Draft report for LTSN

Classroom Seminars and the Web in the School of Divinity, Edinburgh University

This LTSN funded project developed online resources for use by 3/ 4 or honours level students to help them prepare for weekly seminars. The focus was on improving their evaluation of primary evidence, both textual and visual.

Aims of the Project

In traditionally taught history courses students are often asked to read documents from a given period and comment on their usefulness as historical evidence. This project aimed to enrich this task in two ways. Firstly, by extending the access of students to rare documents and pictures by using some of the best quality material available on the world-wide-web. Secondly, by asking students to post their comments on the evidence to a discussion forum where they could be shared with others prior to the face-to-face-seminar. It was important to the teaching team that use of e-learning was fully integrated with the face-to-face aspects of the courses.

Previous research into the use of class web-sites in the school of Divinity showed that such an approach required an increase in support for students at the beginning of the course to prepare them technically for participating online. Introductory sessions could also be used to introduce the required history skills and to give students experience in using reliable www resources.

Project outcomes

Two existing courses were analysed and re-developed as part of the project. Time was reallocated for introductory sessions at the start of the course and assessment requirements were changed to better reward the skills acquired. Primary evidence was selected so that each student could comment on their own text or picture in the forum each week.

The following resources were designed and delivered via WebCT:

1. An introduction to the basic skills required to use WebCT. This included login instructions on paper, a "walk-through" the process with computing support staff and a introduction to the tasks to be completed online.
2. A series of inter-connected pages on history skills – including worked examples showing what was expected in written comments. Examples included textual sources, pictures, maps, and documentation on evaluating material on the web.[1]
3. Further pages covering generic study skills.
4. A "treasure hunt" demonstrating to students useful web-pages and asking them to navigate through them in response to a clue to find treasure.
5. A links page allowed students quick access to the most useful web-sites for the subject areas.
6. Files containing the historical evidence to be used each week in the tasks.

---

[1] See: http://www.div.ed.ac.uk/courses/2003/Treasurehunt/

At the beginning of each course two sessions were spent in a computer lab learning about WebCT; using the skills pages and the treasure hunt. Thereafter, students were assigned weekly tasks during using historical evidence which they completed online prior to the seminar.

Results of research:

How the research was conducted

Research was conducted with the students on both courses using questionnaires and focus groups. Small adjustments were made as a result of the feedback received in the autumn before the second course ran in the spring. The quality of the comments posted to the forum and of exam answers were also analysed. Both courses had the same lecturer and support staff. Protestant Scotland [Autumn] 9 Students Tudor State [Spring] 17. Three students completed both courses.

Introduction and Treasure hunts

All students thought that the introductory sessions were worthwhile - some felt that they could have got started on their own but the majority said they preferred the organised lab setting. "Teething" problems caused by a new login interface for WebCT made the help from computing support staff in the introductory session invaluable. Problems relating to logging were resolved quickly. This meant that the whole class was able to begin the weekly tasks together and that the lecturer could focus on the history and not on technical difficulties.

Students saw the treasure hunt as a good way to introduce www resources and no one found it difficult to use. In particular, the introduction to commenting on evidence both on the study skills pages and when the answers to the treasure hunt were discussed was appreciated. Students enjoyed seeing the "actual" picture or object and the ability to work through the hunt at their own pace. One student commented that the part they liked best was, "looking at a text or picture without help and not seeing much, then using hints and seeing more." As the first group were disappointed to find that there was no "real" treasure, edible rewards were introduced and received enthusiastically by the second group.

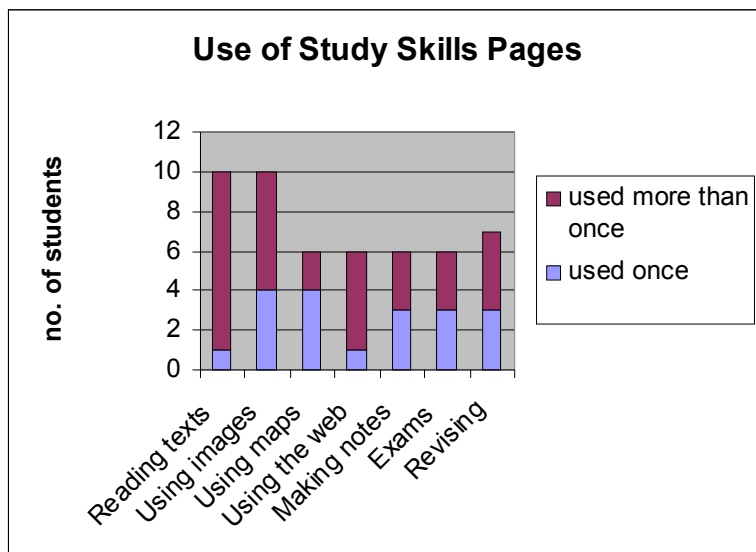Data collected from students in the spring term showed that the study skills pages had been well used.

Figure 1 Use of Study Skills pages

The study skill pages were split into a number of sections, of which the most popular pages were advice on *reading texts* and *using images* as primary evidence (Fig 1). These are specific history skills and those most directly linked to the discussion forum tasks.

An analysis of the external websites used showed that those introduced in the treasure hunt had been reused by at least 5 of the 11 students surveyed. The most popular of the treasure hunt sites had been used by 8 of the 11 students. A small number of students reported that they returned to the treasure hunt page to find these, but most used the links page. Students had also used sites on the links page but not on the treasure hunt, 3 of the most used external sites appeared only on the links page.

This would suggest that the introductory session successfully introduced the students to a significant number of the websites but had not limited them to using only these. The most popular sites gave access to primary sources (that is texts, pictures and objects) and to background information. Websites acting as gateways were the least used. Students in the focus group commented that they would like access to even more links and images.

Weekly tasks and discussion forum

Students reported that there was an initial "learning curve" when dealing with technical aspects of using the discussion forum and also finding the best way to prepare their comments. However, this was worthwhile because using the discussion forum each week to prepare for the seminar turned out to be a valuable exercise. The focus group also reported that this kind of task kept the work for the history course, "at the front of their mind" in comparison to others that they were working on. One student commented that regular activity of this kind, "encourages you to form ideas as you work through the course".

Comments on the amount of work involved varied. Some students saw the task as easier than a long piece of set reading and described writing the comments as "bite sized". While some said

that the task took about the right length of time others thought that it took too long for a "small component of the course."

The lecturer reported a significant shift in the kind of queries received from students and in the type of reading and seminar preparation which they did. The students focused on specialised reading material which would help with their own piece of evidence that week. They were less likely to enquire about and prepare through general works on the topic. An interest in primary evidence is something to be valued in students studying at this level. However, the extent of the shift was unexpected. The class showed levels of background knowledge similar to previous years. This suggested that they were now acquiring knowledge in different ways. The teaching team concluded this was positive but that some students might benefit if the link between background reading and individual tasks was made more explicit.

Students stated that working on their comment for the forum consolidated work on the topics of the week and deepened their understanding. Most reported that they posted their own comment first and then looked at the work of others. To some extent they admitted scanning the other comments to see whether they had written enough themselves! However, all appreciated having a set of notes in the forum to which they could return for revision.

The lecturer noted that students began to feel an obligation to the rest of the class to contribute and began to apologise for late postings. This peer pressure to use the forum had a positive effect on overall levels of preparedness for seminar discussions.
Students commented that preparation using the discussion forum improved the face to face seminar. The "key points" had been highlighted already on the forum which allowed the lecturer to lead them towards deeper aspects during the seminar discussion. The introduction of the weekly tasks and discussion forum was, therefore, seen by staff and students as contributing positively to discussion in class.

The students were not in favour of having their postings assessed. They suggested that assessment of the forum would make the task more time consuming. They thought it would be better if their postings were included in the 10% awarded for seminar participation and presentations.

Students saw the forum as a valuable exercise which allowed them to practice the skills needed for their exams. However, they did want more feedback on their comments. The lecturer had used the seminar discussion to informally highlight good points and correct any errors. However, some students had found this approach confusing and would have preferred an individual comment on their work. The teaching team felt that a formal process of assessing the comments might discourage some of the enthusiasm and spontaneity which students had demonstrated. It would also have significant implications for staff workload. The team has therefore decided to be more explicit when giving feedback in the seminar, especially in the early weeks, and offer to individual advice when necessary.

It was not possible to directly compare the performance of students with previous years as the structure of assessments has changed since the courses were last taught. The lecturer noted however that the quality of the postings improved over the course of the term which suggested that the students learnt from each other and comments made during the seminars. Anxiety about the extracts from evidence in the exam seemed to be reduced and the students preformed well on this section of the paper.

The project, therefore, had a very positive impact upon teaching and learning for the 3/ 4 level students. In addition, the team felt that the experience gained through working on this LTSN funded project helped significantly in their application to Edinburgh University's E-learning Project Fund. They were successful and received just under £28 000 to create e-leaning materials for a new masters module and to digitise manuscripts held by Edinburgh University Library. The project, which incorporates both treasure hunts and weekly evidence tasks using a discussion forum, will be completed in May 2005.

Conclusions

1. The lab-based sessions, treasure hunt and study skills pages were a good way to introduce students to WebCT and reliable www resources.
2. Students spent more time on their history course as a result of the weekly tasks.
3. Using the discussion forum consolidated learning and created a resource for revision
4. Students felt a sense of obligation to their colleagues to contribute to the forum and as a result seminar preparation was more thorough.
5. The quality of face-to-face discussion in class improved.
6. Students focused their reading and preparation on their own weekly task: the piece of primary evidence, rather than general reading.
7. The practice gained when using the forum improved the quality of written comments on primary evidence.

List of resources supplied.

- Link to example of treasure hunt and associated study skills pages: http://www.div.ed.ac.uk/courses/2003/Treasurehunt/
- Handouts used at the University of Strathclyde, Feb 2004.
- Case Study and examples of forum discussion compiled with Sian Bain for use in CPD module: An Introduction to Digital Environments for Learning

LTSN Briefing paper to follow.

Dissemination

- Presentation at Edinburgh University E-learning Lunch, December 2003.
- Visit to University of Strathclyde and presentation to staff, February 2004
- Poster and live demo at Learning & Teaching Forum Quality Enhancement: Developing Strategies in Schools and Colleges, Moray House, March 2004.
- Paper and poster at Edinburgh University E-learning conference May 2004.
- Preparation of a case study based on experiences in the School of Divinity for use in an online CPD module: An Introduction to Digital Environments for Learning. Written with Sian Bain, Summer 2004.
- Article "New Ways of teaching with computers" in New College Bulletin: 2004.
- Presentation at Edinburgh University E-breaks, September 2004. http://www.elearn.malts.ed.ac.uk/issues/news/ebreak01.phtml
- A proposal for a short paper at ALT-C 2004, was unsuccessful.

Dr Dawson has also contributed to e-learning sessions for Edinburgh University Staff working for the Professional Certificate in University Teaching.