The Impact of Virtual Microscopes on Learning

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Diana Jonas-Dwyer
Abstract

Universities are using new technologies for both practical aims (to reduce costs or to cater for greater student numbers without increasing teacher numbers) and/or pedagogical aims (to improve students’ learning). Frequently new technologies are introduced before the impact of these technologies on learning is fully assessed.

This thesis focuses on the introduction of virtual microscopes into histology and pathology teaching in the Health Sciences at Murdoch University.

An exploratory study was conducted in 2006 in which 47 students were randomly allocated to one of two groups. In their laboratory work one group used optical microscopes (Optical Group) and the other group used virtual microscopes (Virtual Group) during one semester. At the beginning and the end of the semester, an ASSIST survey (Tait, Entwistle, & McCune, 1998) was undertaken to determine any changes in the students’ learning approach. As part of the assessments in their course, students completed an Attitude Survey about their attitudes to microscopes. Students were also required to complete a log book detailing their time spent studying. The results were analysed using appropriate statistical tests, frequencies, Chi-square, correlation, ANOVA, Two-way ANOVA, and the General Linear Model. The exploratory study tested the research design and the methods for analysing the data for the main study. Some modifications were made to the Attitude Survey prior to the commencement of the main study.

In 2007, the main study was undertaken with 293 students. In addition to the ASSIST survey, the Attitude Survey, and the log books, the students were asked to participate in focus groups and interviews to build a richer picture of microscopes and learning.

The results indicated changing trends in the students’ learning approaches. The Optical Group moved from surface to strategic; the Virtual Group from deep and strategic to
surface learning during the teaching period. However, there were no statistically significant differences between the groups. The use of virtual microscopes in histology and pathology laboratories therefore does not encourage deep learning any more than the use of optical microscopes. The virtual microscopes do, however, enable students to study at times and locations that are convenient to them and they are easier to use than the optical microscopes.

The students’ responses to the items in the Attitude Survey were content analysed and 15 themes emerged from the data. These themes indicated that there are critical issues, such as authenticity and group work, which need to be addressed when introducing virtual microscopes into the classroom.

In identifying critical issues and ensuring there were no detrimental effects in using virtual microscopes, recommendations were developed for histology and pathology educators to assist the implementation of virtual microscopes into a university curriculum. This was done with a view to enhancing pedagogical practice and included the development of microscope skills, authenticity, linking theory with practice and group work.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .............................................................................................................................. iv
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS ...................................................................................................... vii
List of Figures .................................................................................................................... xi
List of Tables ..................................................................................................................... xiv

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION** .................................................................................. 1

1.1 Problem Definition ...................................................................................................... 4
1.2 Aims and Objectives ................................................................................................. 7
1.3 Significance and Outcomes of the Research .............................................................. 8
1.4 Research approach .................................................................................................... 9
1.5 Organization of the thesis ......................................................................................... 10
1.6 Summary .................................................................................................................. 11

**CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW** .................................................................. 12

2.1 Learning Theories .................................................................................................... 12
2.1.1 Behaviourism ....................................................................................................... 13
2.1.2 Cognitivism ......................................................................................................... 14
2.1.3 Constructivism ..................................................................................................... 18
2.2 Learning Styles and Approaches ............................................................................ 22
2.3 Teaching Approaches ............................................................................................. 30
2.4 The Learning Environment ...................................................................................... 31
2.5 Visual Learning in Histology and Pathology ............................................................. 34
2.6 Virtual Microscopes ................................................................................................ 36
2.7 Theoretical framework ....................................................................................... 45
2.8 Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 47

**CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY** .......................................................................... 48

3.1 Introduction .............................................................................................................. 48
3.2 Methodological Considerations ............................................................................... 48
3.3 Researchers’ Paradigm ........................................................................................... 49
3.4 Research Design ....................................................................................................... 50
3.5 Research Questions ................................................................................................. 54
3.6 Ethical Considerations ............................................................................................. 55
3.7 Data Collection ....................................................................................................... 56
3.8 The Exploratory Case Study .................................................................................... 57
3.8.1 Participants .......................................................................................................... 57
3.8.2 Materials ............................................................................................................. 60
3.8.3 Procedures ......................................................................................................... 67
3.8.4 Data Cleansing .................................................................................................... 69
3.8.5 Data Analysis ...................................................................................................... 72
3.8.6 Amendments to Methods .................................................................................. 79
3.8.7 The Focus Groups and Interviews ..................................................................... 80
3.9 The Main Study ...................................................................................................... 82
List of Figures

Figure 1.1 The optical microscope laboratory set-up .......................................................... 3
Figure 1.2 The virtual microscope laboratory set-up .......................................................... 4

Figure 2.1 Web of constructivism model ........................................................................... 20
Figure 2.2 Theoretical framework ...................................................................................... 47

Figure 3.1 Timeline showing data collection period of the study ..................................... 57
Figure 3.2 Mixed methods and procedures used in the exploratory study ..................... 59
Figure 3.3 Log Book ........................................................................................................... 66
Figure 3.4 Reflections Form, Section 1: Demographic information ................................. 66
Figure 3.5 Reflections Form, Section 2: Questions about microscopes ............................ 67
Figure 3.6 Reflections Form, Section 3: Study practices .................................................. 67
Figure 3.7 Timeline showing the data collected in the exploratory study ....................... 68
Figure 3.8 Fragment of SPSS™ worksheet illustrating identification codes, demographic data and self-ratings of computer skills ....................................................... 70
Figure 3.9 Fragment of data for Section A of the ASSIST (Columns D to I) .................... 70
Figure 3.10 Fragment of data for Section B of the ASSIST (Columns J to BI) ................. 71
Figure 3.11 Fragment of data for Section C of the ASSIST (Columns BJ to BQ) ............ 71
Figure 3.12 Fragment of log book showing time spent studying and mark .................... 71
Figure 3.13 Fragment of raw data of Group A students’ reflections about optical microscopes ............................................................................................................................................ 72
Figure 3.14 Fragment of conceptions of learning data showing the calculation for the reproducing knowledge score .................................................................................. 73
Figure 3.15 Calculation of sub-scales and total score for the deep approach .................. 73
Figure 3.16 Fragment of SPSS data showing z scores and dominant conception of learning for Section A of the ASSIST .......................................................... 75
Figure 3.17 Fragment of Section C showing scores for students’ preference for different types of course and teaching ........................................................................... 75
Figure 3.18 Fragment of statistical analyses of correlation between students’ time spent studying and their final mark ................................................................................ 75
Figure 3.19 Fragment showing the comments in the theme Clarity of Focus .................. 77
Figure 3.20 Mixed methods and procedures used in the main study ............................... 85
Figure 3.21 Timeline showing data collection during main study .................................. 87
Figure 3.22 Spreadsheet showing raw data segment for focus groups ......................... 89
Figure 3.23 Part of a transcribed interview in a word™ document .................................. 89
Figure 4.1 Units participating in the exploratory and main study ........................................93
Figure 4.2 The histology and pathology units and cohorts, years 2 and 3 ..................................94
Figure 4.3 CHI301 Home Page ................................................................................................101
Figure 4.4 CHI301 Unit information/outline web page .............................................................102
Figure 4.5 Fragment of CHI301 study schedule .......................................................................102
Figure 4.6 CHI301 weekly study slides web page .......................................................................103
Figure 4.7 CHI301 fragment of lecture materials web page .........................................................103
Figure 4.8 Example of CHI301 lecture notes .............................................................................104
Figure 4.9 Example of CHI301 Lectopia homepage ....................................................................104
Figure 4.10 Example of CHI301 worksheet for laboratory groups ...............................................105
Figure 4.11 CHI301 assignments web page ..................................................................................105

Figure 5.1 Students’ self-rating of ICT skills by group (n=45) .....................................................109
Figure 5.2 Use of microscope by group .......................................................................................123
Figure 5.3 Focus of microscope by group ....................................................................................123
Figure 5.4 Group work by microscope and group .......................................................................125
Figure 5.5 Control by microscope and group .............................................................................126
Figure 5.6 Health by microscope and group ..............................................................................127
Figure 5.7 Time management by microscope and group ..............................................................129
Figure 5.8 Authenticity by microscope and group ......................................................................131
Figure 5.9 Access by microscope and group ..............................................................................134
Figure 5.10 Microscopes skills by microscope and group ...........................................................135

Figure 6.1 Log book showing Master worksheet .........................................................................139
Figure 6.2 Gender by unit ............................................................................................................140
Figure 6.3 Students self-rating of ICT skills by group (n=293) ....................................................141
Figure 6.4 Students previous educational qualifications (n=293) ..............................................142
Figure 6.5 Students identifying potential microscope use in their career by group ......................142
Figure 6.6 Students identifying potential microscope use in their career by unit .........................143
Figure 6.7 Conceptions of learning for the Optical Group by unit .............................................145
Figure 6.8 Section A - Conceptions of learning for the Virtual Group by unit .............................147
Figure 6.9 Optical Group students’ learning approaches by unit .................................................149
Figure 6.10 Virtual Group students’ learning approach by unit ....................................................151
Figure 6.11 Section C - Preference for different types of course and teaching for the
Optical Group by unit ................................................................................................................154
Figure 6.12 Section C - Preference for different types of course and teaching for the
Virtual Group by unit ................................................................................................................155

xii
Figure 6.13 Responses to “the degree of interaction in my laboratory group was very high” ..........................................................165
Figure 6.14 Responses to “all members of my laboratory group worked equally well” ..........166
Figure 6.15 Responses to reaching consensus in the group was easy ..............................166
Figure 6.16 Responses to “I enjoyed working with this group” ........................................167
Figure 6.17 Responses to “I found the laboratory group work to be an effective learning experience” .................................................................................167
Figure 6.18 Responses to “I was able to understand many of the theoretical concepts taught in this unit by doing the laboratory activities” ..................................................168
Figure 6.19 Responses to “The LMS unit provides an environment that encourages active learning” .................................................................168
Figure 6.20 Use by microscope and group ........................................................................182
Figure 6.21 Focus by microscope and group ....................................................................183
Figure 6.22 Group work by microscope and group..........................................................184
Figure 6.23 Control by microscope and group .................................................................186
Figure 6.24 Health by microscope and group .................................................................187
Figure 6.25 Time management by microscope and group .................................................188
Figure 6.26 Authenticity by microscope and group ..........................................................191
Figure 6.27 Teacher engagement by microscope and group .............................................191
Figure 6.28 Access by microscope and group ....................................................................195
Figure 6.29 Learner engagement with the course by microscope and group ......................196
Figure 6.30 Microscope skills by microscope and group ..................................................197

Figure 7.1 Factors that assist learning with optical microscopes ........................................216
Figure 7.2 Factors enhancing learning with virtual microscopes .......................................218
Figure 7.3 Summary of research findings .........................................................................227
Figure 7.4 Virtual Microscope Implementation Model .......................................................233
List of Tables

Table 2.1 Learning environment characteristics that encourage deep approaches to learning ..................................................................................................................32
Table 2.2 The possible impact of a learning environment’s on students’ approaches to learning ..............................................................................................................34
Table 3.1 Differences between the qualitative and quantitative paradigms .................49
Table 3.2 Epistemological differences between qualitative and quantitative methods ..........50
Table 3.3 Various case designs, their strengths and weaknesses (adapted from Yin (2009)) ..................................................................................................................................................................................52
Table 3.4 Research questions and methods used ..........................................................................................................................55
Table 3.5 Section A - Conceptions of Learning ........................................................................................................................................................................60
Table 3.6 Section B - The Deep Approach sub-scales and items ..................................61
Table 3.7 Section B - The Strategic Approach sub-scales and items ............................62
Table 3.8 Section B - The Surface Approach sub-scales and items .................................63
Table 3.9 Section C - Preferences for different type of teaching and learning environment ........................................................................................................................................64
Table 3.10 Cronbach's Alpha scores for Section B of the ASSIST ..................................65
Table 3.11 Questions added to the reflections form ..........................................................................................................................79
Table 3.12 Data collection by group ..........................................................................................83
Table 3.13 Focus group questions ...........................................................................................86
Table 3.14 Interview Questions .............................................................................................87
Table 4.1 Assessment components for VET244 (main study) .............................................96
Table 4.2 Assessment components for BMS264 (main study) .............................................97
Table 4.3 Assessment components for CHI301 (exploratory study) ..................................98
Table 4.4 Assessment components for CHI301 (main study) .............................................98
Table 5.1 Students age range by group ....................................................................................108
Table 5.2 Section A of the ASSIST for the Optical Group ..................................................110
Table 5.3 Section A of the ASSIST for the Virtual Group ...................................................111
Table 5.4 Section B of the ASSIST surveys for the Optical Group .....................................111
Table 5.5 Section B of the ASSIST surveys for the Virtual Group ......................................112
Table 5.6 Changes to Approaches to Learning by Group ......................................................112
Table 5.7 Section C of the ASSIST surveys for the Optical Group .....................................113
Table 5.8 Section C of the ASSIST surveys for the Virtual Group .....................................113
Table 5.9 Students’ assessment of how well they had been doing in their assessed work for (Optical and Virtual Groups) ................................................................. 114
Table 5.10 Location of study for the Optical and Virtual Groups ................................................................. 115
Table 5.11 Extent of collaboration for the Optical and Virtual Groups ................................................................. 115
Table 5.12 Size of the collaborative groups in Optical and Virtual Groups ......................................................... 116
Table 5.13 Relationship between activities and understanding of the course ...................................................... 117
Table 5.14 Student use of resources .................................................................................................................. 117
Table 5.15 Time spent studying and final grade for both groups ........................................................................ 119
Table 5.16 Themes about microscopes .............................................................................................................. 120

Table 6.1 Participants in each data component of the study ............................................................................. 139
Table 6.2 Students age range by laboratory group ............................................................................................ 141
Table 6.3 Examples of studies reporting reliability of ASSIST by Cronbach’s alpha ............................................ 144
Table 6.4 Section A of the ASSIST for the Optical Group .................................................................................. 144
Table 6.5 Section A of the ASSIST for the Virtual Group ................................................................................... 146
Table 6.6 Changes to conceptions of learning over the teaching period ............................................................ 147
Table 6.7 Section B - Approaches to learning for the Optical Group ............................................................... 148
Table 6.8 Section B - Approaches to learning for the Virtual Group ............................................................... 150
Table 6.9 Changes to learning approaches over the teaching period ............................................................... 152
Table 6.10 Section C - Preference for different types of course and teaching for the Optical Group (n=81) ........................................................................................................... 153
Table 6.11 Section C - Preference for different types of course and teaching for the Virtual Group (n=70) ......................................................................................................................... 154
Table 6.12 Students’ assessment of how well they expect to do in their assessed work at the beginning of the teaching period (ASSIST 1) for the Optical and Virtual Groups ........................................................................................................... 156
Table 6.13 Students’ assessment of how well they had been doing in their assessed work (ASSIST 2) for the Optical and Virtual Groups ........................................................................................................... 157
Table 6.14 Location of study for the Optical and Virtual Groups ........................................................................ 159
Table 6.15 Time spent studying by unit and group ............................................................................................ 159
Table 6.16 Final grade by unit and group ........................................................................................................... 159
Table 6.17 Results of GLM for final grade ........................................................................................................... 162
Table 6.18 Results of GLM for Time spent studying ........................................................................................... 163
Table 6.19 Extent of collaboration for the Optical and Virtual Groups ................................................................ 163
Table 6.20 Size of the collaborative groups in Optical and Virtual Groups ......................................................... 164
Table 6.21 Statements about laboratory work by group .................................................................................... 164
Table 6.22 Responses to “Describe how the activities with microscopes helped your understanding of the course materials” ........................................................................................................... 169
Table 6.23 Activity Theme 1 - Linking theory with practice (by group) .........................170
Table 6.24 Activity Theme 2 - Visualising (by group) ..................................................171
Table 6.25 Activity Theme 3 - Authenticity (by group) ..................................................172
Table 6.26 Activity Theme 4 - Group discussion (by group) ..........................................173
Table 6.27 Activity Theme 6 - Revision (by group) .........................................................173
Table 6.28 Activity Theme 5 - Building skills in tissue identification (by group) ...............174
Table 6.29 Activity Theme 7 - Teacher guidance (by group) .........................................175
Table 6.30 Activity Theme 8 – Engagement (by group) ..................................................175
Table 6.31 Activity Theme 9 - Convenience (by group) ................................................176
Table 6.32 Activity Theme 12 – Developing microscope skills (by group) .....................177
Table 6.33 Resources used .................................................................................................178
Table 6.34 Attitude themes about microscopes .................................................................179
Table 6.35 Focus group participants ..................................................................................200
Table 6.36 Interview participants ......................................................................................206

Table 7.1 Factors students identified as important about virtual and optical microscopes .215
Table 7.2 Changes in Approaches to Learning (by group) ...............................................221
Table 7.3 Changes in Approaches to Learning (by unit) ..................................................222