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POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 3 | Teaching Cycle 3

Developments to the Mode of Delivery

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4.4 CYCLE 3 – DEVELOPMENTS TO THE MODE OF DELIVERY

The experiences from the previous teaching cycles illustrated clearly that while the module was running smoothly overall, some further developments could be made to the mode of delivery, in particular lecture presentation. In response to students’ requests for notes to be provided prior to lectures, and observers’ comments about the ‘busy’ overheads used in Cycle 1 (see Appendix 9), interim modifications had been made by hosting notes on Blackboard, and reducing the amount of text of overheads to just key words and key points (Appendix 14). In both previous teaching cycles, though, students had suggested that PowerPoint could also be used.

Until this cycle, I had been reluctant to use PowerPoint for a number of reasons, including:
- a mistrust of using complex technology in lectures, with the risk of software or hardware failure;
- the time-consuming nature of scanning my numerous slides and diagrams, and the attendant problems associated with the massive files generated;
- the fact that whiteboard sketches (very useful in some contexts) cannot be incorporated into electronic presentations;
- the lesser degree of flexibility to ‘chop and change’ a tightly-structured electronic presentation if one is running short of time, or has too much time;
- a reluctance to simply pander to what can sometimes be interpreted as a demand for ‘style over substance’ in the delivery of lectures.

Clearly, however, PowerPoint does offer a number of advantages, including:
- presentations can look very professional, and avoid the complications and clumsiness of switching between overhead projectors, whiteboards, and slide projectors;
- slides can be annotated and avoid the use of clumsy pointer sticks or laser pointers;
- the increasing number of electronically-available dryland images can be incorporated into lectures;
- live links to relevant Internet web sites can be made during lectures.

4.4.1 Plan
For this teaching cycle, I decided to try and use PowerPoint alongside more traditional teaching media. The overheads used previously, plus some additional images, were incorporated into PowerPoint presentations, but whiteboard sketches and slides were still used also. PowerPoint has a ‘black screen’ facility enabling slides to be projected over a screen that is also being used for PowerPoint, and in the lecture theatre that was being used, there was enough whiteboard space adjacent to the screen to enable sketches to be made also.

Examples of PowerPoint presentations are included in Appendix 19. These were supported by links to Internet sites, and by the use of slides and whiteboard sketches; the overhead projector was the only teaching prop not used in these lectures.

4.4.1.1 Evidence for assessing the success of the plan
To assess the degree of success of these different aspects of module design, I proposed to use the following lines of evidence:
- student interest in the lectures as gauged by the level of student retention or recruitment during the early weeks of the module (e.g. as indicated by the number of ‘Change of Module’ forms that I would have to sign), and by the level of lecture attendance as the weeks passed;
- student engagement with, and comprehension of, the lecture material as indicated by student demeanour during lectures (e.g. yawning, note taking), by the depth and clarity of student answers to questions, and by the quality of questions posed by the students to myself;
- comments from students (by E-mail or otherwise) on aspects of lecture delivery;
- comments from teaching observers on the effectiveness of integration of different teaching media, and on levels of student engagement and comprehension;
• the number and nature of technical difficulties associated with using PowerPoint during lectures (e.g. hardware failure, software failure, slow links to Internet sites, ease of switching between different teaching media).

4.4.2 Progress Notes
Some examples of the comments received from students and colleagues as the module progressed are provided below, with the outcomes of the teaching observations discussed in the following section:

Week 1
PowerPoint is used to give the first two lectures with no problems.

This student cohort is familiar with Blackboard, although one or two problems in accessing material are reported:

"Dr. Tooth, I tried to access the material that you have placed on blackboard for GG31220 - Dryland Geomorphology but under 'my courses' dryland is not there. Is this to do with the work not be accessible to the class as a whole yet or an individual problem with registration? Everything is fine on my personal page though." (06/02/03)

It turns out that by mistake I have set the year incorrectly (02 instead of 03) but the problem is identified and fixed promptly by the Blackboard support team:

"Dear Stephen,

Although the flag is indeed ticked, the duration of the course has been set (via Control Panel > Course Settings > Course Duration) to Feb 7 02 - Jun 16 02. I have now changed this setting to Continuous, and the course is properly available. We recommend that the course durations are not used, it is better to make modules unavailable via the modules database." (06/02/03)

Week 2
Web sites supporting some of the lecture material are referred to, and links made to them through PowerPoint/Blackboard during the lecture. The links are a little slow but function correctly. The 'hit counters' on the web sites show that show that they are being used occasionally.

A student tells me after the lecture that the notes for the lecture were not available on Blackboard. It turns out to be my error. I send out a message:

"The lecture notes for this morning's lecture should now be available on Blackboard. Apologies for them not being available before but one of the settings was incorrect. If you discover any other glitches, and alert me in good time, I can fix them up." (13/02/03)

Some students have transferred in to the module, and some out.

Week 3 to 5
The virtual tours supporting some of the lecture material are referred to, and links made to them through Blackboard during the lecture. The 'hit counters' on the web sites show that show that they are being used occasionally.

An observer is present (see Appendix 20 and discussion below).

Some students have transferred in to the module, and some out (there has been a slight influx overall, and the numbers stabilize after the end of Week 4).

Week 6
Again, web sites supporting some of the lecture material are referred to, and links made to them through PowerPoint/Blackboard during the lecture. Again, the links are a little slow but functional.
Week 7
E-mail questions are received regarding the source of a quotation used in the assessed essay title:

"Dr. Tooth,

For the dryland essay what is the reference for the Bull and Kirby (2002, p.7) paper in the title? Kind regards" (21/03/03)

Week 8
There is a problem in accessing my M-drive and PowerPoint presentations at the start of the lecture. I have overheads and slides as a backup, but I manage to fix the problem. However, the first 10 minutes of the lecture are lost.

A student E-mails me seeking clarification about the seminar presentation:

"My group and I are a little confused about how best to present our work. Currently, we have decided to present the landforming processes as they appear in the papers and then summarise our overall findings at the end. However, we aren’t sure that this is the best way to do it. Would you prefer us to look at aeolian then fluvial features independently of the papers? Please could you email your reply to the whole group? Thank you" (25/03/03)

Other E-mails are received regarding reading material for the essay and seminars:

"Are you available tomorrow as I have been unable to find te recommended articles on the southwest Kalahari in the library, is it possible to borrow them? Thanks" (26/03/03)

"Dear Dr S Tooth,

Do you have a personal copy of The Kirkby and Bull book as the two copies in the Library have now been out for over two weeks and they have ten requests on them. Nobody seems to be taking notice of these requests and I would appreciate a look at the mentioned page. Would it at all be possible to have a look at it? I’ve thought of buying it but it costs £95!!! Thank You" (27/03/03)

Week 9
Our new external examiner comments on some of my exam questions:

"General comment is that I don’t have any real problems, they are very clean and reflect past good practice
Q1 The examples issue and is it really necessary to tell students doing this course at level 3 the difference between layered and massive rocks? Shouldn’t their ability to recognise this be central to the answer?
Q3 This is asking for description and no real evaluation - the learning outcomes stress assess and evaluate but this Q does not require either" (31/03/03)

An E-mail from a student shows that some are accessing the supporting web material highlighted in lectures:

"Stephen, don’t worry about the slides as I’ve got some cool pics from the Geoff Pickup website" (21/03/03)

The seminar presentations take place. All groups use PowerPoint to make their presentations, and overall they are very good. The use of PowerPoint appears to have helped students to illustrate their understanding of the material in well-structured, clear presentations. As in the previous cycle, at the end of the presentations I give examples of the key themes emerging in order to help them with their seminar reports. I suggest that, as with last year’s cohort, the presentations could be hosted on Blackboard to allow time for more leisurely contemplation of the material.

An E-mail from a student shows that some are keen to review the other presentations in order to write their seminar reports:

"I just wondered if you’ve put the seminars on blackboard yet cos I’ve been looking and I can’t find them. If so, can you tell me where they are please?! if not, do you know when they’ll be available to see on blackboard, or could you put the ones you’ve got up because I wanted to get my seminar report done this week before I went home. Thanks" (06/04/03)
Weeks 10+ and examinations
Still to run.

4.4.3 Feedback
Some aspects of feedback from students are apparent in the oral and E-mail comments noted above. Most of this was positive although, as in the previous cycle, there has been disappointingly little feedback from students regarding the usefulness of the web sites such as the virtual tours. The comments of one student, however, indicates that at least some are accessing other web sites, and finding them useful.

As the module has not yet finished, the Module Evaluation questionnaires have not yet been distributed and returned, and the assessments (essay, seminar report, exam) still have to be completed and marked. With respect to the questionnaires, it will be interesting to see the responses to the questions about lecture presentation and how these differ from previous years now that PowerPoint has been used.

The teaching observer’s comments on a 2-hour lecture (Appendix 20) were very positive, especially with respect to:
- the effective integration of different teaching media;
- the pace of delivery;
- student attentiveness and response to questions.

The external examiner’s comments on my draft exam questions were positive and the minor criticisms highlighted were easily dealt with by subtle changes to the wording of the questions.

4.4.3.1 Feedback to students
Feedback has been provided to students on a number of issues, for example:

- in response to questions about the source of quotations:
  "It’s the 1st chapter in:
  I’m not sure that that chapter itself will be all that helpful (despite the quote) but probably worth a look" (21/03/03)

- in response to clarification on the seminar presentation:
  "As part of the exercise is for you to design a presentation, I can’t really say how best to do it; the choice is yours! However, there are probably several ways it could be done i.e. either take a temporal perspective and demonstrate aeolian-fluvial interactions, or a spatial perspective and demonstrate them, or a mixture of the 2. No, you shouldn’t look at ‘aeolian then fluvial features independently’ b/c this wouldn’t be focusing on the interactions, would it ?" (25/03/03)

- in response to article and book requests:
  "You should be able to find le Roux, 1992 but the other 2 (Thomas et al, 1998, and Thomas et al, 1993) you will have to get from me, as I stated on the handout. Can you see me at 2.10 pm tomorrow ? Let me know if you can make this b/c I won’t be around much tomorrow" (26/03/03)

  "I thought that at least one of these was in Short Loan (?) If not, I can call the library and ask for one of them to put in there. Yes, I do have a copy. I am assuming that you want to look at the Bull and Kirkby chapter from which the essay quote was taken ? That chapter is not actually all that helpful (despite the quote) but there are some other bits and pieces that might be. I will be in this afternoon but not around much tomorrow" (28/03/03)
in response to requests for PowerPoint presentations to be hosted on Blackboard:

"Dear All

I have been away for the last week or so but have put on Blackboard (under Assignments) the 2 presentations that have been forwarded to me so far. Only 2 so far - what about the other 5 groups? Have a good Easter, Stephen" (15/04/03)

4.4.4 Implications for future practice

As in the previous teaching cycles, the proposed lines of evidence for assessing the degree of success of the plan (e.g. feedback from students and teaching observers, and possible technical problems associated with using PowerPoint during lectures) will form the basis for modifying future practice. Full assessment of this teaching cycle can only be undertaken when the student’s responses to the Module Evaluation questionnaires have been considered, and their assessments have been marked. The changes to future teaching practice will then be outlined in a written IGES report, following the examples presented in Appendix 11 and 18. Nevertheless, the module appears to be running smoothly, and only minor adjustments will be needed in future. In particular, the combination of different teaching media and technologies (e.g. PowerPoint, Internet, Blackboard, slides, whiteboard) seems to work well, with only the overhead projector rarely being used. Some issues to consider for the future, however, include:

- occasional technical glitches (e.g. hardware or software failure) means that it is essential to have back-up resources (e.g. overheads, notes) and technical support;

- despite heavy ‘advertising’ of support material (e.g. web sites, virtual tours) in lectures, the level of use by students seems to be variable, or if used, the information provided still needs to be integrated more effectively into their own knowledge and understanding of dryland geomorphology.

4.4.5 Comments about personal learning

The main aspects of personal learning in this cycle included the following:

- preparing lectures in PowerPoint lectures allowed me to improve my IT skills;

- by using PowerPoint, I have become much less reliant on my lecture notes (key words now serve as a reminder of the main points), and am much more composed in my presentations, although in part this may be due to the fact that I am now teaching some of material for the third time;

- the successful use of PowerPoint and the Internet in lectures has removed some of the reservations I had about using complex technology in lectures, but has not changed my views about the judicious use of these technologies alongside other teaching media, or the need for back-up resources and technical support in case of hardware/software problems.

Looking back on all three teaching cycles, the main aspects of personal learning include the fact that:

- while the module is now ‘up-and-running’ smoothly, it has taken several teaching cycles to get to this stage and, even after several iterations, is still not perfect;

- individual students’ perceptions of the module vary widely, and thus comments on aspects of the module are often contradictory; one has to guard against making changes simply to cater for a minority if the majority of students are satisfied;

- students regularly pose unexpected questions or introduce different perspectives that throws new light (and sometimes confusion) on the lecture material or assessments;

- future improvements to module design, support materials, and mode of delivery can still be made, and the degree of success in meeting the learning aims and objectives of the module has to be constantly revised.