Flexible Learning for a Large Undergraduate History Paper: Implementation and Outcomes

ROBERTO RABEL
RESEARCH AND INTERNATIONAL DIVISION, UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO
DUNEDIN, NEW ZEALAND

ANDREW HIGGINS
HIGHER EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT CENTRE, UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO
DUNEDIN, NEW ZEALAND

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING HISTORY USING DISTANCE EDUCATION

Until recent years, historians have usually given more attention to course content than teaching methodologies when reflecting on pedagogical issues. In part, this focus has been based on an assumption that success in inspiring students is directly related to the skills and knowledge of individual lecturers as historical researchers rather than to their ability to devise course structures and employ teaching methods which can accommodate diverse student learning styles. As a consequence, Stearns (1993, cited in Blackey, 1993) has argued that, "The challenge of matching history's research achievements with appropriate teaching strategies has not yet been met in the contemporary educational context" (p. 18).

By the 1990s, however, many teachers of history had begun to rethink these traditional assumptions. For example, Reber (cited in Blackey, 1993) has noted, that "As historians have become more concerned with improving their teaching, they have sought to refine their approaches or to develop new methods for helping students understand the past" (p. 123). Similarly, Booth and Hyland (1996) have detected "a growing awareness" among history teachers "that their traditional methods are not working as well as previously, and that the experience of an increasingly diverse student body is emphasising the need to rethink conventional wisdoms about teaching" (p.5). Their response to this challenge was to advocate an "active learning" approach "which emphasises that learning is fundamentally an active process and that it is best promoted when learners are directly engaged through their own interests, enthusiasms and talents rather than expected merely to receive information" (p. 8). In support of this position, they have argued that "increasing students' sense of control over what they do, providing them with opportunities to exercise independence and developing the necessary skills with which to do this can make them more

effective learners. This might involve a wide spectrum of approaches, from allowing students greater choice over essay titles to more truly student-centred activities such as student run seminars or self-assessment and peer assessment" (p. 9). In this context, the history teacher becomes less of a privileged purveyor of historical knowledge and more a facilitator who guides students through the extensive content typical of history courses and who seeks to encourage them to grapple directly with various kinds of historical source materials for themselves.

Booth's and Hyland's position about having a more student-centred approach to learning in an active way thus leads to considerations of open, distance and flexible learning as possible approaches to teaching history. Wade has broadly defined flexible learning as "an approach to university education which provides students with an opportunity to take greater responsibility for their learning and to be engaged in learning activities and opportunities that meet their own individual needs" (Wade, Hodgkinson, Smith, & Arfield, 1994, p. 12). Wade regards open learning as a "term used to describe courses flexibly designed to meet individual requirements."

When examining the United Kingdom's Open University processes for developing History teaching through distance education, Marwick (Booth & Hyland, 1996, pp. 181–90) lists the essentials of a structured distance teaching course for tertiary level History. In his view, the course must be:

A. Thoroughly thought through in advance, with issues, controversies, differing approaches and the exact roles of the individual contributors fully explicated.

B. There must be a set of Aims, concerning the course as a whole, and usually, (though this is not always essential), several sets of Objectives, relating to individual sections, or units of the course.

C. All the materials required by students, apart from the basic course units (textbooks, documents, articles, map books, videos, etc.) must be clearly specified at the outset, and fully integrated with the teaching units.

D. The teaching material throughout must be structured upon a series of self-assessment exercises which provide a genuine learning progression for the particular topic immediately under study.

E. There must be an assessment policy totally integrated with the Aims, Objectives and content of the course.

F. There must be some form of personal backup, if only in the form of correspondence tuition, (marking and commenting on student assignments) and it is vital that this backup be carefully monitored by those responsible for the course and its aims.

It was within principles such as those identified by Marwick that the University of Otago sought to redesign the History 102 course.

THE FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATION OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING AT OTAGO Initially,
the approach to integrate flexible learning strategies into workplace practices at the University of Otago drew its impetus from the University senior management. This approach sought to generate support for, examples of, and interest in flexible learning that would diffuse ideas for

innovation into the whole of campus teaching and learning. The four Assistant Vice-Chancellors (Humanities, Health Sciences, Commerce and Sciences) nominated one paper each which they considered suitable for conversion to a flexible learning approach. They chose papers based on student numbers and whether they had (or might have) potential difficulties in their current delivery. Funding came from the Vice-Chancellor and from Divisional budgets. Of the four papers selected, three were large class first year courses and one was a second year class that caused difficulties for students.

Staff from the Flexible Learning Section began the process of conversion by working as part of the project teams for the selected papers to establish learning objectives for each course in accordance with the University's Teaching and Learning Plan (1996b). This required the academic staff to rethink their courses in terms of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes; understanding; ethical and social implications of their studies; and life-long learning skills their students should achieve. Having set these objectives, the project teams proceeded to design and develop teaching strategies to suit these needs. This included the creation of written materials, lecture strategies, computer-based instruction, small group activities and assessment strategies. Flexible teaching and learning strategies were chosen in accordance with the availability of time and resources as well as their suitability to the chosen objectives.

History 102

History 102, "The Twentieth-Century World", was a first-semester paper taught by four academic staff in the History Department. Previously, the staff members taught discrete sections of the course relating to their respective areas of interest (United States and international history, Asian history, Russian history, and European history). The course consisted of three lectures per week and one small-group tutorial per fortnight. Approximately 150 to 180 students enrolled in this course each year. The resources available to students outside lectures were limited to a computer-assisted learning programme (one staff member had placed his lecture notes on a hypercard stack), very occasional lecture handouts, the textbook and some tutorial readings held at the reserve desk of the central library. The course relied heavily on a traditional lecture format, partly supplemented by tutorials. Student evaluations of the course over the preceding five years had been consistently, if moderately, positive but had invariably included comments questioning the overall coherence of the course. The academic teaching staff shared this concern and realised that student performance in the course, while often excellent with respect to specific topics, did not reflect a wider understanding of the links between those topics and of the more general forces which had shaped twentieth-century history on a global level.

Following discussions with Flexible Learning staff from HEDC, the History course co-ordinator decided to adopt a more flexible approach to teaching this paper. He planned to use more diverse teaching methods and to create opportunities for self-directed student learning by providing more resources outside lectures. As well as seeking to create greater flexibility for students in making their way through the course material, the co-ordinator hoped to give the course a higher degree of

thematic coherence. It was clear that substantial redevelopment of the course was required in order to achieve these aims.

The first step in the process involved active collaboration between staff in the Flexible Learning section and the co-ordinator to establish a more explicit set of learning objectives for this paper expressed in terms of the University Teaching and Learning Plan (1996b). Based on the learning outcomes in the Plan, the redevelopment of the course to incorporate a flexible learning approach involved the lecturers not only rethinking their teaching methods and the overall course structure, but also each lecture itself. They decided to adopt a more consciously team-based teaching approach by combining their areas of interest within each lecture, wherever possible, to give the students a more coherent, interrelated introduction to world history. As well as aiming to generate greater interaction between the teaching staff, they hoped to use teaching techniques which would generate more active student participation in the course. To this end, the team agreed that the course format should be redesigned to have only two lectures a week, to have weekly tutorials and to use the third lecture time selectively for showing videotaped documentaries to interested students. A range of new course materials directly accessible to students complemented lectures and tutorials. These activities complied with Marwick's (Booth & Hyland, 1996) principle A, namely that the course needed to be thoroughly thought through, and that the roles of the individual contributors needed to be fully explicated. The development of a coursebook satisfied Marwick's principle B. The group met with other academic staff and the Head of Department to outline the planning to date. The Head of the Flexible Learning Section agreed to provide a project plan for the development of this paper with estimates of cost. As a result of these discussions, the team created the following resources:

- A comprehensive, interactive coursebook, including the readings on which lectures were to be based;
- An Internet website, which would serve as an electronic "noticeboard" for the course and which included copies of all overhead transparencies used in lectures;
- An email discussion list to enable students to raise questions and to pursue ideas raised in the course with other students outside formal class time;
- Further computer-assisted learning (CAL) programmes;
- Lecture activities;
- Edited videotapes for use in lectures and accessible through the Audio-Visual Study Centre for use by students in their own time;
- Interactive tutorial exercises;
- Suitable assessment strategies, which involved raising the internal assessment component of the course from 30% to 60%.

This work ensured that Marwick's principles C and D had been accommodated in that the learning materials were clearly specified and that the assessment complied with the University of Otago's formal Assessment Policy, thus satisfying Marwick's principle E.

Initial work on this project commenced in August 1997 with academic staff preparing written notes and illustrations for the coursebook. Individual staff

members provided appropriate written materials for their portions of the course and conducted regular weekly meetings to ensure that all team members understood each unit of work being developed by the others. In itself, this process succeeded in building a higher level of intellectual coherence between the different parts of the course. Even more importantly, the outcome of the process—the coursebook—became the centre-piece of the new flexible learning strategy, insofar as it offered the possibility for the lecturers to devote less time in lectures to conveying information and more time to discussing with the class the broader historical significance of that information. Having the coursebook also meant students could more easily work through much of the most important parts of the course content in their own time and at their own pace. The HEDC instructional designer worked with the teaching team to ensure clarity of content and consistency of format as the coursebook was being prepared. The instructional designer also used a desktop publishing programme to produce the final, agreed text, thereby helping create an interactive, student-centred coursebook which was of a high professional standard in appearance as well as in content.

The course co-ordinator identified and edited sequences from videotaped documentaries that were to be integrated into lectures to illustrate the historical detail in many of the unit themes as the writing progressed. Working with a History Department research assistant, he also prepared a script and selected sequences to be edited into a twenty-minute videotape and used to introduce the major themes of the course in the first lecture. Educational Technology Support Services (ETSS) staff recorded the script,

assembled the visual sequences into the required order and prepared the final videotape. Other ETSS staff assisted in the creation of a suitable web page for the course from which students could access administrative information, electronic handouts, and hypercard stacks. ETSS staff with particular expertise in computer-assisted learning (CAL) provided advice about how to apply CAL techniques to teach students footnoting and bibliographical skills in two of the tutorial sessions. Working with the assistance of these various specialists, the History 102 team completed the project in February 1998, well in advance of the time when the students needed the materials. Personal backup to students arose through tutorials and by having academic staff available to the students as required, thus accounting for Marwick's principle F.

EVALUATING THE PROJECT

Recognising that the approach taken to teaching History 102 would differ from the lecture/tutorial format typically used in Humanities courses in the University, staff at HEDC developed a questionnaire to be administered before the course began and again after its completion. The questions sought information on students' expectations about learning outcomes and teaching strategies to be used and the post-course questions sought to explore if the expectations had been met or changed.

Specifically, questions sought information on expectations of enjoyment, stimulation, increased knowledge, development of specialised skills, communication skills, exploring topics in depth, understanding wider implications of the themes, developing computer skills, general research skills and help in passing the final examination. The

questions also sought information about students' views on teaching strategies. These included: lectures, tutorials, coursebooks, textbooks, class discussions, videos, informal discussions, websites, email, computer-assisted learning programmes; studying in their own time; assignment sheets; worksheets; reading; regular assessment; and group learning.

Method

There are many types of tests available to gather information about attitudes towards educational events. This project used a Likert Scale. The questionnaire asked individual students to respond to a series of statements, using a rating scale, ranging from strongly agree (5), agree (4), undecided (3), disagree (2), to strongly disagree (1).

The method is valid and typically used in Universities where academic staff issue questionnaires to students to gauge attitudes towards the particular academic's approach to teaching (Gay, 1987). Responses are often analysed by staff development units. In this particular study, the data is reliable since all students participating in the classes were surveyed, so sampling errors did not arise.

Eighty students completed a Likert Scale questionnaire responding to each of the headings in the list. By multiplying the number of respondents by each score they selected, adding the responses and dividing that result by the number of respondents, it is possible to arrive at a mean score for responses to each teaching strategy. This method was applied both before and after the programme.

The mean score arose from the statistical calculations where the means for the pre and post test results were compared with each other using a Chi squared test. In this study, the pre test result might be regarded as the expected result and the post teaching score as the observed result, testing the question, "Has there been a significant change in student attitudes to various elements of the paper during its teaching?" (Gay, 1987). The University provided a research assistant to monitor the progress of the projects and to measure student learning outcomes. The research aimed to establish students' views of the programme they were about to undertake. This formed the basis of the study. The research assistant asked the same questions of students after the programme to identify where their attitudes had changed and why. This approach allowed a statistical analysis to be conducted on the significance, if any, of attitudinal change to either the whole or to various parts of the programme. It also allowed for the identification of attitudes towards specific teaching strategies that had been built into the programmes. The research assistant devised a questionnaire to ascertain how students thought they would benefit from the programme after academic and flexible learning staff explained it to them. Students completed an exit questionnaire after completing the programme and the two outcomes were compared to see what changes occurred. In addition, the researcher sought staff opinions on changes in student performance compared to those taking similar courses in previous years.

Results

An analysis of these results, based on the null hypothesis that the flexible learning strategies would have no effect on whether student expectations were met, shows that the null hypothesis is

disproved and that this approach to teaching History 102 has made a difference. When looking at the results of teaching strategies more closely to see which particular strategies made a difference, the following information arises. Twice as many students completed the questionnaire at the end of the course than did at the start. Students reported the paper to be as enjoyable as they expected it to be. It stimulated their interest in world history and it increased their knowledge of the subject area. Students reported a major increase (+24%) in their specialised knowledge of world history. It also significantly increased their skills in communicating understanding of the subject (+26%). Students also reported substantial gains in understanding of the wider implications of world history above their expectations. They also reported gains of knowledge and skills in computing above expectations. On the other hand, the paper did not make a significant change in their general research, study and communications skills although they did report help above expectations in preparing for the final examination.

In so far as teaching strategies are concerned, the students reported almost no variation in their expectation of lectures and found the tutorials more difficult than expected. Similarly they found the study groups to be more difficult, but they appeared to enjoy private study and reading. Internet use remained a low priority but regular assessment and feedback received positive responses.

These data show no significant difference between the pre and post test groups for the traditional teaching patterns. In the new strategies categories, students responded well to the coursebook (2.25), rating it either highly effective (83%) or effective (69%). In contrast, they responded badly to the textbook (which was not a new element of the course), with only 33% rating it effective or highly effective. The videotaped documentaries were effective. The course did improve students' skills in using computers.

Discussion

One important finding is that the students' responses to the range of teaching strategies did not quite live up to their expectations displayed at the start of the course. This outcome may be due to the fact that most of the class were first-year students not accustomed to university work. Another factor which must be taken into consideration is that, although most of those who completed the initial survey also completed the final one, the second one was completed in class time. This meant that the number of returned end-of-course surveys was more than double that of the pre-course surveys. The possibility arises, therefore, that the first group included a higher number of "enthusiastic" students who were willing to make the effort to complete and return the initial survey in their own time. Such students may well have had higher expectations of the course. The extent to which those expectations were met is impossible to determine without being able to identify those who completed both surveys. In future, this problem could be eliminated by including a question on end-of-course surveys asking if the respondent completed the initial survey concerning pre-course expectations.

From the point of view of the academic staff, the course was a mixed success. They have no doubt that they were more successful than in previous years

in imparting a greater coherence to the diverse subject matter covered in this twentieth-century world history course. The team teaching also worked well on occasions but some members of the team were less comfortable with this approach than others and they also differed in the enthusiasm with which they attempted to encourage greater student interaction in lecture sessions. In general, as borne out by the responses to the student questionnaires, the teaching team found that the students responded well to the coursebook and to the videotapes but did not like the textbook which appears to have been too demanding. Moreover, they also noticed that whenever additional materials were provided, only a few students showed real interest in using those materials if they were not directly related to summative assessment tasks. Thus, for instance, only a handful of students took advantage of the E-mail discussion list. Nevertheless, the overall pass rate for the course did rise slightly from the previous year (from 78% to 80%).

CONCLUSION Students responded that the coursebook, which allowed them to access material, and the videotapes were the most effective teaching tools introduced into History 102 as part of the flexible learning package. It is noteworthy that both students and teachers are familiar with the coursebook/videotape technology, but that some within both groups displayed less comfort with the emerging electronic technologies. It is also possible to recognise that the quality of the tutorials varied because they were taken by different tutors, some of whom were academic staff and some of whom were post-graduate students.

From the point of view of both staff and students, not all their expectations were met concerning the possible gains to be derived from flexible learning methods. Certain positive outcomes, however, were definitely achieved. The coursebook was a real success and, though requiring slight modification each year, will continue to be used in History 102. It has also served as a model for other courses and a modified version of the coursebook is now being used in a Political Studies course taught within the Division of Humanities. The use of videotaped documentaries was also successful and these will continue to be used to illustrate various themes in twentieth century world history. Although the use of electronic technology did not seem as popular amongst students, it needs to be remembered that this was a campus-based course where the students were attending lectures and tutorials as well as having ready access to a sufficient range of non-electronic materials to enable them to fulfil virtually all course requirements without needing to use electronic technology. What has become possible, however, by introducing a flexible learning approach to History 102 is that this course is now effectively ready to be taught by distance should that be considered desirable. It has also offered valuable lessons for the teaching staff involved, who now realise how challenging it can be to devise innovative ways of encouraging students to assume greater responsibility for their own learning.

The concerns about teaching History in Universities raised by Reber and by Stearns in Blackey (1993) have been partly addressed by the developments using distance teaching and learning strategies at the University of Otago inasmuch as the strategies have been

rethought and the concepts of John Dewey's active learning strategies have replaced the passive receptive model so typical of the lecture format. The learning and teaching strategies have their origins in the principles and methods espoused, by Marwick in the area of teaching History using distance learning approaches. Surveys of students demonstrate that distance teaching and learning strategies used in the on-campus mode are successful.

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Roberto Rabel is Academic Director, International Development, and a member of the Distance Learning Reference Group at the University of Otago. His interest in flexible learning developed while teaching American and world history there from 1986 to 2001 and while serving as Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies in Otago's Division of Humanities from 1999 to 2001. Telephone: +64 3 479 5295. Email: Rrabel@nimrodel.otago.ac.nz.

Andrew Higgins is Senior Lecturer in Flexible Learning at the Higher Education Development Centre, University of Otago. His previous appointments include Education Queensland, the University of Queensland and the University of Western Australia. Email: andrew.higgins@stonebow.otago.ac.nz.