DR MOHD KIDIN SHAHRAN is the Dean of the Faculty of Science and Technology. In this interview, he explains about the development of modules at OUM.

Teo: Could you tell us a bit about yourself?

Prof Kidin: Prior to joining OUM in 2003, I was in UKM for 29 years. I was with the Department of Statistics, Faculty of Science and Technology. Towards the end of my service in UKM, I was made the coordinator of the Mathematics Programme for UKM's Distance Learning Education from 1996 to 2003.

So, when I joined OUM it was easy for me to adapt my experience to the distance learning education environment.

Teo: Do you think online learning is the way forward?

Prof Kidin: Yes, I do. This is because the Malaysian public is familiar with and has access to the Internet and mobile technology. The infrastructure is already there, so what we have to do is to make our programmes available through the media.

This goes well with our motto, "University for All," whereby we provide opportunities for the public to access our programmes in e-learning mode without having to go to a physical campus.

Teo: OUM, being an open and distance learning university, relies heavily on self-study, thus making course modules a crucial aspect of the total learning experience. What is your comment on this?

Prof Kidin: Yes, for the open and distance learning mode practised by OUM, quality modules play an important role. Ideally, the modules should be self-explanatory and user-friendly to enhance self-study. However, this apparently made the modules very thick and bulky.

So, the module writers/ moderators have to scale down the content by retaining only the gist of the subject. To achieve this, the faculty usually engages quality writers who are experts and very experienced in their areas. These are usually lecturers and professors from public universities.

Teo: In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good module?

Prof Kidin: It is self-explanatory and user-friendly. In addition, it is written in simple language and could be easily understood by our students. It should have the necessary information such as facts and figures.

It is also good to have hyperlinks to Internet resources and supplementary e-content to explain difficult concepts. This is especially helpful for technical subjects. Some of our modules are already accompanied by CDs, for example, the Biology module comes with a virtual lab.

Teo: What are the processes that a module has to go through before reaching learners?

Prof Kidin: Currently, the Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CIDT) and the faculty work hand in hand to produce quality modules. The faculty ensures that manuscripts are audited against the table of contents (TOC) of the subject, moderated and edited by faculty experts.

Then, the manuscript is sent to the CIDT for further development including instructional design work such as drawing fully illustrated graphs and providing figures. After meeting all the requirements and obtaining the faculty's

endorsement, the CIDT would produce the modules. The printed modules would then be distributed to registered students well before the first tutorial.

Teo: What are the challenges and issues your faculty faces when dealing with modules?

Prof Kidin: The main challenge is getting qualified and good writers. Not many subject matter experts are good writers. Thus, some of the common issues are matching the contents with the TOC and meeting deadlines. However, with the good work of the programme coordinator and good collaboration with writers, we manage to settle these issues.

Teo: How do you navigate past these issues and how successful are you in doing so?

Prof Kidin: Sometimes, although we advertised, we could not find writers for a specific course. We would then look for a textbook that matches the course TOC very closely. This is a temporary measure and we will continue looking for good writers for that area.

Another step that we have taken is to team up with publishers and get professional writers. We have been quite successful in this, whereby we collaborated with a publisher for some of our modules and managed to upgrade them to textbook standard.

Teo: What are the improvements you would like to see in the modules?

Prof Kidin: There is always room for improvement as we believe quality is an ongoing process. Besides wanting more of our modules upgraded to textbook standard, I would also like to see our modules being improved in terms of the content to match students' needs.

As students are mostly working adults, they do not have much time to look for more information from various other sources. So, the modules have to be comprehensive. It would be good if we can have a "one-stop module" or "self-explanatory module" from which our students can get all the information they need, especially for difficult subjects.

Teo: What is your plan for future module preparation and development?

Prof Kidin: One of the plans for module preparation is to have ongoing training for writers, moderators and editors for subject matter experts. Next, we will engage them very
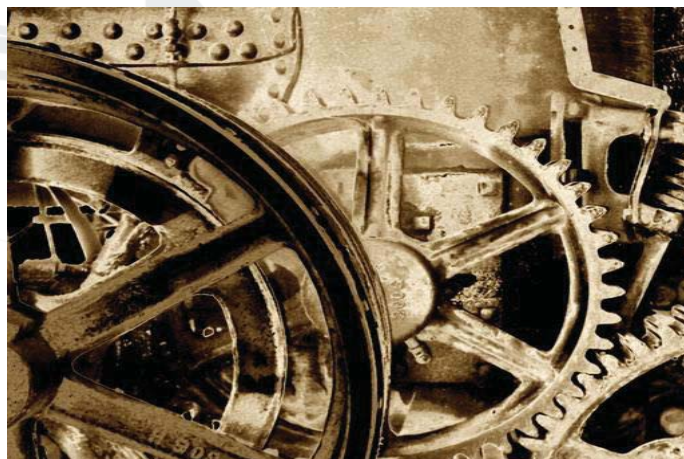
"There is always room for improvement as we believe quality is an ongoing process"

early, such as one year ahead, to give them ample time to produce good and quality manuscripts. Another plan is to review current modules and upgrade them to textbook standard, which will be useful especially when we offer our programmes abroad. However, this plan will be done gradually.

The more immediate plan is to have study guides for more modules uploaded onto the online system where tutors can access them. We are also moving towards providing e-content where we would have hyperlinks and multimedia-rich features as I explained earlier.

Teo: Do you have any advice for tutors in using modules to enhance students' learning experience?

Prof Kidin: I would like to advise our tutors to read beyond the modules so that they are more knowledgeable in their subjects. Since there are only five face-to-face tutorials, they should prepare ahead of their tutorials so that they can explain things better to their students within the limited time. TCX

INSIGHT INTO THE
MODULE PRODUCTION PROCESS

Interview with Datin Hanin by Lilian Kek Siew Yick

DATIN HALIMATOLHANIN BINTI MOHD KHALID is the Director of the Centre for Instructional Design and Technology (CIDT). She explains to Lilian Kek how CIDT develops modules from scratch until they become finished products.

Lilian: Could you briefly tell us about the function of CIDT?

Datin Hanin: The main function of CIDT is to develop and produce quality learning materials for OUM learners. CIDT also develops online and multimedia learning materials such as learning objects, i-tutorials, video lectures, audio modules and learning segments in i-Radio.

In addition, it supports the University by providing services which include art and design, video shooting and editing, montage, photography and delivery of learning materials through its logistics unit.

Lilian: Can you give us an overview of the major processes in your department?

Datin Hanin: The major processes at CIDT involve the development of print modules. It starts with the recruitment and training of subject matter experts to become our module writers and moderators. When the writers receive their appointment letter to write modules, they also receive the titles and tables of contents of the modules as well as the timeline for them to complete the writing.

After they have written and submitted the contents, these are scanned through an anti-plagiarism software. This is crucial because we want to avoid having plagiarised contents in our modules. Next, the writing and language are reviewed. If found unsuitable, the contents will be returned to the writer for improvement.

Next, the contents will be reviewed by moderators (who are also subject matter experts). All contents need to be correct, current, have enough depth and suit the level of the learners.

The moderated contents are further improved upon by our instructional designers (ID), who will enhance the text flow and add illustrations and diagrams so that the module is not too text heavy. This is to make the module simple enough for learners. The IDs also put themselves in the shoes of the learners by trying to understand the language used and seeing whether the contents are clear.

They will also ensure that the learning outcomes, activities and self assessments are aligned. For illustrations and diagrams, graphic designers will create new artwork or improve those supplied by the writers. The contents are then passed to the Editorial Unit for editing.

The next step involves getting desktop publishers to do the layout. After that, a team of CIDT reviewers will review the content. Proofreading is also done. The draft copies are then sent to the respective faculties/school/centre for further review. Field testing of new modules needs to be conducted to improve the quality of modules further.

After amendments have been done, a mock-up copy is submitted again, this time to be signed off by the Dean/Head/Director. The softcopy is then sent to METEOR Doc Sdn Bhd (MDoc) for printing. Finally, the Logistics Unit will pack and deliver the printed modules to the learning centres.

Lilian: How many staff are there at CIDT?

Datin Hanin: There are 60 full-time staff.

Lilian: What is your role as the Director of CIDT?

Datin Hanin: I think, most importantly, it is to get the staff to not only understand but internalise the meaning of quality learning materials and how their role is crucial in producing quality learning materials. Teamwork and motivation are the keywords.

Getting each staff to be involved and take pride in their work are the main objectives. We need to create a happy and conducive environment. We also need to keep our blood pressure low!

Lilian: How are modules useful for ODL learners?

"Getting each staff to be involved and take pride in their work are the main objectives"

Datin Hanin: The modules are simple and easy to understand. They provide guidance and meaningful activities to assist the learners in learning. The simplified diagrams, tables and graphics are helpful too. The modules are also standard in size and pagination. Learners can know the number of pages in a topic, which could make it easier for them to plan their learning.

Lilian: What are some of the challenges CIDT faces in developing quality learning materials?

Datin Hanin: We are short of quality and committed writers for some modules. We also have writers pulling out at the last minute, which affects our production timelines.

Lilian: How does CIDT overcome these problems?

Datin Hanin: We continuously plan and strategise at every stage of the process.

Lilian: What are your aspirations for the department?

Datin Hanin: That the learning materials and services provided will become world class.

Write for TCX and Win RM50!

Are you currently a tutor at OUM? Looking for an outlet to share your thoughts about any aspect of teaching and learning?

If so, we'd love to hear from you.

Send us your completed articles. Or, if you prefer, chat with the Editors about story ideas you're thinking of developing. E-mail us at tcx@oum.edu.my.

If your article is published, you'll receive a token sum of RM50. (Internal and full-time staff are not eligible).

MODULES WORLDWIDE

By Dr Thirumeni T. Subramaniam

A learning module is a package of selected information which focuses on a specific subject that has been appropriately designed to provide the learner with an educational opportunity in a self-directed learning format. Experience has shown that diverse audiences are highly receptive to obtaining information through learning modules.

What is the rationale for most open universities in spending time and money on preparing course material in modular form when course materials in suitable formats are readily available in vast number in the form of textbooks? Focus and a self-directed learning format are the two module elements that are often missing in a textbook.

The quality of the learning environment is dependent on the soundness of both the content and instruction contained in the learning materials, not merely technology. Advancement in technology, however, changes the way courses are developed and delivered. The module remains an important element in the teaching and learning process of the open and distance education system in the face of changing technology and learning culture.

The Open University in United Kingdom (OUUK), one of the top-ranking universities in the world, is recognised for having an excellent teaching record. The university, which was started with the idea of combining broadcast lectures with correspondence text, still provides modules as printed materials, thus keeping true to its mission to be open in its method of delivery. It has increased its methods of delivery to include web-based materials and has created a campus in Second Life (this is a free 3D virtual world where users can socialise, connect and create using free voice and text chat). The purpose of the campus is to enable the varied and widely dispersed student body to meet, work and live together in a virtual community.

Elsewhere, the Athabasca University, a leading open university in Canada, offers print modules also. It employs a broad spectrum of distance learning methods and relies on a variety of information technologies to deliver course materials and instruction to students. The study structure is designed to allow individualised study using course materials in print or online form. The option to study in groups is also available. Similar to OUUK, it also offers additional formats of learning material such as multimedia, web, Internet, CD-ROM, computer software, audio/video tapes, TV and radio.

The Indira Gandhi National Open University in India, which has a large number of students from diverse locations, also uses modules in print form. The learning environment at this university is supported by the use of audio-video production to suit the needs of its student population.

A slightly different learning environment is offered at the Korea National Open University, where textbooks are provided along with workbooks instead of modules. The textbooks are partly written by the teaching members of the university. The workbooks contain summarised core items, supplementary learning materials and exercises for self-evaluation; these are designed to promote learning. Supplementary learning materials using a wide range of technologies are provided as in other open universities.

Closer to home, both Universitas Terbuka Indonesia and University of the Philippines Open University also use modules as teaching materials.

What types of learning materials are used depends on the setting of the open university as well as the diversity and learning culture of its students. In order to produce highly effective modules, a university must have academic manpower support, sufficient experience in open and distance learning and understanding of its students' learning needs. TCX

MAXIMISING THE USE OF MODULES

By Richard Ng

The blended learning pedagogy used by Open University Malaysia (OUM) offers the best of both worlds, a balance between traditional classroom and pure online learning. Blended learning enables tutors to support the learning style which is best for each student. Learners do not just like one way to learn and hence, blended learning can provide them with different ways of learning without making learning experience difficult.

The module acts as a guide and point of reference. Tutors can use different approaches in supporting learning such as collaborative learning or online discussion by referring to topics in the modules provided to all learners.

Modules developed by OUM are study materials meant to drive learning. They are made available in hardcopy and softcopy so that tutors and learners could use them anywhere and anytime at their convenience. They are learner-friendly, self-contained and feature a step-by-step guide that provides learners with customised contents.

Compared to many other universities, OUM has spent millions of ringgit in setting up the Centre for Instructional and Design Technology (CIDT), which is responsible for producing good study materials for its learners. The challenge is for tutors to use their creativity in order to fully utilise the materials.

The modules are well-structured and incorporate the syllabus of each course. They are also rich in content and meet a certain level of quality. Thus, tutors need not worry about the depth of coverage in their lessons. All they need to do is read, plan and implement what is in the modules whether through face-to-face sessions or the online discussion forum.

Before the start of each tutorial, tutors can post messages in the forum to inform learners about what will be covered in the coming tutorial so that they are alerted on what to prepare. This is important as learners have very limited time for studying. During face-to-face sessions, tutors can present slides based on the topics in the module in order to highlight important issues.

Tutors can also post up issues based on the modules and get learners involved in collaborative learning. Tutors

"The modules are well structured and incorporate the syllabus of each course"

can facilitate these discussions so that feedback is given to learners. At the end of the discussions, tutors can post short quizzes to test what was learned from such discussions.

With less time spent on what to cover in a particular topic as the modules provide the required information and depth of coverage, tutors can use the remaining time to focus on finding ways to make learning flexible and fun and at the same time, tailor their tutorials to the different learning styles of learners. To make the modules useful, tutors should help learners to learn how to use the modules.

A number of blogs have been developed by tutors to help learners understand the content of some modules. These blogs are used to post video clips of what has been learned and also to provide supplementary notes and exam tips. Some modules are accompanied by mobile learning to alert learners on what will be covered or what topics are being discussed in the online forum. These are some of the innovative initiatives taken by tutors to help their learners.

With the advent of technology, much more can and should be done by tutors to help their learners to read and understand the contents of their modules. Tutors should ride on Web 2.0 to make learning interactive and get learners engaged. Engaged learners will be less likely to drop out of their programmes. TCX

SHANMUGA SHARES HIS VIEWS

Interview by Nazrai Ahmad Zabidi

SHANMUGA NATHAN A/L RAMASAMY has been tutoring at OUM for the last four years. He shares his views on the role of modules in the teaching and learning process at OUM.

Nazrai: When did you begin tutoring at OUM and what were the subjects you taught?

Shanmuga Nathan: I have been tutoring at OUM since 2005. I began tutoring at the Likas Learning Centre in Kota Kinabalu for the open market programmes. Later, I coordinated the KDP 14-week programme at my college level. The courses which I have been teaching are *HBEF 2103 Psikologi Pendidikan* and *OUMH 1103 Learning Skills for Open and Distance Learners*.

Nazrai: What is your opinion of OUM modules in general?

Shanmuga Nathan: I find *OUMH 1103* one of the best modules OUM has produced. It is a quality module and I use it as my reference when teaching students in other programmes. As for the *HBEF 2103* module, I find it covers most of the required areas.

Nazrai: Do you only use the module or other extra learning materials as well?

Shanmuga Nathan: I use other sources and materials too but I emphasise to learners the need to use their module as the core reference.

Nazrai: Do you think OUM modules are well-written and easily understood by learners?

Shanmuga Nathan: Depends on which module you are referring to. But for the above two modules, I find them well-written.

Nazrai: Can learners rely on the modules alone or should they refer to other materials too?

Shanmuga Nathan: If they want to just pass their exams, the modules are sufficient. However, for the purpose of gaining knowledge and better understanding, they definitely need to refer to more resources.

Nazrai: What changes would you recommend to further improve the modules you are using in the tutorials?

Shanmuga Nathan: Keep improving the contents and presentation of the modules.

Nazrai: How can tutors contribute to the improvement of modules in the quest for quality?

Shanmuga Nathan: They should be involved in workshops to discuss and improve the modules.

ONLINE POLL

In order to benefit both tutors and learners, OUM modules should:

1. Be concise and touch on fundamental facts and theories

2. Cover important facts in greater detail, like a textbook

3. Touch on fundamental facts but include more thought-provoking questions

4. Include content and exercises that are relevant to real-life situations

Please cast your votes online!

WHICH IS BETTER – MODULES OR TUTORIALS?

Compiled by Azeezah Jameelah

Effective learning consists of reading modules as well as listening to and participating in tutorials. Reading a module before attending tutorials will give us an overview of the subjects that we are going to learn. We can find out what we do not understand and prepare questions so as to get assistance from the tutors. Being attentive in tutorials will enable us to understand better and faster. By listening, what we have understood through reading will be reinforced too. To participate in tutorials is to test how much knowledge we have acquired and whether we know how to apply it. Besides, we can interact with our coursemates and tutors. This will give us a chance to develop our personalities and practise good values. Thus, I consider our learning process incomplete without any of these components.

Kok Ah Moy
Serdang Raya Learning Centre

Reading modules and listening to tutorials are equally important. OUM uses the blended pedagogy mode which calls for face-to-face interactions between tutors and their students, unlike ordinary tutorials where tutors teach and students listen, which is a passive mode indeed. Face-to-face interaction further enhances students' understanding of what they have read or gathered from the modules because tutors could provide spontaneous verbal explanations with written blackboard examples.

The face-to-face mode also provides true or authentic teaching-learning encounters and experiences which support the modules. I hope at OUM, listening to tutorials is not defined as a continuous talk or delivery of content by the tutor with little or no contribution from the students and strictly focused on specific lecture topics based on the tutors' interest. A tutorial at OUM should refer to a mini tutorial and brief input on issues raised by students followed by a short discussion before moving on to another mini tutorial. If this student-centred approach is carried out, the students would become active learners, well-guided by the tutors for better understanding of the modules.

Naina Mohd bin Md Noor
Kedah Learning Centre

I believe both modules and tutorials are equally important, based on the following reasons:

1. Learners have different learning styles. Modules cater to visual learners while tutorials cater to auditory ones.

2. Certain things in the modules which are not clear to learners can be clarified when they attend tutorials.

3. As human beings, most learners need human contact and face-to-face communication, if only to reassure themselves that someone does care about their learning experience.

Ho Theen Theen
Sarawak Learning Centre

Based on my experience, I think tutorials are better. I am teaching programming-related subjects and physics. During a tutorial, students can see the actual process of drawing a diagram from scratch. This also applies to writing program codes. By looking at the process, the students will know where to start and how to proceed until the final product is achieved. Sad to say, this is fast missing from the learning environment!

Yap Thin Peng
Perak Learning Centre

Both reading modules and attending tutorials are important. Reading is more for self understanding while tutors' viewpoints and explanations bring new thought. Tutorials provide experience and conclusions from observations which may be different from what is contained in modules and learners can transfer these to new ideas.

Wee Kian Ping
Sarawak Learning Centre

ONLINE MATH RESOURCE CENTRE

By Dr Safiah Yusof

The new OUM Mathematics Resource Centre (MRC) is OUM's latest innovation for its learners. Set up in March this year, the MRC is a special project undertaken by the Senior Vice President's Office. It is part of OUM's continuous efforts as a distance learning provider in supporting lifelong learning.

The MRC was initially designed based on the characteristics and functions of a learning centre. An on-ground tutoring centre on campus normally offers free tutoring and support services for its learners. Learners could get help from their course instructors as well as other tutors throughout the day on a walk-in basis or by appointment.

As OUM is an ODL institution with learners scattered throughout the country, providing such support and services online seemed practical. Furthermore, with online learning being a component of the blended pedagogy at OUM, it made sense to use the same platform as myLMS to develop an online resource centre.

The University strongly feels the need to provide additional support and services for students learning math, particularly at the basic and lower levels. This is because past student performance in assignments and exams indicated that learners were struggling with math. It might be due to their lack of basic math skills or lack of preparation for college math.

Currently, OUM does not offer any developmental or remedial math course that will help non-traditional learners prepare for the math courses they must take in their programmes. These learners may need additional help and support beyond and outside the normal contact hours for the math courses. Through MRC, the University hopes to provide the additional help and support services.

The main function of the MRC is to serve as a learning and resource centre for OUM learners who need help in basic math or would like to review early math topics. The MRC is not meant to replace online discussion forums, modules and face-to-face tutorials. Instead, it will complement them and serve as an alternative for learners when they are unable to get help through the regular channels.

The support will be given through quality and engaging learning resources. The MRC will house a variety of resources for learners' use. It will also benefit tutors and facilitators by providing them with useful resources for teaching math. The resources include and are not limited to supplemental notes, supplemental practice exercises, interactive/ multimedia tutorials, interactive practice problems, pencasts and audio/ video tutorials. There are also links to useful math websites with external resources. The development of learning resources will be a continuing process and the database of resources will keep growing.

The MRC is now accessible to learners and the OUM community at http://e-content.oum.edu.my/portal/. It could also be accessed via myLMS by clicking on the MRC tab at the top of the myLMS page or via the OUM home page, by clicking the MRC icon link at the bottom of the page. The forum area is now open to learners and tutors alike.

The University welcomes everyone's participation and contribution to the forum. The MRC also plans to offer free online tutoring to registered OUM learners, whereby they could get live help from available online tutors. An announcement will be posted in the forum area once the service is available.

The University hopes the MRC will serve its purpose and both tutors and learners will find the resources useful and the support helpful. TCX

* Dr Safiah Yusof is Senior Manager (Special Project) in the Senior Vice President's Office.

THE PENCIL

A pencil maker took a pencil aside, just before putting it into a box. "There are five lessons you need to know before I send you out into the world," he told the pencil, "Always remember them and you will become the best pencil you can be."

"One: You will be able to do many great things but only if you allow yourself to be held in someone's hand."

"Two: You will experience a painful sharpening from time to time but you will need it to become a better pencil."

"Three: You will be able to correct any mistakes you might make."

"Four: The most important part of you will always be what is inside."

"And Five: On every surface you are used on, you must leave your mark. No matter what the condition, you must continue to write."

The pencil promised to remember the five things and was placed in the box.

Now, replace the pencil with yourself. Apply the five lessons to yourself and you will become the best person you can be.

One: You will be able to do many great things but only if you allow yourself to be held in God's hand. And allow other human beings to access you for the many gifts you possess.

Two: You will experience a painful sharpening from time to time, by going through various problems in life, but you will need these to become a stronger person.

Three: You will be able to correct any mistakes you might make.

Four: The most important part of you will always be what is on the inside.

And Five: On every surface you walk through, you must leave your mark. No matter what the situation, you must continue to do your duties.

"No matter what happens, you must continue to do your duties and to do them to the best of your ability"

As an OUM tutor, your knowledge, expertise and experience are the gifts you possess. By imparting them to your learners, you can help them to grow and achieve their potential too. You might face various obstacles and challenges in carrying out your duties and responsibilities but in overcoming them, you will end up becoming an even better tutor. Whatever mistakes you make will be part of your learning process, since one learns from cradle to grave. In correcting your mistakes, you will develop strength of character and skills. No matter what happens, you must continue to do your duties and to do them to the best of your ability. This is your way of leaving your mark on society, by educating its members. TCX

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OPEN UNIVERSITY
MALAYSIA

Jalan Tun Ismail
50480 Kuala Lumpur
tcx@oum.edu.my