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2.1 Writing Online European-funded courses for the University of Wales, Swansea, Department of Adult Continuing Education

The challenge
The first teaching cycle is in two parts: the development and teaching of on-line and face-to-face History of Art courses for DACE (Department of Adult Continuing Education), funded by the European Union, known as LLIW 2 Project. The funding was allocated to six online courses. I was offered two to design and also teach, both online and face-to-face: Art of the Renaissance and Art of the Middle Ages. Since these courses were scheduled to run first, I found myself in the position of a pioneer among colleagues at DACE, with two courses to design in terms of content, but also in terms of online materials in the VLE adopted by Swansea, Blackboard.

Development
The earliest document in relation to this project is the "Risk Assessment of LLIW 2 Project, dated 23 April 2004. The document specified aims and provided an executive summary. In particular, it states:

"The aim of the project is to provide accessible learning opportunities to overcome barriers to participation in learning by developing innovative online learning materials using digital technology to exploit the Internet as a learning resource. It will develop learners’ ICT and e-Learning skills to ensure that they can take full advantage of the information society, while learners will gain confidence and be equipped to actively take part in the knowledge-based economy. As the sole purpose of the project is to create interesting, flexible, modern learning, relevant to people's lives, it will stimulate demand for learning and create lifelong learners and learning communities."

The Executive Summary in the document went on to ask: "What will the project do and deliver to achieve this aim?" What is important here is that the modules were to be "piloted with 10 students on-line and simultaneously taught in a traditional group." Furthermore, this document states its aims:

"the innovative aspect is that research will be undertaken to compare and evaluate the learning experiences of the two groups of adult students, examining: technologies, access, different models of delivery, retention, learning skills and styles, student support and the interplay between the learner, the tutor and the learning materials in a community setting with the aim of development of a best practice model in community based e-Learning."

The anticipated start date (in the above quoted document) was 1 August 2004. In fact, an initial meeting only took place at DACE on 19 January 2005, at which the e-developer Clare Woodward, one of the prospective course writers and the art coordinator at DACE were present. At that stage I was not involved. The meeting, according to a DACE memo of that date, established a deadline of May for all course content, in order to "complete website and blackboard requirements." The content was to be presented electronically as Microsoft Word files. Hyperlinks and links to external websites were envisaged.

My official involvement began prior to a meeting held in DACE on the 7 March 2005. Having met with and discussed the project in detail with the e-developer, I produced a document that formed the basis of an organisational meeting led by me, and chaired by Clare Woodward and Gillian Morgan (e-developer and Art co-ordinator respectively). I raised issues of layout, copyright, resources and submission of content with detailed proposals for each area. These were written up and circulated. The kinds of development issues we tackled were how to use the images? Whether we would present images as a moving strip, with a zooming in facility, but also, the question of how to create interaction between student and material,
student and tutor and student with other students. We had to think about file size, number of images (10-12 images per lesson). How would we label images and relate them to the text (cross-referencing)? Would we try to imitate the face-to-face class experience? We also had to face consistency in presentation across the six online modules, bear in mind that we were writing to a specific Level (Level One), that we were not producing formal lectures, that the style of writing, the pitch would be crucial too and how to build in activities.

I worked closely with the internet course developer, Clare Woodall and a web designer, who dropped out owing to mental health problems, before he could make a positive contribution to the project. This was to cause technical problems that had a knock-on effect on the students' motivation, but were overcome by Clare and myself working closely. Having Clare to support me made the whole enterprise manageable. I could ask: her questions ranging from technical problems to do with uploading images on the Internet, to pedagogical issues, because Clare was also an experienced EFL tutor of many years, used to student-centred learning outlook on teaching.

The first major problem this project presented was how to address the difficulties of writing course materials for distance learning. Fortunately, I was encouraged early on by the course e-developer, to consider the pitfalls of course design. I received guidance from her on pedagogical issues which I tried to bear in mind Writing style was an issue early on: Clare showed me draft material for a pilot unit of one of the other courses (on Egyptian archaeology and civilization) in which, an in medias res approach had been taken with a long biographical introduction, an intimate narrative travelogue style, but little teaching content. The writer had somehow lost track of the task in hand and its requirements. I suggested producing a document for authors (including myself). This document is reproduced here as an Appendix as evidence of the development work that preceded both the writing and the teaching online and face-to-face.

In what follows I provide an analysis of the Author's Guide. In paragraph 1.2, I identify the challenges of online learning: passive learning. The point being that the technology is only a medium. It cannot in itself promote active (and therefore more skilful) learning. In paragraph 1.3 I conclude that motivation is the key issue, given that students have to work independently online. Even online needs to state clearly the learning objectives. As I saw it (paragraph 2.2), the writing includes two separate (though related) areas: writing up course content and directing the learners' activities. I go on to say that the type of writing needs careful thought, precisely because it includes directing the students' learning remotely.

In conclusion, the guidelines provide proof of how I approached the course writing. Although I had no experience in producing an online course, I was able to identify the main dynamic within such a teaching environment. That is, the interaction between two separate parts of the electronic environment: on the one hand, course content, presented in the Blackboard, in separate folders, one for each week, appearing on the screen on a set day; on the other, activities leading out from the course narrative to email communication and to the discussion board. I made this clear when I wrote:

"Remember that you are writing two texts combined into one (it includes the raw material, the course content: comprising dates, facts and figures, views, context, comparisons, evaluations; and your directions aimed at the learners (using activities, directions to make a comparison, to consult the internet using Google, to discuss with other students in Blackboard chat room; to writing a short piece on a given subject and posting it via e-mail or Blackboard)".

I thought that, unless these e-courses had built-in interactivity, the project would fail. In paragraph 2.4 of the guidelines I consider the type of student, mixed ability and not equipped with a technical language of the subject, short sentences are recommended. Also, the tone adopted, as if simulating conversation, based on the principle that this would make it easier to follow and to read. Summaries and conclusions are also recommended. A key feature is discussed in paragraph 2.5, the activities linked to the narrative lectrure-style content. The idea to have one or more Discussion points (an excursus, extended explication of a problem) and Focus points (exercises, questions to follow up, invitations to find out more about a topic or problem) per unit, was borrowed from distance learning text books from the Open University. The initial plan was to produce a set of puzzles for the course. These were produced by myself using software I was not familiar with. Still shots of the results appear elsewhere in this report. The puzzles, which were a variety of: multiple choice, crossword, gap fills, were very time consuming to produce. For this reason, they were not followed up. In retrospect, I think students would have enjoyed them, but the amount of work involved is hard to justify.
The last section of the Guide deals with production and presentation issues within Blackboard and namely the translation of a linear text in a Microsoft Word page to the Blackboard environment which is a web page and needs to provide the user with clear directions that are consistent and thought through.

2.2 Running Online European-funded courses for the University of Wales, Swansea, Department of Adult Continuing Education

How could the two formats, on-line and face-to-face compare? What difficulties would an on-line version present, in terms of teaching, learning and student response? Both the courses ran in two learning contexts: the classroom and on-line.

The face-to-face version of both modules attracted sufficient numbers to run. They were an adaptation of the on-line written modules for Powerpoint presentation, based on the same images with text as prompts for the tutor. It was difficult to shrug off the traditional lecture style approach and introduce a problem-based approach, given the narrative structure that characterised the on-line version which was very tightly-knit, and given also the pressure of expectations on behalf of the students, mature students used to traditional lecturing. In the classroom version of the two modules, the approach was to reject the traditional lecture followed by discussion format by interspersing the presentation of content with a questioning technique aimed at the small group, encouraged to work in pairs and individually. It remained, however, more tutor-centred.

As for the two on-line version of the modules, only The Western Art of the Middle Ages took off. The Western Art of the Renaissance scheduled to start in October 2005, had been a failure, owing to technical problems. The web designer responsible for uploading images and organising the Blackboard pages went on sick leave at the stage of implementation was unable to work in a team with in-house distance learning teacher and tutor developing the modules (me). Consequently, we experienced a serious problem in downloading pages on dial-up machines. After three weeks, this problem estranged the students who had enrolled on the course. One of them happened to live within driving distance of the face-to-face version of the same course, and decided to join it. After seven weeks, DACE sent the students CD copies of the images in the course material, saved as thumbnails. But it was too late. The students felt estranged, discouraged and, understandably, dropped out.

As for the distance-learning version of the modules, the root problem, as I see it, was finding ways to animate a group of students working remotely and separately. It was compounded by the technical hitches we had already encountered in the first module which had prevented it from running.

If they had not all been first-time distance learners, it might have been possible to remedy the situation. The technical problem exacerbated the root cause, which was overcoming the anxieties associated with using unfamiliar software (Blackboard 6) for distance learning.

How to find ways to engage the students in the work for the course, despite their technical phobia? How to facilitate reflective learning? How to get them to use the web for research and distinguish between minor detail and substance?

One of the face-to-face sessions was observed, so documentation includes mentor feedback on a part of this project which demonstrates how the material was adapted for use in the classroom.

Innovation
1. Course writing: Include a specially compiled internal listings guide with commentary to websites. (Web guide to art history). 2. Course tutoring: Opt for email to circumvent problem of students not using the Noticeboard consistently. 3. Using open questioning as follow up.

Purpose of innovation
To elicit deeper learning at the level of content (by shifting the emphasis in content from presentation of information to discussion, using a problem-based approach) and at the level of tutoring when the course went live. To facilitate the first aim the writing was developed around an Open University structure to be found in several OU course books for distance learning. Typically, these have a section on Presentation.
(like a case study, presented as a problem or an enigma of some sort, containing a key concept which can be formulated as a question), followed by a section called Focus, in which the student’s attention is brought to problems of interpretation thrown up by the content, and a Discussion section in which further issues are considered, implications, exploring broader issues arising from the discussion. These ancillary sections address the student directly, forming the core of assignments which are deliberately not separated from the presentation of course content. In addition, further assignments were posted in Blackboard, allowing students leeway and choice in which areas to pursue in their self-study.

Outcome
The second on-line course was adapted so that feedback and discussion took place more by e-mail, than in the Discussion Board. The students’ written responses never added up to a class discussion, but in the e-mail exchanges students demonstrated analysis, and structuring and re-shaping course materials as well as adapting them to other related problems. Three of the five students who enrolled successfully completed the course. None had used Blackboard or any other educational software for the web before. All three learned how to navigate Blackboard, post messages in the discussion board, send emails from Blackboard and how to use both my Webguide to art history compiled and commented by myself, as well as navigate the web for relevant information which was then included in their assignments.

2.3 Online course feedback

How effective was the course, from the students’ perspective? I was interested in analysing student participation as demonstrable positive or negative feedback on the course, making use of the level of e-traffic the online course generated, and in evaluating the quality of the course design, delivery online, strategies, tutorial guidance, and technical support.

To measure its effectiveness, I opted against using a questionnaire, preferring instead to obtain feedback that would throw light on a variety of perspectives of the course, by framing open questions in an e-mail exchange. This approach had the advantage of being less formal and more open-ended. Because I didn’t use the Blackboard facility for this (as I suspected students’ perception that the course had finished meant that they would not participate) I copied the students in on their feedback in order to stimulate more reflection.

To review what students had to say about their learning experience (their perception), I established a set of criteria. What did they think they learned? How do they analyse their learning? What does the evaluation of assessment show they actually learned? What were the difficulties encountered while learning? Which approach to learning did their assignments elicit? Which approach to learning did they adopt?

Results
In the following paragraph I provide extracts from feedback (which appears in full in the appendix). It should be noted that the course was attended by only three students. More had enrolled, but did not participate. One “lurked”, the others simply were absent altogether. This had a knock on effect on the impetus that could be generated in a very small Discussion group. Nevertheless, from the point of view of establishing how the course worked for the students, the following extracts of feedback is very useful.

The initial expectations from Mark were that the course content should have perhaps provided even more narrative material than it did. What is noted, though, is that the text asked questions, prompting the students to think. The questions, Discussion and Focus points were identified as additional material. Linguistic register and readability of written materials. The writing was seen as easier to read than some books. The One-stop guide to art history was seen as “very useful” and the links provided.

Students remarked on the fact that assignments ‘left a fair amount of scope for finding and pursuing the different topics.’ They thought that units, goals and homework assignments were clear and informative.'
As for the learning that was involved in participating as a student in an online course? Students had not been taught through the medium of a VLE before. This explains feedback such as “The difficulties that were experienced during this module were mainly technical and a delay in activating my computer account. Hence I was late in starting the module.” The same student found that confidence in using the discussion board required a shift in attitude. She went on to say, insightfully “I now realize that it was a fear of exposure and resistance to change during the process of adapting to a new learning environment.”

Trisha was "wary of this new individual learning process." The challenges for her were "actively learning in a new way, management strategies, understanding interpersonal communication, and understanding the breadth and quality of available resources. Developing critical reflection; on one's practice and knowledge." For Mark, the advantages of online learning were identified as being able to work at one's own pace, planning answers better. The disadvantages as lack of participation, and of stimulation from a classroom environment. This second point could be addressed in future through a better use of the Discussion Board. What was needed was more skilful moderation than 1 could provide, as 1 was also completely new to the experience.

Mark (who was a first year and full-time History undergraduate) was unsure if the lack of the physical presence of a teacher is good or not, even if it is as a lecturer, implying that perhaps the transmission mode has its advantages. Trisha describes a key experience, when there was a quality shift in her learning: Her account suggests that the course content, the activities associated with it and the navigation of the VLE (Blackboard), had made it possible for her to find satisfaction in learning online. "This is the unit that changed my approach to the course. There was a sense of involvement in learning and looking at my own methods and practice, accessing the university library, recommended web-sites, revaluing source material. I think this is when it came together for me the course was beginning to unfold and take shape, and began to become really exciting."

On a negative note, my instructions were not always clear. As Mark says: "I wasn't sure if you wanted to put down what i saw eg when you said compare them, if you wanted the obvious stuff or if you wanted us to think, so I tried to do both."

As for tutor support, the tutor's availability and communication by email at set times were seen as helpful, as was fast response. Not all learning issues were specifically related to online courses. There were subject-specific skills that needed developing, as well as study skills issues, such as writing and structuring written assignments. Mark noted that in terms of skills, he learned how to work on an online course and motivation.

For Trisha "actively learning in a new way" was what was particularly successful about the online course. Significantly (for someone who had recently graduated at the University of Wales, Lampeter, she has the following insight: "I have become aware that my reading is not well prioritized. I have become more critical of the sources I read and am developing a better means of formulating specific questions. In the later stages of the module I adopted a more proactive response to the discussion board. Learning in groups such as ours requires openness in communication it is important to share concepts and ideas."

Formative feedback
Your feedback did help • when u suggested i use word whilst i read through the topics and noted my thoughts i did that and thus it proved easier. (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 9 June, 2006 11:23 am)

'I would read it through them go to discussion points, but often forgot what was I was going to say. However after u suggested that I have Microsoft Word open whilst I read it through and write any notes in that, I did so and it worked well.' (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 2 June, 2006 3:34 pm)

'Feedback from the tutor provided positive constructive steps to make improvements to the assignments.' (Tricia Humphreys, Feedback, Wed, 17 May, 2006 10:07 pm)
‘To generalise that course, basically it is an Art History course looking at Art History in early-mid medieval period, through churches and illuminated manuscripts amongst others. I represents the way we may previously have looked at it and then asks us questions (and often answers them which is always useful) as to how else we look at them and what is missing from our views etc. (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 2 June, 2006 3:34 pm)

‘I think the course taught me more about art history and that there's a story behind everything, and that some areas are more interesting than others. And what i enjoyed and what i should steer clear of in the future.’ (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 9 June, 2006 11:23 am)

‘Many thanks I really enjoyed Art in the Middle Ages’ (Fracia Humphreys, Feedback, Mon, 1 May, 2006 11:33 am)

‘Some areas were exciting’ (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 2 June, 2006 3:34 pm)

‘How helpful has it been? Pretty useful really. I find myself now looking at art, or at least churches in a different light.’ (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 9 June, 2006 11:23 am)

‘I think I would change only a few aspects of it. For a couple of later topics I occasionally felt like I needed to know who the artists were before I read through the topic in order to fully comprehend it, which I didn't know who they were. But that's only a minor thing. Nothing major to change I don't think. (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 9 June, 2006 11:23 am)

‘Sometimes, or rather occasionally, the reference to other things we might already know...well usually it was something I didn't and so occasionally I would get confused there, but that's not a big thing.’ (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 2 June, 2006 3:34 pm)

‘The course content was written in the way a book would be written, to an extent. Obviously you set questions and Discussion and Focus points which often books don't have: (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 2 June, 2006 3:34 pm)

Linguistic register and readability of written materials
‘also depending on the book, yours was often easier to read than some books and it was on a specific topic. As with internet, it can be very difficult to find the specific book and chapter you need on a topic whilst ignoring all the chapters you don't need. Its worse when there is only a page or two on the subject and you have to read the whole chapter to put it in context.’ (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 2 June, 2006 3:34 pm)

Supporting teaching materials (One-stop guide to art history)
‘I think research on the web was useful to an extent, but sometimes if you're looking for something you never seem to get what your looking for. Google will spit out a load of sites on a topic, but not necessarily in the specific area you're looking for. The one-stop guide to art history was very useful. I liked that and the links you provided for us to look at on the web itself.’ (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 2 June, 2006 3:34 pm)

‘before that - i found the external links terrific for manuscripts, well worth a browse.’ (Anne West, Tue, formative feedback, 14 March, 2006:05 pm)

Assignments
‘The assignments for the course left a fair amount of scope for finding and pursuing the different topics: (Fracia Humphreys, Feedback, Wed, 17 May, 2006 10:07 pm)
'The units, goals and homework assignments for this module were clear and informative.' (Tricia Humphreys, Feedback, Mon, 1 May, 2006 11:33 am)

Online as opposed to face-to-face
'Not having a teacher I'm not sure for me whether it was a good thing or not - im still used to having them in front of me even if it is as a lecturer.' (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 2 June, 2006 3:34 pm)

'I was not familiar with Blackboard until the course start as i didn't use it before Christmas in my courses, but I was ok using a PC.' (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 2 June, 2006 3:34 pm)

'It took quite awhile to become confident in using the discussion board; in fact it required a shift in attitude for me. I now realize that it was a fear of exposure and resistance to change during the process of adapting to a new learning environment' (Tricia Humphreys, Feedback, Mon, 1 May, 2006 11:33 am)

'The difficulties that were experienced during this module were mainly technical and a delay in activating my computer account Hence I was late in starting the module. (Tricia Humphreys, Feedback, Mon, 1 May, 2006 11:33 am)

'I've also learned what its like to do an online course, rather than one in a classroom like most other people do. (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 9 June, 2006 11:23 am)

'I think the advantages of online learning are that u can work at ur own pace so u can do ur modules when u see fit You can also plan your answers better. The disadvantages, i guess could be u put things off, and u don't have that spark that u get from others if ur all in a class together.' (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 9 June, 2006 11:23 am)

'Initially I was wary of this new individual learning process. It was a new experience working with a group of people on-line. The challenges this course presented were, actively learning in a new way, management strategies, understanding interpersonal communication, and understanding the breadth and quality of available resources. Developing critical reflection; on one's practice and knowledge.' (Tricia Humphreys, Feedback, Mon, 1 May, 2006 11:33 am)

'Week three's assignment when we were required to find a series of Examples of different Crucifixion sculptors, low or high relief. This is the unit that changed my approach to the course. There was a sense of involvement in learning and looking at my own methods and practice, accessing the university library, recommended web-sites, reevaluating source material. I think this is when it came together for me the course was beginning to unfold and take shape, and began to become really exciting.' (Tricia Humphreys, Feedback, Wed, 17 May, 2006 10:07 pm)

Tutor support
'being at the end of an email helped, and having a time and day when you would be specifically available and answer emails straight away, rather than other times when it was most likely when you got chance, does help.' (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 2 June, 2006 3:34 pm)

'Our tutor has been very supportive throughout the module.' (Tricia Humphreys, Feedback, Mon, 1 May, 2006 11:33 am)

Subject-specific skills
'Scrutinizing sculpture, architecture and paintings, then giving a highly detailed description of an object or painting is hard to translate what you see into words; creating a logical order. Translating from a visual language to a textual language required A lot of practice.' (Tricia Humphreys, Feedback, Wed, 17 May, 2006 10:07 pm)
Transferable skills
'Skills wise, mainly learning online and motivation is what i learned.' (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 9 June, 2006 11:23 am)

Reflection on learning
'I now realize that unconsciously during the first part of the course I was looking to achieve a more balanced formulation of my essays. My goal was get my point across and express my ideas more directly.' (Tricia Humphreys, Feedback, Wed, 17 May, 2006 10:07 pm)

'The success of this module for me has been actively learning in a new way. I have become aware that my reading is not well prioritized and I am trying to respond constructively to this realization. I have become more critical of the sources I read and am developing a better means of formulating specific questions. In the later stages of the module I adopted a more proactive response to the discussion board. Learning in groups such as ours requires openness in communication it is important to share concepts and ideas.' (Tricia Humphreys, Feedback, Mon, 1 May, 2006 11:33 am)

'At the beginning of the module my written work did not focus on what was specific to the assignment'. (Tricia Humphreys, Feedback, Wed, 17 May, 2006 10:07 pm)

'I think to be honest if i was doing another course like this, I'd wait until i was old as whilst I had some free time as a student, motivation is not something i excel at (typical student!) and whilst I did my best, sometimes it wasn't.' (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 2 June, 2006 3:34 pm)

'Usually I would work on a Sat mom in the library as it was quiet and the week was almost over. Sat mom was usually the time to read through the stuff and then write the stuff.' (Feedback, Mark Wilson, Fri, 2 June, 2006 3:34 pm)