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Adding an extra dimension: the experience of using WebCT for the Literature and its Readers option

Margaret Kendall, Department of Information and Communications

Introduction

In recent years, the teaching timetables for both undergraduates and postgraduates in the Department of Information and Communications have been adapted to meet the needs of the changing student population. Students may have up to six hours classroom contact (two hours per subject) on their days of attendance. This helps:

- to limit attendance for part time students to one day a week
- students travelling a distance to save on travel costs
- mature students with children to save on childcare costs
- to give more opportunities for full time students to find part time work at times other than weekends or evenings.

However, the consolidated timetable has limited the opportunities for students to discuss their work outside formal teaching, learn from each other's experiences and to meet to prepare group assignments.

This article reports on the use of WebCT as an additional teaching and learning strategy for campus based students taking a Level 3 core option unit called *Literature and its Readers*, which ran for the first time in 2001/2002. The aims were to encourage the use of relevant online resources through tutorials and exercises, and to provide virtual opportunities for ongoing discussion outside of designated class contact time. Computer laboratory sessions as starting points for use of the online materials replaced 8 of the 44 hours (18%) allocated for classroom teaching.

Context

The focus of the *Literature and its Readers* unit is not on literary appreciation, but on the range of imaginative literature, the needs of readers of all ages, and the roles of organisations providing access and support. This includes current issues affecting the reading industry: authors, publishers, booksellers, literature development workers, libraries and other agencies. A shared role of many employed in the sector is "reader development", a term in vogue since the early 1990s to describe initiatives to encourage and enhance people's reading experiences, with increasing use being made of the World Wide Web, for example, the Forager selection tool (Branching Out, 2002).

During the previous year, a short course for professional librarians on *Using Information and Communication Technologies for Reader Development* had been designed, using a one day course followed by a month's access to online course materials and communication tools on WebCT. The short course was well received and gave opportunities for further discussion with professionals about current initiatives and developments. This provided a useful first stage in preparing online learning materials, which could then be adapted for use with students. The co-tutor of the Literature and its Readers, Sue Hornby, was interested to see the tutorials and was reassured that she could access them and post discussion messages without needing to learn in a hurry how to use WebCT as a designer. It was decided to introduce WebCT early on in the unit to encourage students to use the communication tools and to arrange computer laboratory sessions at appropriate points throughout the year to introduce new content modules and activities.

Learner profiles

For the academic year 2001/2002, the unit was chosen by 24 Information and Library Management and Information Management undergraduates, of whom 9 were part time students working in libraries. Undergraduate core option units are also open to postgraduate students in the Department as electives, with assignments at the appropriate level. The unit proved popular, being chosen by 7 full time postgraduate students, of whom 5 had degrees in English Literature. In the group as a whole, around a third were mature students in their 30s and 40s, some were parents, two spoke English as their second language, and only five were men. Some of the undergraduates already had experience of using WebCT for a unit taken the previous year, all the undergraduates had higher than average Information and Communication Technology skills because of the nature of their degree subjects.

With such a variety of experience within the group, it was felt important to allow opportunities for students to learn from each other, whilst ensuring that those with less knowledge of English Literature or experience of promoting literature in libraries, were still encouraged to contribute. The aims of online discussions

were to provide additional communication channels for those who might be reluctant to speak out in class, and to allow continued asynchronous discussion after a class had ended.

Sharing reading experiences

> *"Reader development means active intervention to increase people's confidence and enjoyment of reading, open up reading choices, offer opportunities for people to share their reading experience and raise the status of reading as a creative activity"* Opening the Book (2002)

Two students shared poems they had written themselves, the poem by postgraduate Elizabeth Wildgoose below is included with her permission

My Journey

So this is it! Thirteen years
Of living in 'the smoke'.
Endless traffic, filth and fumes,
Believe me it's no joke.
Sold my home and left my job;
To friends I've said goodbye.
Turned my back on London
With regrets, relief....so I
Am here....alone now....
Just sitting on the train....
Looking through the window....
At the towns in all the rain....

BUT I journey North with Hope!!
And a rucksack at my side.
I've passed the point of no return.
Serendipity's my guide.

As a starting point for consideration of this approach and its use, it was felt important to use the students' own reading experiences. Given the size and diversity of the group, face-to-face discussion would have been time-consuming and likely to result in limited participation. As it would have delayed the introduction of WebCT to ask them to read novels of a particular genre or theme as a basis for discussion, poetry was chosen to start off the first discussion. This was timely since National Poetry Day (held annually on the first Thursday in October) happened to fall on the day on which the unit was taught, in the second week of teaching. The students were introduced to the concepts of reader development in the first week, and asked to find a poem that meant something to them on the National Poetry Day theme of journeys over the next few weeks.

For the second hour of the session on the 4th October, they worked through a short tutorial on web resources for poetry. Those who had brought poems with them on the day were asked to post messages about them in a discussion topic area, the others were asked to post them at a later date.

It was surprising that in addition to the messages posted on the day, the students continued to post messages over the following weeks, with the last message posted on January 30th and 22 (71%) students contributing altogether. The effort the students put into their postings was high, for example, one part time student included a quotation from Dylan Thomas to illustrate what poetry meant to her:

"poetry is what in a poem makes you laugh, cry, prickle, be silent, makes your toe-nails twinkle, makes you want to do this or that or nothing, makes you know that you are alone in the unknown world, that your bliss and suffering is forever shared and forever all your own"

Another example of a successful discussion topic was on prize-winning novels, for which the students were asked to write a brief account of the personal impact a prize-winning novel written for children or adults had had on them. Again, most students responded, including some that had not contributed to the poetry discussion, and the quality of responses was high. This exercise formed part of preparations for a face-to-face debate on the last day of term on the value of literary prizes as an indicator of quality. Private discussion topic areas were also set up, and the students were divided into two teams to prepare arguments for and against the motion. Although this group work was not assessed, the asynchronous discussion did mean that the students put in effort to prepare for the debate together when it would have been difficult for them to meet at other times in person. The winning vote went to the team that had made most use of their discussion topic area to prepare for the debate, an interesting but not foregone conclusion.

Learning activities

After a lecture, some students will follow up references out of interest and to deepen their learning experience, but many will only do so if it is seen as meeting the assessment requirements. By replacing some of the classroom teaching with computer laboratory based sessions, greater importance was placed on requiring the students to visit recommended web resources. For the first two laboratory sessions, online tutorials integrated narrative with individual tasks for the students to complete, thus enabling the students to work at their own pace and gain confidence in using WebCT.

To introduce variety in later sessions, exercises were introduced to complete during the session. One of these involved the students in finding the answers to

questions using a selection of recommended sources, a technique known as a WebQuest (Dodge, 2001). Another required students to work in pairs to visit the website of one of a number of organisations working to encourage literacy in order to find out more about their aims and activities. They were asked to prepare notes as they explored the web site using Windows Notepad, then paste in the notes to a discussion message in a WebCT discussion topic area. At the end of the session, each pair had found out about one organisation in depth, and the group had built up a shared resource giving summaries of literacy initiatives from different organisations.

Student views

Evaluation at the end of the unit was carried out using the standard questionnaire for all teaching in the Department (see Appendix 1). The quantitative results indicate high levels of satisfaction overall (apart from one undergraduate whose comments revealed an expectation that the unit was on literary appreciation). However, very few comments were made by the students to complement the statistics. A further survey (see Appendix 2) specifically about the use of WebCT was distributed, and although only 9 of the 31 students responded (29%) the qualitative results provide some confirmation of the benefits of using WebCT and give pointers for future developments.

Several comments indicated that the students felt that they had learnt from each other through the Discussion topic areas, for example:

The posting of individual opinions on literature and activities relating to it gives people a chance to form their own opinions instead of direct influence by lecturers

As a part time student it is good to get other people's opinions outside lecture times

One student would have liked further discussion

It would be good to make this more of a major emphasis for discussing reading and books in general than was initiated on the course this year

but another felt that too many messages could discourage some from participating

overuse can detract from the purpose, ie. too many discussions gives a lot of material to plough through so people don't bother to read them and don't interact

Some reluctance to post messages is evident from the quantitative results, one commented

I did feel reluctant to post messages in the Discussions area at the beginning, though towards the end of the course I found that I enjoyed communicating with the rest of the group in this way.

There was general agreement that more could be achieved in less time, with four students commenting that it was useful to be able to refer back to the tutorials and discussion at other times, for example

The discussion areas allow more time after class to consider topics and return to other's views. It was useful as preparation for the final debate

However, a couple of responses pointed to the need for reminders about the resources when using WebCT as an additional, rather than the primary means of delivery

You need to find more time out of teaching time to keep an eye on the resource: you have to keep remembering it's there!

There was general agreement that the timetabled lab sessions were helpful, and the comments from four students about not having access to the Internet at home indicate the importance of allowing time to enable and encourage students to participate. This would also help at times when the students are under pressure to complete other assignments, as shown by this comment

When the coursework being worked on was not this module then less time was available to participate

Discussion

Providing an additional communication channel to encourage students to learn from each other was appreciated by the students, as shown in the feedback comments, and by their willingness to share their experiences about poetry. Alexander and Boud (2001, p.9) emphasise the need for *"the establishment of a climate for learning that values the learner".* Rather than comment publicly on the poems and be seen as "marking" contributions, the tutors used WebCT private mail to show appreciation of student efforts without being too visible. This appears to have worked as a tactic to encourage the students to view the electronic space as their own. Even had there been more time for face-to-face contact, some might have felt more self-conscious about sharing their personal views of poetry and it would have been highly unlikely that they would have shared poetry they had written themselves. There was only time in the taught programme to allow one week for discussion of poetry and its readers, but the online facility enabled the students to share their experiences for the remainder of term.

It was encouraging to see the use made by the students of the discussion tool to prepare for the debate, when this was not a direct part of the summative assessment for the unit. The exercises in the laboratory sessions also engaged the students in activities with the aim of encouraging deep rather than surface approaches to learning (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). Whilst there are too many variables to make a correlation between the use of online learning strategies and performance in the assessment, it may have helped some to reach a higher level of performance. Many illustrated their discussions of reader development initiatives with examples drawn from the resources to which they had been introduced through the online tutorials and activities.

Participation in the online discussions was requested, but not formally required, as is recommended for effective distance learning (Graham et al, 2001). As these were campus-based students, who did meet together regularly for face-to-face teaching, it was not felt appropriate to require contributions, particularly since the aim was to encourage and demonstrate reader-centred approaches to discussing literature. As several students raised lack of access to the Internet from home as an issue, it would also be unequal to insist on participation beyond the timetabled laboratory sessions. However, by the end of the unit, 24/31 (77%) had posted at least one message. This included both the students with English as a Second Language, all 5 men and 7 of the 9 part time students. A total of 128 messages were posted altogether, which is not a lot, but the quality was generally high. The WebCT tracking facilities showed that all but two of the students had read at least five messages, with 22 (71%) reading at least twenty-five of their colleagues' contributions.

Number of messages read	**Number of students**	**Percentage of the total**
More than 100	2	6%
More than 75	8	26%
More than 50	10	32%
More than 25	22	71%
More than 5	29	93.5%
More than 2	31	100%

To put these results into context, Salmon (2001, p.121) says that a common experience is that a third of students *"read and contribute, a third only read messages and a third neither read nor contribute because they never access the conferences"*

With hindsight, use of the discussion tools could have been further encouraged at the beginning of the year by giving the students more time to become familiar with the software and gain confidence. Sharing poetry was also a challenging starting point, which may have been intimidating to some. The plan for next year is to start with children's literature instead, which may make it easier for more people to contribute at an earlier stage. Guidance from Salmon (2001) will be

followed to encourage participation and moderate discussions to reduce the sense of overload experienced by one of the survey respondents.

The two tutors have yet to meet to plan next year's programme in detail, but it is likely that we will increase the amount of time for computer laboratory sessions, both to encourage participation and to ensure that the students don't forget about the resources! To a certain extent, it was trial and error this year, but the results provide an encouraging basis for further development. Online learning does seem to have helped us to achieve more in less time, and to have added an extra dimension by enabling and encouraging student-to-student communication.

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APPENDIX 1

DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION & COMMUNICATIONS: UNIT EVALUATION SUMMARY SHEET

5 = I strongly agree; 4 = I agree; 3 = I have no strong feelings 2 = I disagree; 1 = I disagree

Unit: Literature and its Readers					
Students in group: 31 No. of respondents: 21 % response: 68%	5	4	3	2	1
1. The unit is well taught	9	10	1	1	
2. The unit content is relevant	8	11	2		
3. The unit is well organised	6	7	4	2	

4. The supporting materials (courseware, handouts etc.) supplement the lecture material well	6	11	3		
5. The assessment exercises (essays, in class tests etc.) are relevant to understanding of the lecture material	6	11	3	1	

APPENDIX 2

EVALUATION OF THE USE OF WEBCT FOR THE LITERATURE AND ITS READERS UNIT

5 = I strongly agree; 4 = I agree; 3 = I have no strong feelings 2 = I disagree; 1 = I disagree

Unit: Literature and its Readers					
Students in group: 31 No. of respondents: 9 % response: 29%	5	4	3	2	1
1. The online tutorials introduced me to web resources of which I was previously unaware	3	4	1		1
2. The timetabled lab sessions to use the WebCT materials were useful to me	3	4	2		
3. The use of WebCT enabled us to achieve more in less time, e.g. continued discussion of topics introduced in class	2	4	3		
4. I benefited from reading the messages posted by others in the Discussion topic areas, e.g. poetry, reviews of prizewinning novels	3	4	2		
5. I was reluctant to post messages in the Discussions topic area	1	2	2	3	1