



English Subject Centre Mini Projects

E-learning Advocate Project 2006/7 Integrating E-Learning into the English Curriculum at The University of Northampton

Project Report

Author: Chris Ringrose

Department of English, University of Northampton



English Subject Centre Departmental Projects

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The English Subject Centre
Royal Holloway, University of London
Egham, Surrey TW20 OEX
T. 01784 443221
esc@rhul.ac.uk
www.english.heacademy.ac.uk

Executive Summary

The English E-learning Advocacy project at The University of Northampton was conceived as a broad initiative to extend and improve the use of IT in learning and teaching at a time of curriculum change and redevelopment. It focused on the BA in English and the BA in Creative Writing. In the course of the project the most significant developments involved the use of sound files, the redesigning and effective use of discussion forums, the use of blogs for summative assessment and student reflection throughout a module, the linking of VLEs (in this case Blackboard) to on-line resources from HUMBUL and JISC, the use of hand-held voting systems in lectures, and the designing of e-journals and websites to showcase student creative writing. A student focus group was used to provide feedback on the design of the e-learning materials and their effectiveness in the learning process. The project proved successful in involving seven of the English staff group of eleven in e-learning activities, and in maintaining a good level student engagement. Support from English Subject Centre staff and other Advocates involved in the scheme was important in the generation of ideas and in refining the process of 'advocacy'. The report concludes with eleven suggestions for ways of integrating e-learning into the English curriculum, encouraging its use by staff, and acting in the role of 'e-learning advocate'.

Introduction

The aim of the e-Learning Advocate Project at The University of Northampton was to encourage the full use of e-learning in English Literature and Creative Writing modules during the 2006-7 revision of the English curriculum. The new syllabus and assessment regime would then begin in September 2007. A new BA in Creative Writing received its first intake in 2006-7, and it was important to include this in the project, as its curriculum and learning and teaching methods were still in the process of formation.

The original overall aims were:

- To provide English staff with practical original examples of the creative use of e-learning and assessment in English within and beyond Blackboard;
- To help individual staff to incorporate e-learning into their modules, and to raise their awareness of the potential uses of IT in English teaching;
- To provide a platform for the publication of student creative writing and editing;
- To ensure that the revised English curriculum from September 2007 made use of a full range of e-learning, as appropriate, and that that this is developed in a holistic and embedded way;
- To make "a *standard* model of e-learning" the baseline for English modules;
- To make some of the learning materials 'open access' to interested English students and staff world-wide through the University internet
- To use students in the project as active remunerated participants, and to incorporate regular student feedback into the development process.

I was aware that while English at Northampton already used a VLE (Blackboard) for most modules, in terms of the 'four models of on-line education' indicated by Roberts, Jones and Romm (2000), most of our use was at Levels 1 and 2 ('naïve' and 'standard'). The challenge was to lift some of modules to 3 and 4 ('evolutionary' and 'radical'), whilst making the 'standard' (with lecture notes, slides, summaries, web links, discussion boards) the norm for English and Creative Writing. One the most important aims, in the initial year, was to produce examples of innovative e-learning module sites that could act as exemplars within the Department. Further down the line they might even be demonstrated elsewhere as a stimulus to other English colleagues. In the event this proved to be feasible at the Subject Centre's *Innovations* Conference at Royal Holloway in July 2007, and at our own School of the Arts Learning and Teaching Event in September 2007.

Looking back to 2006, I can see that the project interested me for three main reasons. I had seen examples of e-learning being used interestingly in other English Departments and other disciplines, and I wanted us to be part of that. I had had a valuable (though distinctly pre-IT) experience of collaborative leaning as a postgraduate student at the University of Alberta, and I hoped that extensions of the classroom and collaborations that I found so exciting

there might be promoted for our own students through e-learning. And I felt that we had facilities available to us that we were not using to full advantage.

Institutional Context / Background

English at The University of Northampton consists of a BA programme (70 students in total), Combined Honours (150 students) and two MAs (in Modern English Studies and English Language). It is located in a lively Arts Campus alongside Art, Dance Design, Drama Fashion, Media and Music, so there is room to extend current collaborations into e-learning. Both the School's and the University's Learning and Teaching Strategies emphasise the need to extend blended and distance learning, so initiatives established by an e-learning advocate in English might be continued through institutional funding in future. The University has three Learning and Teaching Fellows with e-learning expertise, though this does not always translate easily into the context of English Studies. An undergraduate curriculum review and introduction of a new BA in Creative Writing made 2006-7 a good moment at which to embed e-learning.

The Department has eleven English staff, each of them with access to good-standard IT hardware. There had been some experimentation with e-learning in the core course in Victorian Literature (where students wrote an assessed logbook in response to a range of web-based materials and exercises, including visual material) and assessed discussion board exercises in eighteenth-century literature. Both of these were to undergo substantial revision in the course of the project. An institutional strength lies in the energetic Library staff, who actively promote the use by staff and students of electronic journals, subject gateways and on-line databases. Reading lists can be linked from Blackboard sites to the Library catalogue, and the English pages on the Library website are full of useful links and suggestions. In the course of 2007, IT Services and the Library were merged into 'Information Services', and three more Learning Technologists were appointed, including one for the School of the Arts whose expertise has proved invaluable. The University's Office of Learning and Teaching sees the development of E learning as one of its priorities, and has been very supportive of the project.

The project coincided with the refurbishment of the Arts Building in 2006, and played its part in encouraging the University to equip each of the teaching rooms with an interactive white board, visualiser, pc and projector and video and DVD player. This refit changed the whole context of the project, because it made every tutor aware of the potential for using such equipment, prompted students to ask why it was not being used (if it wasn't) and gave a new impetus to staff development in e-learning.

The University uses Blackboard (in the form of NILE—Northampton Integrated Learning Environment), and this system too underwent a major upgrade in Summer 2007 so that a learning suite including blogs and wikis was available for the start of the 2007-8 year.

The next stage of the development of the Arts Building will include custom-designed learning spaces which will encourage the flexible use of laptops and wireless internet access for project work and discussion.

Methodology

The overall aims for the project remain valid, though the aim of making some of the learning materials 'open access' to interested English students and staff world-wide through the University internet is still some way down the line. It soon became clear that the number of specific projects was too ambitious, and that we needed to be selective. It is instructive to look at how these objectives changed as the project progressed (*with update in italics below*):

- (a) The recording of parts of the best student presentations, and making them available on-line. *mp3 and sound files are an excellent resource, but we have not necessarily used them in this way. They can be used for student feedback (as Bob Rotherham from Leeds Metropolitan University has shown), presenting poetry, adding postscripts to lectures*
..
- (b) The promulgation of best practice in managing on-line discussion forums, and the use of them for assessment. *This was a very necessary move; we came to realise that there are useful ground-rules and stages for stimulating student involvement and making the forums work.*
- (c) The production of e-magazines for the showcasing of student creative writing. *We actually handed this over to the students, who set up an editorial board, were given access to the website and are in the process of producing a writing magazine, 'Red Kite'.*
- (d) Links to JSTOR and scanned articles from Blackboard module sites. *Relatively simple to do and helpful to the students. It encourages them to use JSTOR in a way that a posted announcement about it might not. It can be linked to blog exercises, too.*
- (e) The use of on-line quizzes and tests for summative and formative assessment. *Well, the facility is there on Blackboard, and it may be worth using one day. It is not really a priority. For formative testing, hand-held voting devices like Quwzdom are more immediate and more fun.*
- (f) customizing of e-portfolios used for English students' PDP. *In conjunction with the Careers Department, we obtained some funding from the English Subject Centre for web pages on Your English Degree: Making It Work, which includes video interviews with four Northampton English graduates who work in a variety of jobs. The University-wide blog tool MyPAD (available to all staff and students with an IT account) is proving to be useful for PDP reflection. On the*

other hand, the whole issue of making PDP workable is so huge that it could absorb the whole energies of this project if it were allowed to.

- (g) On-lines blogs and portfolios for assessment; *this is the area in which we have made the most progress, and which has had the most impact on student work.*
- (h) More consistent use of external links from Blackboard sites to Intute and JISC resources; *proved relatively straightforward to implement, and to link to the blogs.*
- (i) The showcasing of different standards of student work, with links to tutor marking comments on different sections; *remains a longer-term project, though we have posted samples of good assignments and dissertation chapters.*
- (j) The use of on-line group work in literary research; *wikis will be used to create records of group research for presentation projects in a Level One module on literary genres.*
- (k) The design of a restricted-access site on Blackboard where e-learning pages and work-in-progress can be shared by English staff. *Since most of the staff log in to each other's Blackboard sites and share ideas, this separate site has proved to be largely redundant. There is a University-wide version, however, run by the Office of Learning and Teaching.*

The progress of the Project was measured in four ways:

1. In meetings of the staff team, where it is a standing item on the agenda.
2. In staff development sessions, where the success of the e-learning developments have been shared and critiqued by staff.
3. The project leader received email comments from staff on the practical issues that arose as the materials and methods were used in the curriculum.
4. Through a student focus group which has given feedback on past and present e-learning initiatives.

Discussion

Given the number of the initial targets, a certain amount of rationalization was inevitable. We hope add additional projects in the longer term.

We now have six major modules that make substantial use of e-learning, in addition to the e-learning presence in many more.

One of the key factors in achieving the goals has been the extent to which we were able link e-learning to summative assessment. In a modular course there are many assessment opportunities, and generally both students and

staff are willing to try out new methods if they are part of a mixed diet of assessment. Three things are worth noting: (a) once staff agree to use e-learning in assessment they will work hard throughout the year to both master the technology and make it work in worthwhile ways for their students; (b) formative assignments have worked with Masters students, but undergraduates' commitment to them tends to dwindle away; (c) summative assessment signals to the students that e-learning is an important part of their course.

As a result of this year's experience, it has occurred to staff that some of our 'professional and academic writing' modules might be more effectively taught through blended learning. Lectures and demonstrations of key topics could be followed up not by the current workshop-style writing exercises but by on-line exercises and tutor feedback. There had been no plan to 'advocate' this; it is a spin-off from the success of other initiatives.

Staff have tried new methods of teaching (via interactive whiteboards, student 'lantern slides', discussion boards, blogs and use of sample student work). They have sometimes been drawn into doing this because they were on a module teaching team where such an approach was expected by students or required by the assessment regime. The English Department is seen in the School of the Arts as innovative in extending the classroom through e-learning, and as a source of information and guidance.

The Advocate project has been given impetus by national and university initiatives such as the HE Academy-funded BITE project, which aims to create exemplar on-line courses that consist of bite-sized chunks of learning, through which staff can enhance and develop their abilities to teach more effectively. The appointment of three additional Learning Technologists, based in specific University Schools, has ensured knowledgeable support for English staff and others.

On the whole, the challenge in sustaining creative use of e-learning in English does not lie at School and University level (where it forms part of strategic and Learning and Teaching plans) but in maintaining a supply of exemplars of good practice to stimulate colleagues. This is what allows strategic plans to become reality.

Levers & Barriers to embedding

English deals in text and analysis. Both these are eminently suited to e-learning—both in traditional activities and in more 'recreative' or playful forms of role play and pastiche. The subject has traditionally used links to fine art and visual material, and the web has enabled this to be done efficiently (eg by approaching "The Lady of Shalott" through the multitude of contemporary paintings of scenes from that poem). Poetry is at least in part an oral art form, and the Poetry Archive and custom-made recordings allow this to be exploited in e-learning materials. Other similar points could be made.

One barrier to e-assessment through blogs and discussion boards is the desire of English tutors to correct student work through annotations and marginal comments on the assignments themselves. Now this can be done by editing blogs and suggesting corrections (at the most basic level, by inserting apostrophes and semi-colons and alternative words). This laborious process seems however to be against the spirit of the blog. A tutor comment can be added (*should* be added) after student entries, but it may have to restrict itself to more general comments (“be careful with punctuation . . . you could read Huggins's book on the Harlem Renaissance”).

Matters of style in student writing are even more visible (and disconcerting for some) in Discussion Boards. Additionally, blogs are time-consuming to read and grade.

Student experience

Student feedback and Focus Group comments suggest that students welcome the variety provided by on-line assessment, the continuous feedback on their progress, and the variety of the tasks. The original Victorian web-based exercises submitted in paper form have given way to more flexible blog and discussion board entries. Thanks to the Focus Group we have made a more realistic assessment of the time needed to complete on-line assignments, and designed them so they focus on research techniques and critical review.

Students' work-study balance has changed in the past decade, and in many cases they do not spend as much time on the premises and in the Library as they once did. E learning does provide an extension of the classroom, and an opportunity to connect with the course, that work and family commitments might otherwise prevent.

Students did need guidance at the start of the module about the practicalities of blogs and discussion boards, but on the whole their response has been positive. The assessment briefs were designed with the Focus Group's advice in mind. Here is the one for the Children's Literature blog:

LIT3049 Critical Diary (Blog) on Children's Literature

(Counts 60% of assessment of module)

On the NILE site for LIT3049, click on the 'Blogs' icon. You will find that you have been assigned a blog with your name on it. Click on this and write in the space provided. A blog is an on-line log or diary; it can be used for many purposes, but here the objective is to reflect at regular intervals on the material you are reading for the module. You will write **a minimum of 500 words four times per term**, using one of the 'prompts' below as a starting point. Your views may change as the module progresses, and you have more knowledge and critical techniques to draw upon, but 'independent

thinking' is one of the assessment criteria for the blog, so you should not be afraid to be exploratory and **try new ideas and responses**.

Your Tutor will have on-line access to your blog, and will add an occasional comment on your progress. All the entries are date-stamped, so it is important that you keep to schedule, as late entries will not be assessed (unless there is good reason for the lateness). You can ask your tutor to enable other students to read your blog, and you can be given permission to read theirs. This sharing of ideas can be one of the rewarding aspects of such on-line diaries, but of course you should not lift ideas from others' blogs without acknowledgement.

For each blog entry you should choose from the following five 'prompts' for your blog. You should only use each prompt AT LEAST ONCE during the year; ie your EIGHT blog entries should contain ONE of each exercise, and THREE others of your own choice.

Prompt 1: Reflect on this week's seminar. Did it cover the aspects of the text that you expected? Did you come away with new ideas? Did you share others' views? Were there aspects of the text that you would have liked to have seen addressed?

Prompt 2: In the library, seek out one paper secondary source on this week's text and read it carefully. (It might be a chapter from Jack Zipes's book on Harry Potter, or a journal article on Philip Pullman, for example). It might be one of the items on the module bibliography, or one not mentioned there. Briefly summarize the core of the argument, and its approach to the text. Did you find it enlightening and useful?

Prompt 3: Give your first thoughts after reading a set text, *before* the seminar. How would you define its themes and form? What did you like or dislike about it? (Remember that you need to be literary-critical rather than just emotive--"I liked it" without critical reasons won't be too interesting to your tutor or other readers!

Prompt 4: Seek out an on-line source of information or discussion on a set author or text (eg from The University of Calgary's Web Guide to Children's Literature <http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/>) As with prompt 2, assess how enlightening and useful it was for you in helping you to understand a set text.

Prompt 5: Pick a passage (no more than a page long) from a set text for that week, or a single poem, and examine it in detail, suggesting how you respond to it and how it relates to the book as a whole, or to other works by that writer.

Deadlines for blog postings: Midnight on Sunday as follows

November 4; November 18; December 2; December 16 2007

February 3; February 17; March 2; March 16 2008

Assessment Criteria: Your **Critical Diary and Seminar Reflection** will be given a grade at the end of the module, based on the following criteria:

1. Consistency of work: contributions on a regular basis
2. Evidence of sustained reflective engagement with the set texts
3. Analysis of language and narrative techniques
4. Understanding of structure and form
5. Evidence of reading and research
6. Constructive reflection on seminar discussion and its outcomes
7. Appropriate and sophisticated use of critical discourse

Project Support

The year's work has been inspiring. It was rather daunting at first to realise that we were each starting from different points of competence and expertise, and that my own use of on-line assessment and discussion boards had been misconceived in some respects. It did not take me long to realise that fact—a few comments and suggestions from within the project team helped me to see the light, and some of the results of improved design (eg in the MA Discussion Board) were almost instantaneous. I have since read useful texts on on-line groupwork, but the initial suggestions from within our group had actually been more effective for me, because they derived from the discipline of English. I was pleased to see how diverse the project members' aims were, because that allowed me to review the scope of what was possible within e-learning. I am particularly grateful to Rosie Miles from Wolverhampton and Lesley Coote from Hull, as they actually came to Northampton and met my colleagues and demonstrated creative and tremendously varied ways of using the already-available technology. Brett Lucas and Richard Francis's visit to Northampton, to meet the Department, brought into focus the differing degrees of preparedness and willingness that characterised my English colleagues, and made me decide to focus on what could be achieved through Blackboard and through formal assessment. I had thought I would use more formal staff development sessions than I did. In practice, working with individuals, or groups of two or three on specific issues and tools, with a particular end in view (such as how to set the 'tone' of academic discourse in a blog, or how it might differ from a formal essay) proved most practical and productive. I know I did not reach some my colleagues, but that was natural.

As an advocate one does acquire a rather undeserved aura of competence and authority in matters of e-learning, which at first is gratifying but then needs to be deflected back to colleagues. They soon become more adept than oneself at using the online tools and devising or refining the assessments.

Outputs/Outcomes

These can be tabulated quite briefly:

Revised and improved for interactivity, time demands, feedback:

Level 1 Victorian Literature on-line tasks
Level 2 18thC Literature Discussion Board
MA Research Methods Discussion Board
Sample past student work on-line

New for 2007-8:

Level 1 Modern Literature Assessed Blogs
Level 2 Modernism Assessed Blogs
Level 3 Children's Literature Assessed Blogs
Student on-line magazine for creative writers
Alumni creative writing website at
<http://www.rippingpages.co.uk/>
Podcasts in Children's Literature and Creative Writing
Optional blog space for PDP in English
Trial use of hand-held voting technology in lectures
Level 1 Wikis to record group work in Literary Genres
Problem-based on-line research topics at various levels.

In all, these actively involve seven staff out of a team of eleven.

Conclusions / Recommendations / Closing thoughts

I would suggest that any teacher of University English reviewing e-learning ask themselves (a) what were the most exciting *extensions* of the classroom for them when they were students? and (b) what were their most exciting *collaborations* as a student? My guess is that some aspect of these experiences could be facilitated today through e-learning.

The e-learning advocacy project has been stimulating and productive. It certainly connects lecturers from different universities, yet each person focuses on innovation within a particular curriculum and a particular institution. Advocacy adds an element of persistence to staff development projects and personalises the issue of e-learning within the host Department. It can act as a springboard, in that there may be funding available from Universities' Offices of Learning and Teaching for additional years' work.

My general recommendations for advocates (new and old, official and unofficial) would be:

1. Where possible, link e-learning to summative assessment. This can be done through assessed blogs, wikis and discussion board contributions, or through essay-based work which draws upon 'learning objects' or on-line research tasks.
2. On-line sound files are easy to prepare and achieve a rewarding degree of intimacy in a medium that can be dominated by written text.
3. Ask students, often, what would improve their e-learning experiences. Perhaps use a separate discussion board for this process.

4. Work on a broad front and try a number of different approaches so that your e-learning has variety. Don't worry if some ideas don't work out.
5. Non-assessed discussion boards can work well with MA students, particularly if they are part-time and are looking for a form of academic community that might not come about in other ways. Gilly Salmon's books on e-tivities and learning in groups are full of useful ideas for making such boards a success.
6. Design on-line assessments that combine specific 'prompts' with freedom for students to invent their own forms of engagement with texts.
7. Guide students on the use of an appropriate academic register, but remember that blogs can be subtly (or starkly) different from an essay.
8. Give feedback to e-learners little and often.
9. As an advocate, work with small groups of staff and involve them by targeting aspects of their students' learning that they would like to improve (eg reflection on material outside the seminar; additional reading; use of sound research methods).
10. Make sure that staff get to see interesting and imaginative examples of e-learning from their colleagues and from other universities. I think this is called peer pressure.
11. Include a question on e-learning as standard in the student feedback surveys. Then hope that this does not backfire.

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