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HOW CAN A CLASS WEBSITE BE USED TO SUPPLEMENT TEACHING? A CASE STUDY OF ADVANCED LEVEL TECHNICAL COLLEGE LEARNERS IN OMAN

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Abstract. *This study examines how a class website can supplement the syllabus in an English language college level class in Oman. Having collected data from teachers about areas of the syllabus that were not being covered in class, a website was set up with the intention of providing a second classroom for students. The findings of this study include the better augmentation of the syllabus by specific use of computer-assisted language learning, an increase in learner motivation due to this and the creation of a means through which the learners can interact with the target language outside of class time.*

Key words: *computer-assisted language learning, syllabus, class website, learner motivation, Oman*

1. INTRODUCTION

There are two problems this study addresses. One is age old and the other is ultra-modern. The first is that students sometimes seem disconnected to the material in the syllabus. The second problem is very possibly due to the first and it is this; students' use of smart phones in classes is on the increase. The first problem is one of syllabus, the second is one concerns the misuse of new technologies. This paper aims to provide one solution that will solve both problems. Concerning the first, McKeachie (1986) says: "At the very least, the syllabus sends a symbolic message to the students regarding your personality as a teacher and the amount of investment you have made in the course" (p.22). Teachers are the nexus between the syllabus and the students. But there is a fundamental problem inherent in this relationship, and this is that teachers and students do not create the syllabus. The result of this is that if teachers and students are dissatisfied with the syllabus, there is very little they can do. The second problem is the issue of smart phone use in classrooms. New technologies are all around us these days. Smart phones seem as endemic to the classroom as they are to every other scene of our lives. This presents daily problems for teachers and learners. It is all too tempting for students to use these interactive devices in class.

What if a solution to both these problems lay in the marrying up of the two? What would happen if a class website were created and students were allowed to access this website on their smartphones in class? Would this allow the students and teachers to redesign the syllabus to their own needs? These are the questions I will attempt to answer in this paper.

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2. CURRICULUM, SYLLABUS AND A COURSE: TOWARDS A DEFINITION

The study began with a survey given to the fellow teachers. In order to begin investigating the dissatisfaction with the syllabus, the decision was made to define a few of the key terms with which teachers expressed the dissatisfaction. What did the teachers mean by a 'syllabus'? Did the teachers really even mean 'syllabus', or were they using the term as a 'catch-all' phrase when they really meant 'curriculum' or perhaps even 'course'? Once these questions are answered there remains a further final question: What actually constitutes the syllabus, curriculum and course for the Colleges of Technology in Oman? The first part of this essay will deal with these questions before attention is turned to a possible solution to the teachers' complaints.

All seven Colleges of Technology at Advanced Level in Oman use four documents to give teachers guidance on what and how to teach. These documents are produced by the Ministry of Manpower in the capital Muscat and must be strictly followed in terms of content. Though flexibility is entertained in terms of approach, the likelihood that teachers will ever have a role in terms of input is unlikely for the near future at least (Al Toubi, 1998).

These four documents are: the Oman Academic Standards (OAS), the Advanced Level Delivery Plan (alternatively titled Level Four Delivery Plan), the Advanced Level Learning Outcomes and the Graduate Attributes 2012. None of these documents claim explicitly to be the curriculum, the syllabus or the course. For this reason, it is necessary to first identify which are performing the roles of a curriculum, syllabus and course before any analysis of their shortcomings can take place. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) believe that a curriculum may be defined as a very general concept which involves consideration of the whole complex of philosophical, social and administrative factors which contribute to the planning of an educational program. The document that best offers teachers this long distance vision is the Graduate Attributes. This document lays out ten basic attributes that are desirable of graduates of the English Language Centre (ELC). An example of this general outlook can be found in Attributes 8 and 9 that are philosophical and social, yet extremely general: Attribute 8: (Students) Are committed to self-development through lifelong learning; Attribute 9: (Students) Are socially responsible citizens aware of contemporary issues in contributing to national development.

This theme of generality is reflected in the other eight attributes that the college expects of its graduates, but these attributes cannot be said to encompass the administrative and planning elements mentioned by Hutchinson and Waters above. These are to be found in the Oman Academic Standards (OAS). Though the OAS's do have a slightly more detailed time specification stated for each standard, they still only cover various metacognitive and linguistic skills students are expected to be capable of by the end of each level. It is this specification of content, but generalization of time frame that points the evidence in favor of the OAS and the Graduate Attributes as being the curriculum of the Colleges.

If this is true, what can be said to constitute the syllabus? Following Breen (1987), a syllabus can be described as performing seven basic functions. These functions and how they match up to the colleges Learning Outcomes are displayed below in Table 1.

Table 1 Do the Learning Outcomes match Breen's (1987) 7 specifications for a syllabus?

Specification	Yes/No
It breaks down language into manageable chunks	Yes
It makes the learning task seem manageable	Yes
It gives a pathway for teachers and learners	No
It states what should be learnt	Yes
It informs materials selection and production	Yes
It achieves standardization of input	Yes
It makes a basis for assessment	Yes

It can be seen from the above table that on the whole the Learning Outcomes fit into Breen's schemata for a syllabus. The exception is function 3. The Learning Outcomes provide a goal for learning rather than a pathway, there is a fixed achievement date for all outcomes, rather than an exact breakdown of when certain outcomes should be achieved.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define a syllabus as "… that part of the curriculum which is concerned with a specification of what units will be taught" (p.80). From this point of view, the Learning Outcomes can be said to be the syllabus of the colleges.

Significantly though, the Learning Outcomes stop short of going into an actual week by week plan. This is contained in the Advanced Level Delivery Plan. This plan is the road map for achieving the Learning Outcomes. It is this level of detail that points heavily in favor of the Delivery Plan being the college course. Indeed, this practical realization fits neatly into the below definition from Hutchinson and Waters (1996) of a course as "an integrated series of teaching-learning experiences whose ultimate aim is to lead the learners to a particular state of knowledge" (p.65).

Table 2 below displays the findings of the above discussion in a simpler form. In the interests of simplicity, the terms in the left hand column of Table 2 shall be used from now on. At the end of the teacher survey I included a matching exercise based on Table 2, in which teachers had to match up the items in from the left column with those in the right. The answers the teachers gave showed that there is very little consensus on what constitutes the curriculum, syllabus or course. This demonstrates that when the teachers complained against the syllabus, they were using the word loosely to encompass all of the four documents that they are given related to the course.

Table 2 Curriculum, syllabus and course at Oman Colleges of Technology

Curriculum	➡	Oman Academic Standards Graduate Attributes
Syllabus	➡	Learning Outcomes
Course	➡	Level Four Delivery Plan

3. ANALYSIS OF THE CURRICULUM, SYLLABUS AND COURSE

Now that the curriculum, syllabus and course have been defined, an analysis of what the teachers found to be their shortcomings may begin. To do this, it was decided to return to the teachers themselves to pose a question in reply to their statement that the syllabus was causing discontent. It was time to find out why the syllabus was creating disinterest.

Teachers are unique in their responsibility of implementing the curriculum, syllabus and course in classrooms on a daily basis. Based upon this, a seventy-five question survey was created to understand the teachers' views of where these shortcomings might lie. The questionnaire was given to the twenty-one teachers of Advanced Level groups at the English Language Centre in the Salalah College of Technology.

Before the survey was designed, I asked my colleagues to give me a one or two word answer to the question: Why is the syllabus causing so many issues? By far the most prevalent reason was that it was not achievable. This idea of achievability was adopted and used to analyze the elements of the syllabus and course. The answers to the first seventy-one questions were limited to yes or no responses in order to judge conclusively which sections of the syllabus and course were causing so much trouble for teachers and learners. For the last 4 questions of the survey, teachers were given ample space to write any particular opinions that might expose a more detailed picture of the failings of the syllabus and course. The results of the teacher questionnaire provided striking insights into the weakness of the curriculum, syllabus and course that shall be discussed now.

3.1. The curriculum

Figure 1 below shows that 70% of the Oman Academic Standards were considered achievable. This came as a surprise, as I had predicted a much lower outcome. It is clear from the survey data that the teachers did in fact think that most of the Standards were achievable throughout the course of the semester.
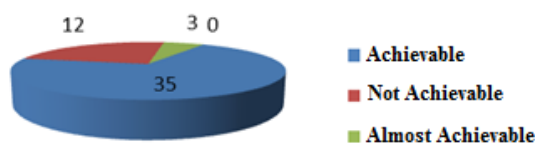

Fig. 1 Achievability of Oman Academic Standards

Significantly however, 24% were considered unachievable. These unachievable outcomes are displayed in the Table 3 below.

Table 3 Oman Academic Standards considered unachievable by teachers

No.	Standard
3.2.b	Paraphrase information (orally or in writing) from a written or spoken text or from graphically presented data.
3.2.j	Read an extensive text broadly relevant to the student's area of study (minimum three pages) and respond to the questions that require analytical skills e.g. prediction, deduction, inference.
6.2.1.a	Work in pairs or groups and participate accordingly i.e. take turns, initiate a discussion, interrupt appropriately, express an opinion.
6.2.1.h	Complete homework on time.
6.2.1.i	Continually revise one's work.
6.2.2.c	Use an English-English dictionary for language learning.
6.2.2.h	Find specific information using internet search engines and electronic resources.

In terms of the Graduate Attributes displayed in Figure 2 below, the picture is a little different. Forty percent were considered achievable with 20% being considered almost achievable. This means that the teachers believed that only a remaining 40% of the Graduate Attributes were achievable over the semester.

Fig. 2 Achievability of Graduate Attributes

The Graduate attributes that were considered unachievable by teachers are displayed in Table 4 below.

Table 4 Graduate Attributes considered unachievable by teachers

No.	Attribute:
Attribute 2	Are able to apply the knowledge and skills to a diverse and competitive work environment.
Attribute 4	Have a high degree of competence in using information and communication technology.
Attribute 5	Are professionally competent and up to date in their field of specialization in a changing global environment.
Attribute 8	Are committed to self-development through lifelong learning.

To conclude, it was clear that though my colleagues were dissatisfied with the curriculum aims, their criticisms were far from unanimous. Where was the unequivocal evidence in the data to support their original claim that the syllabus was causing dissatisfaction? In order to find this, it was decided to analyze the syllabus for the same failings.

3.2. The syllabus

Figure 3 below shows the compiled data of the teachers' responses to the achievability of the Learning Outcomes. Once again, it can clearly be seen that my colleagues considered the Learning Outcomes to be on the whole achievable, but that lack of achievability varied considerably by skill. Teachers believed for instance, that just 16% of the outcomes for the reading classes were unachievable. In contrast however, the projects classes contained the greatest number of individual unachievable outcomes, with nine out of the total twenty-two (40%) being considered out of reach by the time the semester ends. Listening also suffered, with five out of the total twelve (41%) outcomes being considered unachievable. The picture is similar for writing (36%) and speaking (38%).

In summary, we may say that with the exception of reading the teachers maintained that around sixty per cent of the syllabus can be completed by the end of the semester. The failings of the four college documents were beginning to make themselves clear. Yet to be sure, the course would have to be analyzed too.
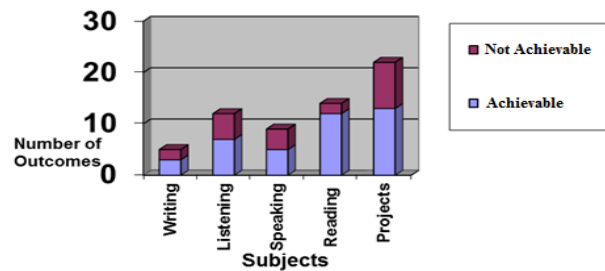
Fig. 3 Achievability of learning outcomes

3.3. The course

The teachers were asked for their opinion about whether they considered the course was achievable. The results are shown in Figure 4 below. Ten yes/no questions were asked regarding issues such as accountability, rationale, cultural appropriacy and manageability. It can be seen from Figure 4 that teachers believe the great majority (68%) of these issues were not properly addressed by the Delivery Plan.
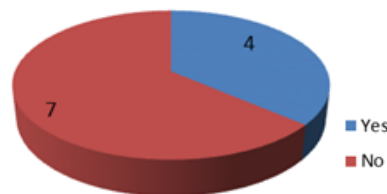

Fig. 4 Assessment of delivery plan

It can be seen from the teachers' responses that when they criticize the syllabus they actually mean the syllabus and the course, though it must be remembered that the curriculum was not entirely free of blame. Table 5 details the key criticisms of the Delivery Plan by teachers.

Table 5 Elements of delivery plan considered unachievable by teachers

1. No clear pathway to achieving Learning Outcomes.
2. No coherent syllabus style.
3. No flexibility to include learner generated content.
4. No clear framework.
5. No culturally appropriate content.

4. TEACHERS' OPINIONS: SUMMARY AND COMMENTARY

The feedback from the teachers was both complex yet revealing. In order to criticize the curriculum, syllabus and course adequately for the purposes of this study, a summary of the above data is needed. Generally, the teachers believe that the Delivery Plan does not adequately reflect the Learning Outcomes and that the Learning Outcomes in turn do

not match the Oman Academic Standards. Indeed, in some cases, they appear to provide entirely separate ideas of what should be taught. There is no clear top down conformity from syllabus to course level. Teachers find that both the Learning Outcomes and the Delivery Plan have large portions that are unachievable. However, these portions vary by skill, with listening, writing and projects suffering the most. The syllabus and course have weaknesses, but in the end they are simply documents recommending certain elements to be taught. There is much more to a semester than the syllabus and course. In an effort to get the whole picture, the teachers were asked to comment on the main external factors constraining the syllabus and course. These are represented in Figure 5. Time is the key factor constraining the achievability of the syllabus. The colleges operate a somewhat strange system of three 'semesters'. Both the winter and autumn semesters are twelve weeks in length, but the current summer semester contains only nine teaching weeks. Importantly however the Learning Outcomes for all three semesters are the same. The outcomes are simply compressed into the much shorter Delivery Plan. This adequately explains the teachers concerns about lack of teaching time, syllabus load and consequent drop in the motivation of students and teachers.
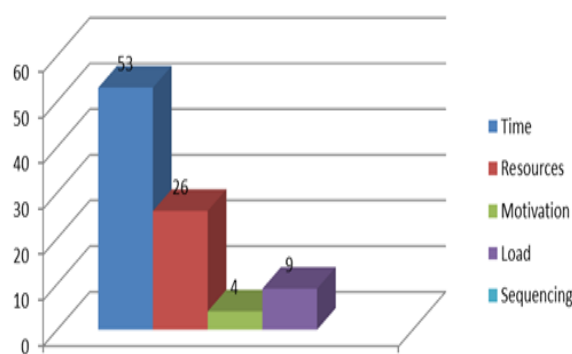

Fig. 5 Main constraints of the syllabus and course

Yet not everything in the teachers' responses in the questionnaire is straightforward. For example, teachers state that the second greatest constraint on the syllabus and course is a lack of resources. How teachers view the resources of the college varies depending on their experience and expectations. The colleges are far from resource poor places, and the technical shortcomings are insignificant when compared to the shortcomings of the syllabus. Yet, teachers hardly mention the syllabus load or poor sequencing as constraints in themselves.

4.1. Is there evidence in literature to back up the claims of the teachers?

Just what type of syllabus and course are the Colleges of Technology in Oman using? In the case of the syllabus the teachers complain that the expectations are too great given the time frame to achieve them. The message is clear that the syllabus is too extensive and exam orientated, but these can be classified as weaknesses of implementation. It is the teachers' criticisms of the course rather than syllabus that are more revealing.

The course fails to demonstrate a clear pathway to learning. It lacks valid accountability and a coherent style, it is also culturally inappropriate in terms of content, and it does not give teachers and learners flexibility to develop their own courses or internal syllabuses.

It must be stated from the outset that the course plan displays a definite loyalty to the course books of which there are three. The reading book is *Ready to Read More*, for listening the college uses *Skills for Success* and the writing course book is *Get Ready to Write*. The rationale behind each of these books is different, and it is too simplistic to lay all the blame on the books. The writing book is functional, using topics like "How to write a Division and Classification Essay." The reading is slightly less proscriptive, but still clearly functional, with topics like "Understanding Supporting Details" or "Understanding the Author's Purpose and Tone." The Listening and Speaking book is notional-situational, with chapters entitled "Cities" and "First Impressions."

Both notional and functional syllabuses have been criticized for the inevitable feeling of isolation of their topics (Long & Crookes, 1993), the difficulty of their implementation (Willis, 1990) and their inability to prepare students for the complexities of real-world communication (Finch, 2010). The syllabus does not use all the topics in the book, and this is perhaps its greatest failing. The result is that by the end of the semester in listening for example, the students will have studied the following entirely unrelated topics: 'First Impressions', 'Success', 'New Perspectives', 'Advertising' and 'Cities'.

The syllabus dictates a heavy reliance upon the books, with each week having an allotted chapter. This forces the teachers into teaching a course based upon the partial use of books with different approaches. This alone easily accounts for the teachers' feelings of aimlessness in the syllabus, and yet the text books also certainly contribute greatly to the lack of culturally appropriate material in the classrooms. The teachers complain that the course lacks any real flexibility, and this is attributable to a course plan that has such a reliance on text books.

The course books are not responsible however, for the teachers' belief that they are teaching a course that lacks any clear pathway to learning. To find the answer to this question it was decided to provide answers to Breen's (1987) five syllabus questions.

1. "What knowledge does the college syllabus focus on?" The syllabus of the colleges prioritizes the formal written structures of the language. Examples of this are the essay formats linked to specific grammar points. As a result of this prioritization, the spoken language is accorded a much less important role, both the time allotted to speaking and the limited range of topics demonstrate this.

2. "What capabilities does it focus on and priorities?" There is a general correlation that language use is very similar to skills use. This presupposes the assumption that those skills must progress from the receptive to the productive. This latter point is especially evident in the speaking and writing element of the course.

3. "On what basis does it select and subdivide what is to be learned?" The course demonstrates clearly that is has been designed upon the presumption that the language is best taught subdivided into "the four skills." This is reinforced by the strict adherence to a week-by-week chapter of the course books which offers pre-categorized language chunks in an unrelated order.

4. "How does it sequence what is to be learned?" Instructions on how to achieve the formal written style are systematically linked to a point of grammar. Styles of formal writing are arranged along a perceived level of difficulty and hence importance.

5. "What is its rationale?" The overriding rationale of the course is that if students can learn the rules of the language, they can learn the language. This in turn rests upon the belief that the linguistic components of the language can be subdivided and that teaching the language is simply a matter of teaching the various subdivisions from small to large in sets. An example being the progression from paragraph to essay.

It is clear that the Colleges of Technology are utilizing a syllabus that falls firmly into the genre White (1988) calls Type A or product syllabuses. The priorities of the syllabus are on *what* is to be learned rather than *how*.

Could this be what was giving the teachers their feeling of a lack of a pathway in the syllabus? Teaching is a creative calling and teachers who know exactly what they will teach for the entire semester will naturally feel powerless against a feeling of predestination in their work. Was it the basic assumptions at the very core of the syllabus that were so unsettling to the teachers, or was it something more superficial? Breen (1987), for example, observes that "… any syllabus will be helpful to the extent that it imposes order upon the apparent chaos of what is to be taught and learned" (p.86).

Perhaps the truest answer to the teachers' complaints is the simplest. It might well be that the syllabus's biggest failing is that the subject matter is uninspiring and the pedagogy it is based upon is outdated. It seems to be that the strict order in the sequencing of learning outcomes and the adherence to that order imposed by the course plan is reassuringly directive enough for teachers not to complain about every item in the syllabus and course. Sadly however, the overly precise nature of the syllabus has the effect of stifling all spontaneity and creativity in the classroom. Perhaps in this case, too much direction leads to a feeling of none at all.

The reasons that the type of syllabus employed by the college is causing problems are manifold. SLA research tells us that whilst we have developed several ways to present the language, we know relatively little about when learners will acquire understanding. The grading and sequencing of the content in the college syllabuses presumes that if a student starts at the beginning of the course, they will be proficient by the time they reach the end simply because they have been exposed to the language. However, that exposure is random and unrelated to real life. This type of sequencing can give an unnatural feeling to the content of a course (Widdowson, 1978). A more practical justification is that presenting the language in this way can only leave students feeling that they have fallen off an unstoppable train.

It is well understood these days that students must internalize the language at their own speed, something for which the lack of flexibility in the syllabus allows no room. Support for this idea comes from Nunan (1988), who suggests that students are more likely to struggle with the psycholinguistic difficulties of language learning rather than the grammatical complexities.

Another major criticism is that while the college course certainly devotes large amounts of time exposing students to a limited range of responses in terms of the four skills, it fails to provide any real chance to develop a communicative competence.

It is clear that what is really needed at the Colleges of Technology is an overhaul of the curriculum, syllabus and course. As stated above however, there is very little likelihood of that happening any time soon (Al Toubi, 1998). Given this fact, it is time to examine one way in which a lone teacher could make up for the aforementioned failings. Such a solution would have to be based on culturally relevant material, have a focus on communication and be learner-centered.

5. CONTEXT OF CALL AND THE SYLLABUS IN THE COLLEGES OF TECHNOLOGY

I decided to use Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) to try and make up for the weaknesses in the syllabus and course. This was based upon Warschauer's (1996) observation that technology and the internet can play a "vital role" in aiding the teacher

of both EFL and ESL. Also informative to the choice of CALL over other resources was Skinner and Austin's (1999) claim that CALL promotes students' interest, motivation and confidence.

The choice of platform was influenced by the belief that the best people to help the teachers solve the problem that the syllabus was causing issues, were the teachers themselves. The solution I provide is easily-available, free and provides an empowering option for teachers without requiring much technical knowledge. There is however, a more practical reason for choosing a solution that incorporates CALL. Students constantly use their mobile phones in class. Despite being officially forbidden, such usage is tolerated because it cannot realistically be controlled. The idea of providing a digital solution to the failings of the syllabus means that the students can be accessing the website in class from their mobile phones. Instead of explicitly and unrealistically forbidding phone usage in class, it was agreed with my class to try to only use their phones for the class website. After a certain period of time students learned to abide by this rule, and the result was that instead of using their phones to communicate with friends and relatives in Arabic, they were using them to connect with other students in English.

Key to the implementation of this solution was the fact that 85% of my students have smart phones with 4G Internet connections. The remaining 15% were either satisfied sharing with students who did have smart phones, or borrowed phones from friends in other classes in order to access the site. The Colleges of Technology in Oman are well funded and have good technical equipment. There is a paradox though that despite the abundance of technical equipment, actual usage is very low. Reasons for these resources not being exploited are many, but perhaps the greatest is that whilst Information Communications Technology (ICT) skills are aspired to in the curriculum, this aspiration is not realized in either the syllabus or course. It is clear that the students want to use technology and the college possesses the technology for them to use, but the highly proscriptive nature of the syllabus and course are to blame for preventing the two ever meeting. As can be seen, the solution of a digitalized learning platform for the students has the potential to provide a modern and enjoyable way for any college teacher to make up for the failings of the syllabus and course.

5.1. The website

The site I created is called the Salalah English Club (http://salalahenglishclub.webs.com/.) It should be mentioned at the outset that the use of ICT in the English language syllabus is limited to using the Internet to search for ideas related to the communication project. Thus all the idea of using a class website greatly contributes towards making up for the syllabus's failure to achieve outcome 3 of the Learning Outcomes and Graduate Attribute 4 mentioned below:

L4C3: Use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g. libraries, databases, websites, videos, etc.) to gather and synthesize information.

An explanation shall now be given of the sections of the website that provided the most effective compensation for each particular weakness of the syllabus.

Fig. 6 The Class website

5.2. Groups 3 and 4 Forum

Fitze (2006) found in a study of writing forums that lexical range, interaction and equality of participation all improved when compared to studies of classroom writing. With these expectations, the aim of the forum was to give the students the opportunity to practice writing English on a computer in a virtual environment. In this way, it was hoped that the students would simultaneously improve their digital literacy and IT skills whilst profiting from a lowered affective filter.

As none of my students had ever taken part in an English language blog or forum, it was necessary to introduce them to the idea of a virtual message board slowly. The first exercise was designed to put them at ease and involved describing a picture of a local scene. This allowed the students the opportunity to learn how to use the interface and to see some of its relative advantages.

Students found the forum to be an enjoyable and different way to practice writing. They were soon creating their own threads and the interactive element of this page made it the most popular of the website.

One key issue was encountered in the setting up of the forum. Both the male and female students expressed a wish that the sexes be segregated on the forum. This is something quite common in Omani Muslim society. In order to explore a way in which the class website could be a vessel for a class culture, it was decided to poll the classes involved for their opinions on this key issue. Figure 7 shows that the majority of the class wished the forum to be separated by sex. The implementation of this further lowered the affective filter of the students in a manner impossible in the coeducational classroom.
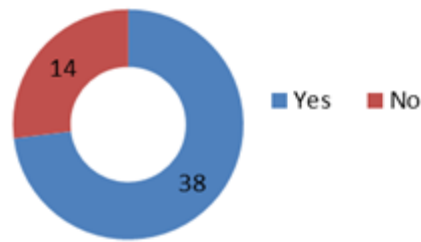
Fig. 7 Should boys and girls have separate forums?

After the first topic was posted, many students had quickly learned how to create threads, post pictures and add links to their posts. In order to promote self-study, the discussion topics of the forum were left open to suggestions from students. The topics chosen by the students can be seen below in Table 6.

Table 6 Topics chosen by students on the forum

Girls	Boys
Fashion - Handbags	World Cup 2014
I fell down	Coffee
My new phone?	Should Nizar win the Kinder Bueno?
I'm sad today	
What do you think about this picture?	

The advantage of the forum for the students is that they were the ones creating the course content. This actualized the learners' pre-existing knowledge, and helped to promote interaction in the target language outside of college hours. The forum can also be said to have made up for the failing of the syllabus to satisfy item 6.2.1.a. of the course, namely, work in pairs or groups and participate accordingly i.e. take turns, initiate a discussion, interrupt appropriately, express an opinion.

5.3. Writing tips

Kol and Schcolnik (2008) found that no significant improvement was to be found in the standard of written English of students who took part in four forum discussions. Wu (2006) found similar results for the use of blogging to teach writing. Hence the rationale behind the website's writing section was not to improve writing directly. Instead, by using this page as a notice board where writing tips from lessons could be displayed, students' writing would be indirectly influenced. In practice it typically worked by one student approaching me after class and posing a question which I would answer on the webpage in the form of an easy-to-assimilate set of writing tips, (an example is *Top Ten Tips for Conclusions*). This had the advantage of providing a permanent record for all students. The majority of students did not wish to stay behind and discuss the class after it had finished, but the amount of page views (for example, 571 page views after one lesson) showed that students were accessing this page after class hours on their own time. The positive effect was to have my teaching reach a larger audience, long after class had finished. This page of the website arguably contributed to making up for the syllabus's

failure to properly address items 6.2.1.j. and 6.2.1.h. of the course: 6.2.1. Continually revise one's work; 6.2.1.h. Complete homework on time.

This is because this page of the website had a surprising outcome. Students who had visited the Writing Tips page began to hand in second versions of the essays they had completed in class, and four of my students began producing extra essays written on their own time.

5.4. Photo of the week

In this section photos were posted that were linked to a competition. Answers were to be posted by students on the forum and prizes were awarded for the first students to post. The aim was to give the students more writing practice, improve their motivation, and have them participate in the forum. In practice however, it was found that motivation only began to improve when the photos in this section came from the forum topics created by the students themselves. Figure 8 demonstrates this. The topics 'Wadi Shab' and 'Man and Camel' were chosen by the teacher, but the topic of 'World Cup' comes from the boys' forum (Thread: 'World Cup 2014' posted by *Hzagi*). Not only is the number of page views much higher but the pages are viewed more times over the following three days. This information is interesting because it confirms findings by Wu (2008) that more student-centered learning increases motivation.
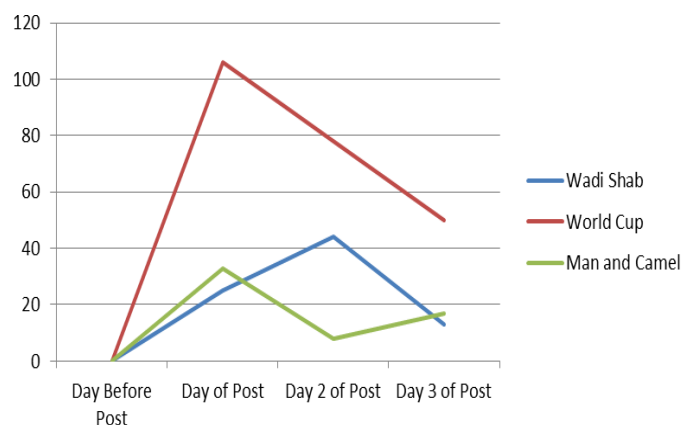

Fig. 8 Number of page views per topic on photo of the week tab

5.5. Article of the week

Reading was the particular focus of this section. My students complain that the reading book provided by the college is neither culturally appropriate nor relevant to their exams. In order to make up for this, this page displayed one or two different articles per week that were exam relevant and culturally appropriate. The idea was again to promote self-study and reading in the target language. However, this page also fulfilled the function of making up for the failure to achieve course outcome 3.2.j. for reading: Read an extensive text broadly relevant to the student's area of study (minimum three pages) and respond to the questions that require analytical skills e.g. prediction, deduction, inference.

Whilst the course book certainly fulfils this requirement, the students find the articles too long. The website provided an opportunity to read short to medium-length culturally appropriate articles that were relevant to the exams. An example of this is the article *Graphs and Charts* which also provided students with material to fulfil the following item that the course failed to achieve. 3.2. b.: Paraphrase information (orally or in writing) from a written or spoken text or from graphically presented data.

5.6. Links

The links section of the website is the students' portal to the English language resources on the web. Many students feel intimidated by the enormity of resources on the Web, so the main advantage of this page for the students is that they have a limited set of safe sites that they can access to help them with their studies. In terms of making up for the failings of the syllabus, this page offers access to two English-English dictionaries and a self-study guide on how to use them. This clearly fulfils item 6.2.2.c of the course: Use an English-English dictionary for language learning.

It is also clear however, that by offering a self-access, language level specific gateway to the Web, this page also contributed to the achievement of Graduate Attribute 8: Are committed to self-development through lifelong learning.

As has been shown above, the use of this website allowed me to cover several of the items in the curriculum, syllabus and course that were deemed unachievable by the teachers. However, not every element was covered by the website's use. Many items in the writing and reading syllabuses were not compensated by the website. This can be mitigated by the fact that the website is based on a process approach to learning rather than the more product orientated focus of the syllabus and course. Should a teacher wish to take a more product focused approach in his or her own website, then these parts of the syllabus can be compensated for as well. It is also important to stress that one clear weakness of the website is that it cannot be used for the practice of speaking. Thus the website made up for none of the elements of the syllabus and course relating to this skill.

6. LESSONS LEARNT AND IMPROVEMENTS FOR THE FUTURE

Teachers wishing to use this platform need to bear in mind that website content takes a long time to produce, but a very short time to read. Watching my students surf the website, I noticed that they tend to scan rather than fully read pages. The result is that an article that took days to create might take only a few seconds to read. Linked to this is the fact that the more interactive a website is and the more students have authority over the website content or design, the more the students will use it. So the primary lesson learned from this study is this: Encourage design ideas from your students from the very beginning. It is hypothesized that this will increase learner motivation towards the website whilst simultaneously decreasing the amount of time the teacher needs to spend producing content and his or her motivation to do so.

At the end of the semester, I went back to my students and asked them how I could improve the website. They mentioned five points: Firstly, they stated that their favorite webpage was *Questions of the Day* from Ask.com [http://www.ask.com/]. They suggested the creation of a page with several of these questions in order to improve their general knowledge. Secondly, they were explicit that the answers for those questions should have

no prizes. Previously I had created competitions to help motivate the students to participate. However, the feedback was clear, the students believed that external motivation (such as the chocolate I had been rewarding them with) was no longer necessary - they were using the website for the pleasure of expanding their own knowledge.

Thirdly, I had technical complaints about the mobile version of the website. It suffices here to say that technical problems can be extremely demotivating to students. I was assured by the website technical team that the paid version of Webs.com has none of these faults. Hence, teachers may wish to consider asking for funding for their websites.

Fourthly, my students found that being able to post pictures they had taken with their smart phones increased their motivation to use, and more importantly, share the site.

Finally, a few of my students wished to access the site directly from their Facebook accounts [https://www.facebook.com/], to improve accessibility to the website.

Chapelle (1997) and Warschauer (1996) both stop short of suggesting that CALL should replace the language classroom. At the outset of this study my own opinion could not have been more contrary. However, having witnessed the many issues encountered in the creation and implementation of a class website, my own opinion has changed.

Though I myself may have envisaged a day when my students could learn English online with the use of technologies such as the website created for this essay; that vision is far from becoming a reality. In this integrative stage of CALL, such technologies are at best a bridge to further skills development (Kern 1995). The question remains as to whether the students wish to cross that bridge.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has shown how the use of a class website can make up for some of the failings of the syllabus and course of technical colleges in Oman. It has also been demonstrated that whilst a class website can provide a platform through which teachers can compensate for several of the syllabus' short-comings, class websites cannot cover every element that the syllabus and course fail to address.

Now when I walk in to class, my students are already on their smart phones chatting on the website forum in the target language and creating content on the other pages of the website. The image of my students on their phones in class has not changed, but the language they are using has.

In taking the time to create a website for students, the teacher provides a safe vessel upon which the class can explore the vastness of the Internet. But this project taught me that without the teacher to guide them, my students would never have had the quality of experience that they did. Based on my experiences this semester, I will certainly make another website next year. It is my hope however that my students will captain their own vessel next time.

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