

Electrifying Seminars

George Macdonald Ross

Summary of discussions

Frances Condron

Information about Aster and the PRS disciplines:

- [As rtf file.](#)
- [As pdf file.](#)

Especially in the humanities, academics are reluctant to use materials designed by others. However, development costs are too high for most tailor-made e-learning products to be economically viable for use in a single department. One solution would be for a number of departments to collaborate in the production of materials (there are precedents for this, in medicine, for example).

Commercial software (e.g. WebCT, Blackboard, QuestionMark) is expensive. Co-operation between departments in the same discipline would be hampered if their institutions had taken out licenses for different products.

Word 97 is better than Word 2000 for generating HTML. However, there is a program called HTMLTidy, which improves web pages generated with Word. Web authoring packages such as Dreamweaver are widely used; but academics need quite intensive training in how to use them.

There is a problem over ownership of intellectual property, especially if an electronic module is developed in an academic's spare time. Different institutions have different policies. If the author moves to a different institution, maintenance of the module will be problematic.

The resource problem might be overcome if e-learning modules are seen as opening up a new market through distance learning.

There's not much point in putting materials on-line unless students acquire advantages they wouldn't otherwise have. But the act of specifying in advance what students will learn also forces one into good practices which may have been overlooked in conventional teaching - for example, thinking through how much students can reasonably be expected to read in a given time (usually much less than we would wish).

Martin Gough

Using commercial software means that problems have to be sorted out by the suppliers.

For electronic discussion rooms to work effectively, there must be a critical mass of active participants, and the traffic must be quick. In order to generate a critical mass, the discussion must be integral to the design of the module.

In order to avoid overload, older messages should be archived.

Students are intimidated if there is too much tutor input; but the tutor needs to provide **some** input to show that the discussion is being monitored and directed.

Martin Gough's summary of his presentation

Susan Lochrie Graham

The problem of using copyright materials can often be mitigated by negotiating special rates with the relevant publishers. This might also make additional materials available at no extra cost.

A major disadvantage of WebCT is that it is too linear. Students have to go through the material in a predetermined sequence, and if they depart from it, they have to go back to the beginning.

On-line lecture clips can make the student experience too like the classroom.

It was noted that the students on her course were all distance learners, working with computers at home. They therefore didn't face the problem that on-campus students would face, of having to switch between on-line materials and texts available only in hard copy.

Nik Jewell

There are means for obtaining automated statistical information about student contributions. MCQs are generally unsuitable for assessing students' understanding in humanities disciplines. Research is in progress on means for automatically assessing students' written work; but it is difficult to see how the human assessor can be entirely eliminated.

There is no obvious solution to the problem that students will generally not participate in electronic discussion unless they are assessed; but that if they do participate, the work involved in assessing them becomes unmanageable.

The way forward

We need to find ways of combining images with text in PRS disciplines. They shouldn't be mere illustrations just for the sake of it. For example, in HPS, diagrams and models don't just illustrate, but **explain** abstract concepts.

Since the disciplines are largely text-based, the main issue is to find the best means for incorporating textual materials on-line. Students are often reluctant to read primary texts anyway, let alone on screen. The technology should be used in such a way as to encourage deep reading. For example, there can be links to glossaries or other supporting material, and self-assessment tests.

In the case of HPS, there is scope for developing a bank of case studies, which could be incorporated into different modules at different institutions.

On-line learning provides an opportunity to improve on traditional methods of assessment, such as the essay and the sat examination - for example, group assessment, or the construction of a web page.

It was felt that the disciplines covered by the Subject Centre were sufficiently homogeneous for future events on e-learning to be aimed at all of them. There was also the advantage that the disciplines could learn from each other.

It was agreed that the Subject Centre would set up a mailing list for further discussion.

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