John Michael Warren
Sefydliad y Gwyddorau Biolegol, Amgylcheddol a Gwledig | Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences

2003

SYLWER: O ganlyniad i newidiadau yng ngofynnion portffolio’r TUAAU, nid oes gan bob cylch dysgu a lwythir i CADAIR yr un nodweddiwn. Mae’n bwysig bod y cylchoedd dysgu hyn yn cael eu defnyddio fel adnoddau yn unig, ac nid fel canllawiau i’r hyn sydd ei angen i fodioli gofynnion y TUAAU. Os oes genych ymholiadau, cysylltwch â thestaff@aber.ac.uk.

PLEASE NOTE: Due to changes in the requirements of the PGCTHE portfolio, not all teaching cycles uploaded to CADAIR share the same properties. It is important that these teaching cycles are only used as a resource and not a guide to what is needed to fulfil the requirements of the PGCTHE. If you have any queries, please contact thestaff@aber.ac.uk.

TYSTYSGRIF UWCHRADDEGG ADDYSGU MEWN ADDYSG UWCH

POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 1 | Teaching Cycle 1

The Use of Websites

Mae’r Cylch Dysgu hwn o’r portffolio TUAAU wedi’i gyflwyno i CADAIR gyda chaniatâd yr awdur uchod. Adnodd i’w ddefnyddio gan ymgeiswyr y TUAAU yn y dyfodol a staff eraill ydyw, fel rhan o’u datblygu proffesiynol ym Mhrifysgol Aberystwyth. Erys yn ei ddo o i’r awdur a Phrifysgol Aberystwyth. Os hoffech dyluniu’r gwaith hwn neu gyfeirio ato, cysylltwch â’r awdur. Ceir y manylion cyswllt yn http://www.aber.ac.uk/cy/directory/.

This Teaching Cycle of the PGCTHE portfolio has been submitted to CADAIR with the permission of the author detailed above. It is to be used as a resource for future PGCTHE candidates and other staff as part of their professional development at Aberystwyth University. If you wish to cite this work then please contact the author. Contact details can be found at http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/directory/.
Cycle I - The use of web sites

Methodology

My teaching in Semester I - 2000/2001 included two modules:
RS24110 – Sustainable agriculture and agro-forestry
RS33810 – Environmental impact and enhancement in ecological agriculture.
The first of these is a second year module taken by a range of students, on agriculture, countryside management and rural resource degrees.
The second module is a third year module, which in 2000/2001, was primarily taken by overseas students on the Socrates exchange programme in organic agriculture.

In addition to the modules being covered by a programme of lectures and class discussions, for each lecture session I produced an associated web page of supplementary information (see example in Appendix). The lectures were delivered with the aid of visual materials presented via OHP and the limited use of handouts. A number of practical exercises were performed in class that utilised farm maps, and stocking information provided as detailed handouts. The web pages produced to support these modules were constructed using Microsoft FrontPage. These web pages provided a range of additional support material, including copies of the visual material used in class, reading list, photographs and real-life scenarios.

Outcome and Feedback

Student feedback was received through a number of mechanisms: direct informal student comments, comments written on acetate and discussed in a module feedback session (see Appendix) and anonymous individual student feedback forms summarised in the module review (see appendix). Direct feedback from RS24110 indicated that the class were unhappy with the limited provision of handouts. No such comments were made by RS34110. Neither class commented formally about the websites, although several students (primarily in RS33110) were seen to have printed them prior to
attending lectures. Informally a number of the Socrates students on RS34110 commented that they appreciated the web pages. They were regarded as being novel, because their home universities did not provide such resources.

In the exam there was no evidence that students taking RS24110 had accessed information from the web. None of the supplementary information available was quoted in their exam scripts. In contrast five of the 11 students taking RS34110 quoted information clearly extracted from the web pages in their exams answers. The average mark of these five students was 64%, which was statistically higher than the 51% of the remaining six students.

Reflection

A number of issues arise from this first cycle. Evidence provided by RS34110 suggest that web-based learning resources are preferentially utilised by the more academic students. This supports Briggs (1999) assertion that teaching methods that rely on the students' own motivation are likely to widen the gap between the more and less academic students.

The fact that RS34110 students used the web pages and not those taking RS24110 has a number of possible explanations:

1. Students taking RS24110 were generally less motivated academically
2. Students taking RS24110 were reluctant to pay for the cost of printing web pages and preferred to be given the material free as handouts
3. Web pages were not novel for students on RS24110
4. RS34110 students not being native English speakers, preferred to use web page backup material to their lecture notes
5. The two groups of students may have different exam techniques re: the types of information they cite when answering exam questions
6. RS34110 was a more successful module than RS24110 in engaging students to think about and discuss the issues, and this provided them with the interest to seek out further information
It seems likely that all of the above possible explanations are in part correct. The difference observed between the two modules illustrates the point that there is no simple best method of teaching, which can be applied under all circumstances. Consideration of module feedback indicates that the provision of web sites was not regarded as an issue with students. Students were more concerned with content, organisation, support for the assignment etc. In both these modules, but particularly in RS34110, there was a degree of antagonism expressed by the students about perceived criticism of organic agriculture. The majority of students on RS33810 were 'believers' in the organic cause and many of them (for a number of complex reasons) were not happy with the module, which considers the environmental impacts of various farming systems. They stated that they did not see the validity of the comparisons being made. In reality I suspect that the module 'touched a sore nerve' as organic agriculturalists feel that their values are frequently being attacked by conventional agriculturalists. In addition, subsequent discussions with this group of students revealed that a significant minority of them do not accept the validity of the scientific approach. The first point may be addressed by pointing out that if organic agriculture is to convince its detractors it needs to be able to prove its case scientifically and it also needs to be able to quantify its environmental impacts if its own ideals are to be achieved. The second point is more difficult and one with which I still struggle. Indeed I remain to be convinced about the credibility and honesty of awarding such students science degrees.