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CYCLE 2: USE OF DIGITAL RESOURCES ON MODULES

In this cycle I am going to reflect upon two main digital resources that I have used within my teaching: the web and Blackboard. When I was being taught as a student, these applications were not used, so when I began my lecturing they were all completely new to me. I was, as a person involved in the teaching of 'new media', actually encouraged to create my own web page and to use this for course-related use. However, during my period here, Blackboard began to be recommended for teaching as well. I will, then, reflect upon these tools for course use and compare their usefulness.

Application: the Web versus Blackboard
I was encouraged to use the web as a teaching tool, effectively as an enhanced version of the module handbooks used for modules. Course handbooks provide information on the module, including an overview of the course, the aims of the course, expected student learning outcomes, plus a breakdown of the module detailing each session with accompanying reading. These are invaluable documents for students throughout each module and a fundamental requirement. Creating web-based handbooks has a number of advantages which include:

- They can be regularly updated. Thus, if any information needs to corrected, added, etc., this can easily be done. Contrastingly, a 'fixed' hard-copy remains the way it was when printed.
- They can contain links to a number of other interesting pages. These can include articles printed on the web, sites of particular interest, as well as links to, for example, lecture notes. This potentially aided a more 'interactive' potential: in addition to providing information that students can then act upon as with the traditional handbook (i.e. by visiting the library to engage in research), it also aids a more hypertextual approach to research that does not replace the former but does act as a useful supplement.¹

¹ This 'hypertextual' nature means that the web handbook also can be navigated with more ease than its hard copy counterpart, at least potentially. To this end I design course websites without large files that may slow down navigation and also layout sites in a consistent manner so that each component can be accessed from any part of the site. Further, I also design sites so that external links open up in a separate pane to best avoid any confusion.
• Information is always there (excepting when the server goes down!) which therefore obviates the need to replace lost handbooks.
• It is a method that saves considerable paper costs and wastage.

However, despite these potential advantages, I felt somewhat disappointed by the overall usefulness of the web as a teaching aid in this respect. In relation to the more traditional handbook, I felt I actually wasted quite a lot of hours working on my module websites. Coding and design, even at their simplest, are still considerably more taxing than the traditional production of a handbook. And, whilst the ability to update the website throughout the running of the course gives this electronic handbook a more organic flavour (evolving as it does in relation to the development of the module), it is once again something that can eat up rather valuable time. This, of course, wouldn't be a problem if it delivered significant benefits, but I am not sure that it does. My own experience of its pros and cons was evaluated through the use of a more traditional handbook on a film course, which I compared to the use of web handbooks on the media courses that I taught.

One of the frustrating elements that I encountered with the web handbook was that it just didn't get used as much as I thought that it would, and therefore many of its potential advantages were lost. In the first year that I tried this it may well have been due to the fact that I just didn't tend to advertise it to the students as much as I should have. However, I certainly tried to redress this error in the following years by giving out handouts as well as sending emails regarding the web handbook. Whilst some students certainly did use this resource, many still seemed to be unaware of it, an understanding I gained through certain questions being asked about the reading for specific seminars. Perhaps this was a case of entrenched expectations: i.e. that the web handbook, whilst used by others, was not very common and therefore people just weren't used to gaining module information in this manner. Certainly, though, it just wasn't consulted enough. One of the few plus points I could take from this was that when I could find specific pieces of writing online and link these into the website, it did tend to get consulted more widely, though I would still have to send emails around reminding students of it. Thus, the use of email alone - which could have linked to the document - may have sufficed in this respect.
In contrast, the use of a more traditional handbook did seem to create a more user-friendly guide for students on the film course: I often saw plenty of students with handbooks, and they seemed to be more prepared and knowledgeable about what to do in seminars. The handbook was even positively commented on in a couple of feedback forms. I think that the lack of constant updating available here was more than compensated by the greater time I had to compose the actual content (as I didn't lose hours coding and designing a template page); a greater depth of content was perhaps the advantage over the more flexible nature of the website.

During this period, however, there was also the added variable of Blackboard being added to the mix, which I was made aware of a few years ago and which lecturers have been increasingly encouraged to use. As students were also being made aware of this I ultimately found Blackboard to be a very useful electronic resource. In line with email, which has now become so embedded into university life on a number of levels, Blackboard can create an effective 'e-environment' within which to provide information to students about a number of course-related elements and to provide information and links to further information. In particular, with my use of Powerpoint slides within lectures, Blackboard is an excellent source to post lecture presentations (whilst I also use email to inform students when I have posted the lecture notes there).

Further, I have increasingly been using Blackboard to provide reading materials in electronic form. This has not been without some problems; for example, at first I didn't quite realise how long some of these would take to be put onto Blackboard (fortunately, in this early stage I was using it in conjunction with paper-based library copies). Later, more damagingly, I found out at a later point that I could not get copyright clearance at a late date, which meant that I had to change the reading at a late point. This did actually prove to be somewhat detrimental to the seminar in that the reading that I actually used was not quite as solidly related to the areas that I wanted to cover. It certainly wasn't a disaster, but this has signalled to me the need to think more carefully about back-up reading for the same types of areas being covered or, in the absence of this, a need to re-jiggle the actual ideas to be explored and hence the seminar structure. Such are the pitfalls of new technologies!

Whilst alerting me to the fact that new technologies can sometimes create more work and hassle, electronic reading placed on Blackboard is, however, advantageous on the
whole (and would certainly be more so without the rigid copyright laws that currently apply). It means that students can access reading in one place, the 'virtuality' of the document allowing access by a potentially infinite class size. Despite a couple of groans from students about having to pay to print off these documents, the overall feedback I have had about digital documents has been positive. It is especially beneficial on larger courses where a huge number of students try and access a dearth of library copies. It also sidesteps the occasional problem of library copies becoming lost and displaced (and therefore, in this case, can save time from having to continually monitor library box files to check whether everything is there and in order). Further, it gives students less of a potential 'false excuse' when they haven't done the reading: they cannot, for example, claim that the library copy was not there or had gone missing!

Overview
Reflecting on this use of electronic tools in learning has helped me to think of how student learning is changing, but how it is also very much embedded within a firm set of traditions. As internet technology has embedded itself within broad areas of life at an exponential pace over the past decade or so, it is perhaps inevitable that this vast apparatus has implications for teaching. In one sense, and this is particularly the case with email, the use of Internet applications within teaching (and other areas of university life) reflects the fact they have become so crucial within and outside the workplace in general. Further, if these technologies are also becoming crucial components within the research environment (e.g. the use of the web to find research information) then students should be encouraged to use them so that their research skills are honed; in addition, such use will heighten their 'transferable skills', something that UWA stresses in 'aims, objectives and learning outcomes' for taught modules.

Whilst my reflection on the use of the web within teaching only refers to a modest element within the overall teaching environment (the creation of a module handbook), it does, I think, have further implications. There is the question of paper versus virtual files within aspects of teaching. Regarding the creation of web pages as module handbooks, I'm not yet convinced that the former should solely be used despite my awareness of the crucial importance of students using the web, in addition to my