VLE Pilot Project Case Study

The History and Theory of Criticism

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Contents

Overview

Title	**The History and Theory of Criticism** (Spring Term 2008)
Pedagogic theme	Critical analysis: individual report writing and peer review
Keywords	Course-level blog
Subject area	Literary theory
Student level & profile	3rd year students in English and Related Literature
No. of students	9
Key conclusions	1. The VLE can be used to extend discussion space for a course beyond the physical confines of the classroom. A module site may serve as a virtual place for students to prepare their thoughts and engage in critical thinking in preparation for a seminar. A course-level blog represents a useful tool for academic writing and peer review, with student outputs forming a valuable revision resource and model for future cohorts. By encouraging students to contribute ideas in advance of the seminar, there is an additional benefit to the instructor in terms of providing feedback on how students have tackled a particular assignment, which may help to inform the teaching approach for the seminar session. 2. Students who are new to on-line learning can soon adapt and work effectively if there are clear expectations as to what is required of them and guidance on how to perform the on-line activities. Students will require direction in the earlier stages of a blended module: modelling desired activity, as well as providing encouraging feedback and chasing up non-contributors will all help to engage students with on-line tasks. Delivering feedback on individual work can be challenging, but this may be dealt with through oral comments in class, as well as on-line feedback. 3. Whilst taking positions in on-line discussion can be intimidating for students, exposing individuals to critical feedback, they can become accustomed to this way of working, developing critical analysis and peer review skills. Setting expectations and managing discussion, without providing the final word on debates, are key responsibilities for the course instructor in fostering the development of these skills.

Background

The History and Theory of Criticism is a third year special module for undergraduate students within the Department of English and Related Literature. The aim of the module is to provide students with an understanding of a wide variety of critical and theoretical approaches to literature and an opportunity to consider these approaches 'in action'. The module is structured around one weekly face-to-face seminar session, with independent study time accounting for the rest of the course.

The instructor – Dr Jane Elliott - had delivered the module before, but encountered problems with the levels of student engagement with the reading and discussion of the key texts in class. She had introduced a requirement for students to write up their interpretations of the texts and email them to her before class, but this had not fully addressed the issue.

> I have delivered the course before, where the assignment was delivered without technology. For the class on literary theory and criticism, it was very difficult to get students to engage with the literature and I didn't want students to skip the reading when it was hard. So I had them write reports and email them to me, and I would photocopy a few of these and circulate them in class. The problem was, there wasn't sufficient time in class for them to read and assimilate the photocopied reports, so the assignment didn't really add to discussion.

To tackle this problem, Jane revised the reading and presentation tasks each week, requiring students instead to circulate their own written reports in advance of the seminar through the VLE, and to comment on each other's reports.

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> Technology was the answer in enabling them to circulate their reports, encouraging them to read and comment on the work before the seminar. Students don't do much writing in term, except for the short procedural essay, and so the reading report was a good opportunity to practise writing. It was also an opportunity to register your voice (in the discussion), to contribute.

The VLE therefore had a key role to play in this redesign of the course, serving as the location for students to present their reports and engage in discussion on their written interpretations of the texts. Jane set up a course-level blog within the module site for this course, which was used to present the critical analyses of the texts by students and to serve as the forum for critical discussion during the week. Each week the course participants submitted a written analysis, considering the relationship between two of the texts assigned for that week. Students were asked to submit between
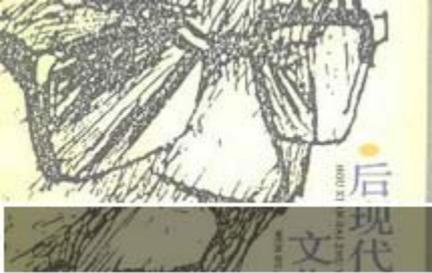
250 and 500 words in a blog posting by 9am on the morning of the seminar. In addition to this, they were asked to read the analyses of other seminar members and to leave at least one comment on another student's contribution to the blog. The aim was to extend the time that students spent on reading and discussion activities, so that ideas sharing started before the seminar took place, which would enhance the quality of discussion in class.

> Previously I tried to do everything in the seminar class – the reading and assimilation of the reports. The aim for the introduction of the VLE was to extend this process into the week (before the class), so that discussion had already begun before students entered the classroom.
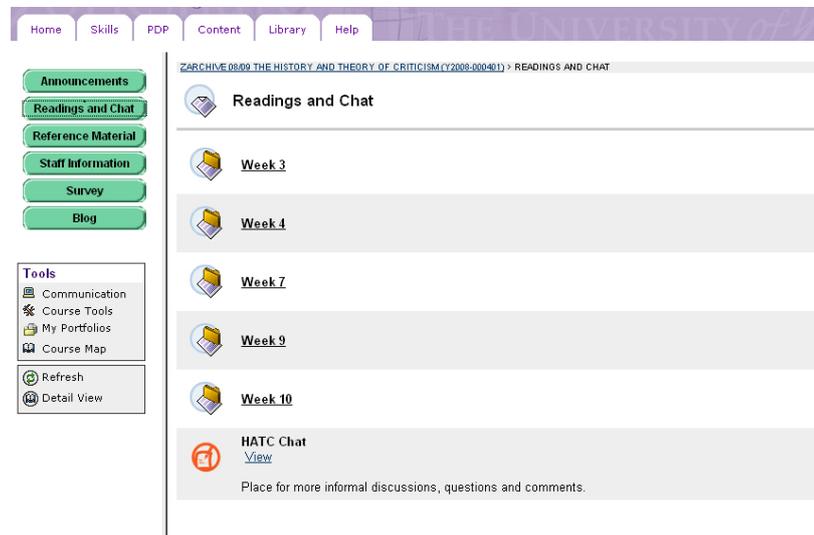
Screen shot of the Readings and Chat content area of Jane's module

Description of approach

The blend for this module was based on the combination of face-to-face and on-line discussion activities. Students completed weekly written analyses on the key texts on-line, in preparation for the seminar sessions and class-based discussion.

The learning objectives of the on-line component were therefore to:

- Encourage students to engage with the literature

- Give students the opportunity to practise academic writing, in presenting their interpretations of the texts within the course-level blog

- Encourage participation and the sharing of ideas amongst students for the duration of the study week, extending this beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom

Learning activities & tools

The online component of the module included:

- HATC Blog. A course-level blog, which was used as the formal learning space for students to post their weekly analyses. Participants were required to post their own analyses and comment on peer contributions.

- Readings and Chat. Reading material was posted on the course site for 5 of the study weeks, with an additional blog made available in this area of the module site. The Chat (an informal blog) was intended to serve as an alternative area for informal course related discussion.

- Reference Material. This included an electronic copy of the course reading list, plus external links for additional help with the theories covered in the course.

- Announcements. Details of public lectures and information related to the course were posted on the site.

Student profile

The students were third year undergraduates who had little or no experience of using the VLE to support their learning prior to this module. This blended module came at the end of their study programme, with students unaccustomed to writing on-line and critiquing the work of their peers.

Outcomes of the module

The module was delivered over the Spring term (January – March 2008; Weeks 1 to 9) to a class of 9 students. Feedback was collected from the instructor and students on the learning outcomes at the end of the course, before students had completed the exam and received their final marks.

Activity statistics

Student log-in patterns were frequent across the module, with high activity recorded both at the beginning and end of the module. Peaks of activity were discernible on a weekly basis when analyses had to be posted within the blog in preparation for the seminar. Overall visits to the site were high, with 628 hits in total.

Table 1: Number of visits to the module site

Number of Visits	Number of Students
20-40	2
41-60	4
61-80	7
81-100	8
over 100	9

Participation in the blog area

Students made between 7 and 11 blog postings each over the duration of the module. Only 2 posts were made by the course instructor, but Jane used the comments features to give feedback on students' early posts.

Table 2: Number of posts by month

Month	Total number of posts
January	32
February	25
March	17
Total	**74**

Students engaged with both elements of the weekly task that they had been assigned, posting their analyses and critiquing the contributions of their peers. Most students made a similar number of posts and comments each week, as outlined in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Number of posts & comments within the course blog

Student	No. of Posts	No. of Comments
1	7	6
2	7	7
3	8	6
4	8	5
5	7	4
6	7	8
7	9	6
8	8	8
9	11	4
Totals	**74**	**55**

Posts & comments

Students were presented with a clear task to complete in their report writing. They selected two texts from a long list each week and were asked to consider the relationship between the texts. Given the scope of choice, they each produced different analyses – it was not the case that they were each posting similar answers to the same question.

Students followed the guidelines for the task closely, posting an analysis of two texts from that week's reading. They did not use the blog for other purposes, but elements of group communication were evident within the posts.

Although posts consisted of formal analyses, elements of informality appeared in prefaces to the main task and the use of emoticons to express uncertainty.

> "Sorry this is a bit long and rambley everyone…"
>
> "I hope it's not too random and I promise to explain myself (at least to try) when I see you all later."
>
> "In the conclusion of the essay Freud postulates: "all the connecting pathways that lead from other functions to sexuality must also be traversable in the reverse direction" (Freud 72). This two directional process echoes Brooks' argument that whilst desire is the fulfilment of the end, this is only possible by acknowledging the reverse and understanding the origin and the need to desire itself."

Jane used the comments feature to give short encouraging feedback to students on their early posts, as well as directing them to reading that might foster their emerging interests in particular themes within the subject matter.

> "Nice reasoning, particularly in connecting Brooks and Freud's theory of infantile sexuality."
>
> "Your response resonates with feminist and queer criticism that both employs and critiques the simultaneous psychoanalytic emphases on masculinity, teleology and fulfilment. If this is a topic that interests you, see in particular essays in Teresa de Lauretis' Alice Doesn't."

Individual blog posts received up to 4 comments each. One sentence comments were rare, with students leaving short paragraphs in the comments section, including some referenced quotations.

Screen shot of the main blog from Jane's module

The comments can be grouped into four kinds of response:

|	
Build:	Building on a specific element of another author's post with your own ideas. Students identify a point of connection with their own thinking and explain their own thoughts on this point. It might also involve suggesting a connection with another text/area of the literature.
EXAMPLE:	"I hadn't thought of Said's personal discomfort with the terms of Orientalism in this way, but reading his essay as an enactment of "an Oriental" urge to identify oneself with the Western bourgeoisie is really interesting. In a way, this makes Said's confession of anti-semitism and its proximity to Orientalism seem like another attempt to align himself on the more powerful side of the dichotomy…maybe?"
Question:	Posing questions of another author's ideas seeking to extend the analysis rather than simply clarify a point.
EXAMPLE:	"Does articulating or making visible through words, release sexualities from the supressed spaces they have been confined to after being written out of "normative" cultural discourse? or does it do the opposite by bringing them into the sterilized hegemony of discourse?"
	"If we do hijack the text and inpregnate it with our own concepts, to what extent do you think are creating an additional text, a paratext or rather a recoded variation of the original? Also, when exactly is the moment of power shifted, can we ever really pinpoint it?"
Agree:	Explicit agreement with a specific point made by another author with a reasonably lengthy justification.
EXAMPLE:	"I agree with your analysis of Derrida's ever infamous phrase, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" that it doesn't suggest/imply "narrowing down" but an extension of "the meaning or signification of the
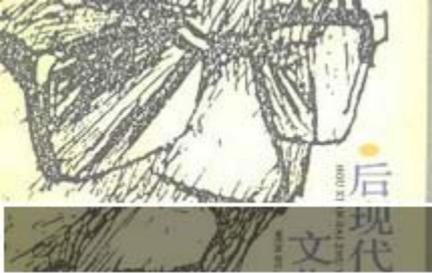
word text". Just as Derrida advocates and himself performs an intense scrutiny of language, and the various marks/words/etc that comprise it, maybe we can apply the same strategy to his phrase..."

| Disagree: | Explicit disagreement with a specific point made by another author with a reasonably lengthy justification. |

EXAMPLE: "I'm not sure Foucault sees certain forms of sexuality outside of the discourse. His suggestion is surely that the discourse shifted..."

"I felt that Hurston made great efforts not to generalise..."

Students most commonly built on the contributions of their peers in their comments, as outlined in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Categories of student comments posted with entries

Category	Number of posts
Build	24
Question	15
Agree	11
Disagree	17
Total	**67**

N.B. The combined total is greater than the actual number of comments made by students – as some posts have been categorised more than once.

Disagreement was more common in the later posts, suggesting that students were becoming more comfortable with on-line communication and discussing each other's ideas in a critical way on-line.

Responding explicitly to more than one author's ideas was unusual but did happen, especially when a particular point was contentious.

HATC chat

A blog which had been set up for more informal discussion remained unused.

> This area is available for more informal discussions than the weekly critical analyses blog. Feel free to use however you as a group see fit.

As the task orientated blogs were well used, this suggests that students understood how to use the blog tool but were not motivated to make use of the general blog in an undirected manner.

Exit survey feedback

8 students completed the exit survey which included questions about their use of the VLE and their reflections on particular tools and tasks within the module site.

Table 2: Drawbacks and positives of using the wikis as expressed by students

Survey question	SA	A	N	D	SD
A VLE supports ideas and experience sharing between students	87.5%	12.5%	0%	0%	0%
A VLE increases opportunities for discussion and debate outside class	37.5%	62.5%	0%	0%	0%
A VLE increases interaction levels between the course instructor and students outside of class	0%	62.5%	25%	0%	0%
A VLE increases interaction levels between students on the course outside of class	12.5%	87.5%	0%	0%	0%
Using the VLE complemented the class-based learning that I experienced in this module.	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%

SA: Strongly   **A**: Agree   **N**: Neutral   **D**: Disagree   **SD**: Strongly Disagree

Student feedback on the value of the VLE was very positive. Participants recognised the role of the VLE in increasing interaction, debate and ideas sharing with their peers, as well as enhancing interaction with the module convenor.

The feedback suggests that Jane achieved her aim of fostering deeper and more sustained engagement with the literature, resulting in improved seminar discussions.

'The VLE is a great idea - by having to create a blog each week it meant that I had to think about the reading, not just absorb it - so in our seminars the discussion already had a depth of understanding which had not been there in many of my other module seminars. It also helped me to keep up the practice of arguing in a written way whilst simultaneously functioning as a starting point for verbal discussion in seminars. I felt that it has contributed substantially to the progress I feel I have made this term in understanding and getting to grips with quite a challenging module.'

Students also recognised the value of practising and improving their academic writing skills, and appreciated the opportunity to learn from each other:

'The prospect of your writing being read by seminar members every week caused me to pay attention to matters of style and to consider how 'readable" my response may have been. It was also useful to compare writing styles and ideas with other writers in order to improve and develop existing skills; this was an opportunity which wasn't previously available on the course. Peer assessment can be intimidating yet also useful.'

Students acknowledged the capacity of the online activities to structure their self-study and encourage them to prepare more thoroughly and in advance of the seminar.

Few students noted any disadvantages related to the blended course design approach. One student commented on the pressures of time and found the requirement to comment on another student's work particularly difficult to complete before the seminar. Another student questioned the relevance of the task, expressing frustration with the lack of feedback on this work.

'Lack of specific feedback on what we have been asked to submit suggests it was not relevant? Doesn't encourage students to spend much time on it because don't see point if no one, especially the tutor, responds.'

Nonetheless, all of the students strongly agreed or agreed that the use of the VLE complemented the class-based learning.

Course instructor's feedback

Jane reports that supporting her teaching with the VLE was a positive experience. The students benefited from the regular writing activities:

> "Third year students not only don't get writing assignments during term but there is only one class per week. This helped to give them more structure – to produce writing at certain points."

She was impressed by the volume of work produced over the term and felt that the class discussion was enhanced as a result.

> "The level of student contributions was higher than I expected. They wrote more and contributed observations – I got some mini essays.'"
>
> "It was fairly amazing – printing out the whole blog extended to 93 pages – they were all really impressed with the volume of writing and were very excited."

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It was more of a challenge to offer detailed commentary on individual writing. Jane found a solution to this problem in using some class time to comment on specific posts:

> "A big challenge though was to give feedback on their writing (via blog entries) without being perceived as offering the last word (on the discussion). But some students who did not received feedback from me wondered what the point of it was and a waste of their writing. The solution was to pick out one or two (blog) entries per week in class from everyone and ensure that they were commented on in class."

Jane found that she needed to stress the importance of peer review for students, so that they appreciated that this was part of their role:

> "Some weeks there were limited comments (on the reading reports) so I emailed students on the day of the seminar to get comments…if you don't comment, you are putting this report into a black hole – just for my assessment. It was vital to get students to realise that commenting is important."

She also facilitated the activity by modelling the kind of comments that she expected:

> "In the first week I commented on the blog – only to give a sense of what a comment might look like. I presented a selection in class to give an idea of what I was looking for. The first entry in the blog was a description of what I was looking for."

Jane recognises the importance of these strategies and plans to be more encouraging and enforcing in future courses to further facilitate participation online.

Jane observed that the online writing activities also had a direct benefit in informing her approach to teaching in the seminar sessions:

> "I liked logging in to the site. It really helped me to understand what they had gotten from the material (literature). I knew if the responses concentrated on a couple of texts – I knew what they liked and understood and it would help me prepare for the seminar. It was a form of feedback – a feedback loop to the instructor. If they didn't get something, I could plan and revise what to do with the seminar."

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She found the tools flexible enough to adapt to her teaching:

> "I was really able to shape what the VLE could offer to help me do what I wanted to do. Pedagogically I didn't need to conform to the limitations of the tools – I did what I wanted to do."

Jane did not feel that using the VLE increased the time taken up with teaching and student support. Time devoted to the online activities was balanced by time saved in other respects:

> "Did this add extra work for me? I didn't feel that it did. It removed the burden of photocopying work, although there was some burden in terms of the preparation and organisation to students."
>
> "I loved being able to upload articles from J-Stor to the VLE. I didn't need to email people to change the reading list. Students got into the mode of accessing everything via the VLE."

Student skills required & developed

Students initially felt exposed by having to post their work online. However, they built up a level of trust between them and participated at a very high level.

Students developed their writing skills through weekly writing tasks. They also developed skills in peer review, challenging and developing the ideas of their fellow students.

Although the VLE was new to students, they generally coped well with the technology with minimal instruction. Some reflected that they would have liked to have been introduced to the VLE earlier in their study programme, but Jane felt they enjoyed the innovative approach to the module:
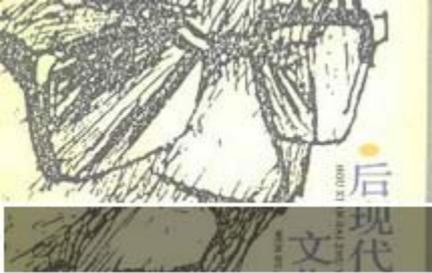
"Students quite enjoyed being guinea pigs and appreciated the novel status of the course. Part of their enthusiasm was that this was not old hat. This was their last class in the degree programme and they are as sophisticated as you are going to get as graduating third year students."

Staff skills required & developed

Jane had used Blackboard software before and felt very confident with the technology, but valued the ad hoc support which she received from the E-Learning Development Team. She further developed skills in online facilitation.

Actions for further development

Jane plans to keep the blog as an archive for when she teaches the course again. The writing could be reorganised and used as introductory material for the new students. It could be used as a resource for future cohorts – to introduce students to theory.

A wiki may be introduced as a tool to build up pages on individual theorists, perhaps making one student responsible as an editor for one entry.

Jane will make use of the VLE for her next course - Contemporary Women's Literature and the Caribbean - and students will be required to post a report on the VLE as an alternative to making an in-class presentation.