

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| CCNA Year 1 – Reflective Report | 2 |
| 1. Introduction..... | 2 |
| 2. Learning Material..... | 3 |
| Cisco Net Academy | 3 |
| Thames Valley University | 3 |
| 3. Learning Strategies | 4 |
| 4. My Job | 5 |
| 5. Conclusion | 5 |
| 6. References..... | 6 |

nazaudy.com

CCNA Year 1 – Reflective Report

This reflective report is to give an overview of what I have done in the whole year of studying the Cisco CCNA programme module at Thames Valley University¹. I will state my learning experience while studying for this course from October 2009 to July 2010, describing and commenting my achievements, challenges and difficulties that I faced during this time.

1. Introduction

I first would like to state the reasons that determined my decision for joining this course. I have been working in the IT industry for the last 8 years, always as an ICT Technician and originally for a company that supported hotels, schools and small business around North/West London. My IT knowledge has evolved in the last few years in the term of using and managing computers and servers, and I consider myself highly knowledgeable at the time of managing a network already setup. I remember those days of Windows 9x and NT, and how we slowly upgrade to Windows 2000 and then to Windows XP. I have done several courses at Microsoft Academies and I achieved the qualification of an MCSE Certified about three years ago. MCSE² stands for Microsoft Certificate System Engineer, and is one of the most standards and sought after qualifications that a technician need to have in order to support a network based in Microsoft Windows.

Thought I was happy of having achieved my MCSE, I still needed a degree in an educational institution to raise my profile, as well as the knowledge and experience of dealing with the inner switching structures of a network, the bottom layers of the core system where all the communications are forwarded or routed to other destinations.

At the beginning of summer 2009 I found the FdSc CCNA course in TVU and I quickly follow the required steps to enrol. The course offered me just what I wanted, the change of obtained a degree as well as the opportunity to gained valuable knowledge of the Cisco products that form the core switching network of any medium size business network.

I am very aware of the constant demand of IT knowledge and the tough market of the IT industry, with system developing every time more streamline and hassle-free, releasing the pressure of manpower but sill needed for more elaborated and sophisticated IT Technicians. It is my intention to raise my professional profile by holding a foundation degree and a certificate in Cisco CCNA, which will allow me to “stand out” in case I start looking for a new job or development in my career.

Another important thing I wanted to achieve with this course was to obtain a solid and reputable knowledge of how a network works, how really the network that I support in the school where I work does function. I said “solid” knowledge because I believe this course will give me that level of confidence and security at the time of troubleshooting issues that can put the network to a halt. If we compare my level of knowledge to the OSI model, I would say that before the course I knew how to manage and solve problems in the upper layers, but this course has given me confidence with problem solving at the bottom layers, where the packets and network traffic flows.

2. Learning Material

In this section I will give my opinion and the experience that I have in using the learning resources the University provided to us in order to complete this course. I would like to separate the structure of the learning material that I was given in two sections, one dedicated to the resources provided by Cisco and the other in the resources that were available to us directly from TVU.

Cisco Net Academy

The online Cisco Network Academy³ was our first point of contact with the Cisco material. I found the site very poorly design where some of the menus can easily be confused (I never could say the difference and purposes between *Student Home* and *Alumni Home* buttons). The website does not centre in the page and it seems to be designed only to work in 1024 x 768 screen resolution. It does not support the simple “back” function, and every time to hit back on the browser, the webpage expired (?) and you have to refresh it by hitting F5 in order to get access again, losing valuable time and increasing the irritation of the visitor.

But the most annoying of all the features of the Network Academy was the actual presentation and layout of the Official Course Material, it is slow to open (you actually have to click on at least two pop-up windows before accessing the material) and they expire without warning. I was really shocked to find myself that the online material expires and that I could not leave a page of any chapter open for as long as I wanted, because after a while, when I tried to jump to the next page, I was asked to log back in again and lost track (was never re-directed) to the page I was working on, losing time and concentration. I did sent an e-mail to web-help@cisco.com reporting my problem and wanting to know the reasons as why my sessions has to expire without warning, but was given elusive answers that frustrate me even more. After a couple of weeks working and trying to study solely with the Cisco online resources, I realised that I needed something else to power my learning and boots my motivation for this course.

Thames Valley University

Throughout the whole year, and during both semesters, we had the lessons for the Cisco course on Wednesday evenings, in the same labs, having each one of us (students) a personal computer for our own use during the lesson. That allowed me to concentrate more as the surrounded atmosphere did not change during the course.

The programme that we followed during the lessons, however, was changing accordingly to our needs. We were always told to read the chapter prior to the lesson, and every week we were reading one of the eleven chapters that formed the curriculum of each semester. For the first few weeks the lecturer presented us with a presentation of the chapter in power point slides for the week, and then we discuss the subject among us and proceed to do the online test for the relevant chapter through the Cisco Net Academy. Last part of the lesson was the hands-on practical, were we were presented with the physical routers and taught how to connect them, start the initial configuration and troubleshoot problems and connectivity issues.

One of the things that I liked the most was the dynamic of the lessons, which changed accordingly to our needs, to the number of students we were attending regularly and to the level of complexity of the course material, modelling our learning curve perfectly in the sense that we were given the necessary pressure every week to

perform without breaking our interest and motivation for the course. I congratulate TVU for all the effort in preparing the right environment for our learning experience.

We were always encourage to read the chapter prior to the lessons, which indeed forced me to extend the time that I dedicated to the course other then Wednesday evenings, as I was required to read the chapter I could not possible do it during the lesson. I have to do it during weekends. During Semester 1 we were given lots of practice, and almost half of every lesson was dedicated to know the physical principles of the cisco commands, routers and cables. During Semester 2 we did not have that many practical lessons, and the few that we had were pretty advanced and focusing not just on setup (like Semester 1 lessons did) but rather on troubleshooting in order to understand routing behaviours. We were also given tips about how to use Packet Tracer to virtually replicate complex routing environments at home. The strategy adopted by the lecturer during last part of Semester 2 was really interesting and it worked pretty well for me: we were given a lecture of the chapter that we were about to read for next week. This system helped me to understand better the subject because, when I was reading it, I had already been lectured about that the previous Wednesday.

The main disappointment I had with the TVU resources is that the computers in our labs did not have Packet Tracer, though it wasn't at all a handicap to my learning process because the instructors always showed the Packet Tracer exercises by remotely logon to his computer, and I had Packet Tracer at home, but we never dedicated one lesson as I would have liked to get some more experience in this highly valuable software, doing for example some exercises together to get to know the interface.

3. Learning Strategies

After the first two weeks of the course, back in October, and having tried hard to cope with the login expired issues, I realised that the Online Official Course material was not going to be enough for me. I always learned stuff in the old school way, by reading and studying books, and I am not accustomed to study just by looking at the screen: I needed books and papers, therefore I went ahead and bought the official cisco course book for the first semester, but my regret was that I did that more or less in the middle of the semester and it took me some time to adjust this new learning strategy to the process I had already started of reading the chapter online before the lesson.

Weekends were the only time I could dedicate to the course, particularly Sunday mornings, but I also dedicated many Tuesdays evenings to read and study, and at some point I consider that this course was really taking place for me on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, two days a week from 6 pm to 9 pm fully dedicated to the course.

I made a big mistake during the first Semester that put me under lots of pressure at the end of it: I postponed the technical diary until the last few chapters. I was more concentrated in studying, taking notes of my experiences and resuming the official book that I had instead of doing the technical diary. It was only at the end of the semester when I started to do it, finding myself under a tight time frame to finish it where other modules of the TVU were also needing my time, effort and attention.

I was better prepare for Semester 2, and I started the technical diary with every chapter that we explore, and as we progressed in the course my draft of the learning technical diary was taking shape and accumulating data. All I had to do at the end was

to polish the writing and work in the presentations and references, but this proactive approach that I took for the technical diary in Semester 2 really helped me out to pass the module final exams and more important understand a lot about the subject of cisco networking that we are studying.

It has been a hard year, and both technical diaries, plus the cisco exams forced me to study every weekend in he mornings, I just put that time aside for it. But what I did not consider was the task of this Reflective Report of the whole year, I was not prepare for it at all and it has taken me quite a few days to start this report and finally express on it my thoughts and learning experiences.

4. My Job

During this year I have been promoted in my position, from being an IT Technician to be now the official Network Manager of the school. This course has given me the chance of obtaining confidence of what I am doing and the assurance of taking the decisions (either right or wrong) at critical times when an output was needed, like that day when our major core switch broke down, and I advised the school to spend nearly £2,000 in a new cisco switch to be placed at the center of the school network infrastructure. I would never have taken that decision without the help and the solid knowledge that I have obtained during this course.

It is my intention to try to get sponsor by my job employment for the next academic year, and though Cisco is not directly related to the functions I do at work, it does offer me the benefit of the solid foundation of how a network really works, and that will benefit the school in the long term. I am eager to learn about VLans, how they work and how to create them. I believe we are going to have this subject next year, and once I know how to manage VLans I would like to implement them on our school network to optimize the traffic and reduce the broadcast that at present is very high on our switched network, where there is only one router and about 20 switches distributed in four main locations, three of which are connected to each other by fiber optical cable.

It is not me, but my work the one who has benefit the most of me doing this course, as I have applied in the field and test in non-production areas of the school almost everything that I have learnt in this course, as well a sharing my knowledge with colleges at work and showing them how the traffic really flows in a network, paying more attention to the status of the cables and connections. I have realised that it is critical to have a solid foundation about what you are doing and this course has given me just what I needed in this aspect. I was so motivated that at some point, just at the end of Semester 1, I embarked myself in the task of mapping our school network, drawing all the switches that we have, their models and how they are connected to each other. This allowed me to analyse the performance of every switch and where they sit in the network as a whole. I am very proud of having done this mapping, and I am sure it will be handy when the next connectivity problem rises. I admit that I would have never started this task if, for example, I would never have known the existence of Packet Tracer thanks to this course.

5. Conclusion

My only regret of doing this course at TVU is that I did not started before. I am really motivated to complete this course and obtain my degree and my qualification as a CCNA Certified. A few years ago I started a course at Luton

University, but after a couple of years I gave up and focus on the pursuit of a Microsoft Certification. Now, I have realised the importance of holding a degree (even if it is only a foundation degree) to stand out and most importantly to develop my skills and maintain fresh my learning attitudes. This time, with this course at TVU, I am not going to give up and I it is very obvious to me that I need to work hard in order to achieve what I need.

I thank TVU of having developed such a course where you can attend on Wednesday evenings, specifically targeting people like me, full time employees who wishes to have an academic degree. I hope that, whichever level I obtain in this course, it will improve in the next year, because the next academic year is when I will have to decided if I will continue further developing my career and studying to obtain a bachelors degree or stop at the point of achieving a foundation degree. My main goal is to focus in the foundation degree, and based on what we have done this year, the next academic year is going to be very hard, but now I am better prepared for it.

6. References

-
- ¹ FdSc Computing and Information System (Cisco Certified Network Associate) <http://courses.tvu.ac.uk/CourseDetails.aspx?CourseInstanceID=4322&SearchType=adv&KeyWord=&rptindex=1&isSorted=0&img=img&sortname=null&count=0&PageSize=20&Sub=10.7&SubjectAreas=10.7&StudyLevel=6&Mode=Select&Campaign=Select&Quali=Select&Location=Select&LocationReal=Select&Duration=Select&International=radInternational2&Year=radYear2010&Month=&Ccode=&RC=Select&Faculty=Select&Department=Select&swKeyword=&swTitle=&swAward=&swStudyMode=&SearchMode=simple> [Accessed 23 July 2010]
- ² MCSE Certification <http://www.microsoft.com/learning/en/us/certification/mcse.aspx> [Accessed 23 July 2010]
- ³ Cisco Network Academy <http://cisco.netacad.net/> [Accessed 23 July 2010]