What is Skills Zone?

The Skills Zone is a collection of online tutorials that are intended to help young people strengthen and build critical skills in priority areas, including study skills, language and writing skills, numeracy, computer skills and personal/social skills. Content for the Skills Zone has been sourced from existing open source learning materials. These resources have been used to build the tutorials wherever possible and to create an appropriate learning pathway that enables students to access the online tutorials and learn at their own pace. While the tutorials do not constitute an accredited online program or course, it is hoped that the online tutorials will be useful to education providers when integrated into formal foundation courses or informal orientation and support programs for students.

Who is involved?

The Skill Zone is a project of the Vuma! Portal. While it has been set up to be integrated into the portal, Skills Zone can also be integrated into other learning platforms, like Moodle and Sakai. To date, the VUMA! Portal project has been funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation and the Ford Foundation. The donor funding received from the Ford Foundation in January 2011 has primarily been used to build the Skills Zone tutorials. The project is being managed by SAIDE, the South African Institute for Distance Education. Since the end of 2010 the WITS First Year Experience program has supported this work and will be assisting SAIDE in piloting the tutorials in early 2012. eLSI will be hosting these tutorials on their new electronic learning environment, Wits-e and will use the system and materials to start training students in 2012.

Skills Zone is an exciting collaboration which will also see the University of Venda, Limpopo and Tshwane University of Technology piloting the use of the tutorials, along with other facilities on the VUMA! Portal. TUT for example, will be using the group networking on the Portal to manage 500 students mentors across 7 campuses.

What role is eLSI playing in the project?

eLSI has supported SAIDE in testing the tutorials on the Sakai learner management system. This testing helped ensure that the tutorials can be easily transported to other systems to ensure ease of use and efficient learner tracking by individual universities. eLSI has also provided SAIDE with ICT materials which they developed as Open Education Resources (OERs). These have been re-worked and adapted for use in the Skills Zone. eLSI is hoping to use the tutorials to train students in the use of ICTs at Wits in 2012.
A change in scenery for 1st years

Newly enrolled first year students are going to find that they are the first large group at Wits to be introduced to Wits-e/Sakai, the University’s new e-Learning platform. Their induction to the new electronic learning environment, as opposed to the University’s current LMS, Ignite/Web CT, is due to the fact that the old platform will be discontinued at the end of 2012.

Although new students may not notice a change, it is likely that initially, academics who are familiar with WebCT, may experience a little disorientation as they get used to Sakai. However, as they become familiar with the platform, the range of tools available and its flexibility, they will probably discover and acknowledge that Wits-e offers significant improvements to their blended course offerings. Concurrent with the migration across to Sakai/Wits-e within their courses.

The class of 2015 will be the first to make full use of Sakai/Wits-e within their courses.

Wits-e, eLSI has encouraged lecturers to contact them so that they can assist and aid course coordinators move their content and assessments from one environment to another. At present, the training programme involves a series of workshops on Wits-e.

In February, the sessions will focus on five key component topics, including a prerequisite introductory workshop, content management, assessment, managing large classrooms and online grading.

The graduates of 2015 will be the first at Wits to make comprehensive use of Sakai/Wits-e within their courses. eLSI anticipates that these new users will find the move to a new learning environment to be smooth and seamless and expect that the changes will not disrupt the University teaching and learning programme.

Staff Profile: David Wafula Wanyonyi

Born David Wafula Wanyonyi, eLSI’s lead coder never dreamed that one day he would become a software developer, mainly because there were no computers at his school.

Growing up in rural Kenya, Wafula admits that he was a clumsy young man and broke all his mothers’ glasses. At that time he thought that he would become an electrical engineer; he was very good at making toys.

Wafula’s first degree was obtained from Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology. Here, he saw a computer for the very first time and fell in love with it. “If a computer can do such amazing things, then the person who created it is very smart”.”

When Wafula was still at university he wrote a programme for marking exams and managing transcripts. Today, JKUAT is still using a modified version of the same programme that he initiated.

Once graduated, Wafula moved into the private sector for a short period. Soon he returned to his alma mater and there he joined a Chisimba collaboration project, with the University of the Western Cape. As a member of this project, he was selected to go to South Africa for further training because he showed much programming promise.

Currently, Wafula is eLSI’s seasoned, unflappable and passionate software developer with a strong background in computer science. Under him, his team is working on getting Wits-e (http://ele.wits.ac.za), the new eLearning system, installed and configured.

I asked him for an explanation about what was involved in software development. He answered that coding fundamentally involves writing concise instructions to a computer in order for it to perform a specific task or a set of tasks. Typically, this involves mastery of the science of writing instructions. In the Computer Science world, these are referred to as Programming Language, and the process of writing the instructions is referred to as Computer Programming. I then asked Wafula if I could be a computer programmer and he said “Anyone can become a computer programmer, but it takes experience to become a good software developer”.

Wafula’s hard work and experience has earned him respect and admiration in his current position at eLSI. This respect will come in useful as he takes on the responsibility for the implementation of eLearning software at Wits. By: Nkaba Senne

eLSI has been established to explore, contribute to and expand the online education capacities of students and staff at Wits.

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Migration FAQ

1) What do you mean by ‘migration’?
Migration, in this context, means moving or transferring data from one platform to another.

2) Where are you migrating from?
We will be transferring content from WebCT to Sakai, the new learning platform.

3) Who is responsible for migration?
The eLSI Team will be in charge of migration. We consult with lecturers, and advise them when their content will be transferred. We also recommend that they attend a workshop. Academics will be informed about the transfer and asked to approve it.

4) How will migration affect courses?
Course activities should not be disrupted as eLSI has arranged a staggered migration. At present we have migrated all the first year courses. Thereafter, we will start with the second block or as lecturers come on board.

5) By when will everything be migrated?
WebCT shuts on December 14th 2012 and we will have migrated before this deadline.

By: Nkaba Senne

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