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Overview

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>New Media and Society (Autumn Term 2006)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogic theme</td>
<td>Co-operative learning &amp; teamwork to augment weekly seminars (blended learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keywords</td>
<td>Group-based tools, wiki, blog</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subject area</td>
<td>Social and cultural change in the Information Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student level &amp; profile</td>
<td>Second year module for Sociology students, based on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of students</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key conclusions</td>
<td>1. Blogging can be an effective tool for ideas-sharing, engaging students in the exchange of learning resources. Interaction between students and critical discussion of entries is more challenging to deliver, and will require careful management by the course instructor.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. The virtual presence of the instructor within a module site is a motivating factor for students to participate online, and is a key factor in the early stages of a blended module, in encouraging students to use new tools and engage with the VLE.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. The induction phase is critical to the success of a blended course, and should address both the technical requirements (IT skills) and pedagogic rationale for using new tools. The cultural adjustment that students are being asked to make in their work patterns should be addressed in the induction phase and early stages of the course.</td>
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</table>
Background

**New Media and Society** is a second year undergraduate module for Sociology students, which explores a range of sociological accounts which analyse the emerging properties of the Information Age. The module examines the factors influencing the development and diffusion of new media, such as the Internet, mobile telephony and digital communications technologies, and their implications for understanding social and cultural change in contemporary society. The aim of the module is for students to acquire a critical understanding of how a range of sociologists theorise the emergence of the Internet and other networked technologies, within the context of debates about broader sets of social transformations.

The module is taught through a combination of lectures and workshops, with students attending a two-hour lecture together with a weekly one-hour small group workshop over a ten-week period. The subject of the course - new media – lends itself to the use of the VLE and its communication and collaborative tool-sets. Consequently for the delivery of this module in the autumn term 2006, Brian Loader, the course instructor, introduced an online element to the course to augment the weekly seminar sessions. The aim was to give students a first-hand experience of new media such as blogging tools and discussion forums, and encourage them to reflect on their use of these tools.

"...on reflection they were users of mobiles, the Internet, Facebook and chat boxes. They didn’t immediately think about the significance of this, but recognised it when reflecting on the tools."

"I wanted students to experience blogging. The vast majority of the students did not regard themselves as techie or new media oriented – they didn’t immediately see this as part of their life. But on reflection they were users of mobiles, the Internet, Facebook and chat boxes. They didn’t immediately think about the significance of this, but recognised it when reflecting on the tools."

Screen shots from some popular web service sites

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The introduction of an online component to the module therefore provided students with an opportunity to critically reflect upon new media by using it. Students were asked to publish a minimum of three entries per week on a personal blog, and were expected to create a 1000 word entry on a new media concept within the course wiki tool. In addition to these tasks, the cohort was expected to use the communication tools within the VLE to support the collaborative preparation of workshop presentations. Each week, 2-3 students were expected to take a lead in discussing a workshop topic by preparing a PowerPoint presentation and then delivering a short 20-minute presentation, with peers contributing feedback and engaging in discussion after the workshop within a dedicated wiki space.

**Description of approach**

The blend for this module was based on lectures and workshops for the face-to-face component, and the use of new media for discussion and collaborative activities for the online component.
The learning objectives of the online component were to:

- Provide students with a first-hand experience of new media, engaging with the new technologies. Topics such as e-learning and online deliberation were explored through an experiential learning approach, with students using the tools to support a range of co-operative learning tasks.

- Facilitate communication between students on presentation topics for the workshops. Participants from different workshops were encouraged to deliberate and share information on a topic which they would later give a workshop presentation upon. These activities were intended to provide a link between the on-line and class-based learning.

**Learning activities & tools**

The online component of the module included:

- **Course resources.** Weekly units of the module were released with web links and key readings and lecture notes in the form of PowerPoint slides.

- **Discussion board.** A plenary forum entitled ‘Questions and Queries’ was set up for ideas sharing and discussion.

- **Workshop wiki.** Students were allocated a workshop wiki space to prepare their presentation and to invite comments and feedback from peers after each workshop session. A wiki is a collaborative writing tool which creates web pages. It allows multiple users – in this case members of a workshop group - to edit web pages and add content. A commenting area was also switched on to invite feedback from the rest of the class on the wiki pages for each group.
- Class wiki. A wiki space was set up to host a collaborative glossary of new media concepts, and was referred to as a ‘Mediapedia’, along the lines of the more famous ‘Wikipedia’ model. Students were able to select a concept and then create a web page definition, which they linked to the concept on the main page.

- Class blog. A course blog - a reflective journal for the class - was set up, enabling each student to create multiple journal entries which were visible to all. Entries were dated with most recent contributions shown first. Students could include web links within an entry to point to interesting articles, websites etc. On each entry there was a comment space, to encourage students to discuss the ‘new media’ themes presented in the blog entry.

- Announcements. The entry page to the module site, where the course instructor could post messages to the cohort.

- Online resources. Reading lists connected to the library catalogue with links to external websites.

**Student profile**

The entry questionnaire was completed by 35 of the 43 students, after the induction session in the first week of the course.

**Experience with computers**

The entry survey results revealed that students were established users of computers for information search activities, with 89% of respondents accessing information from the web on a frequent basis. There was a noticeable mix in experience within the class however regarding the use of communication tools.
A third of respondents (34%) were frequent users of discussion boards and blogs, 37% had occasionally used these tools, but 29% had never made contributions to discussion forums / blogs. The figures for chat tools reflected a division between frequent users (52%) and occasional users (40%), with 8% never using this tool. However a higher proportion of respondents (71%) rated themselves as confident in uploading files to a website, with 12% not yet confident and 17% who had never attempted this before.

Experience with computers for learning

Some of the students had experienced using the VLE for a first-year Politics module (World Politics), which was based around the use of discussion boards and file exchange tools, as well as access to lecture notes and web resources. However the majority of students were new to the VLE. This contrast in experience was reflected in the results, with 34% of respondents having followed courses in which course materials had been delivered online. Only 23% of respondents had previously followed courses which involved the use of a discussion forum.

Expectations towards the VLE

Expectations towards the use of the VLE in this module were quite positive, with 71% of respondents agreeing that it would increase opportunities for discussion and debate outside class, and 60% that it would increase interaction levels. A similar level of agreement (57%) was recorded for the view that the VLE would support ideas and experience sharing amongst students.

Outcomes of the pilot

The module was delivered over the autumn term 2006 with students attending two hours of lectures each week, as well as participating in a weekly seminar session. Feedback was collected from the instructor and students on the learning outcomes from the module.

Activity statistics

Student log-in patterns were frequent across the module, with high activity recorded during the induction phase and during the mid-October and mid-November periods. 7 students recorded over 100 hits on the site, 17 students recording over 50, with only 3 students visiting the site less than ten times. Of the content areas within the site, the lecture notes received the most hits (41%), with the workshop wiki space accounting for 33% of the hits each for these pages. The wiki spaces were intended for students to share resources and ideas about their workshop presentations, and
to support the ensuing discussion after each presentation had been delivered. The web pages however were not used, with just the commenting space employed to exchange ideas on how to get started in preparing the presentations.

Screen shots from the Mediapedia module wiki. The main image shows the home page. Inset 1 shows the wiki Page List; these are all pages created by students. Inset 2 shows an example of a wiki page created by a student.

Each student contributed an entry to the ‘Mediapedia’, and there was an extensive range of entries to the course blog, which reflected individual research and comments on new media and related issues, with links included to websites and relevant articles and websites. Only a small number of entries attracted comments from peers.

There were 14 posts from 5 participants on the ‘Questions and Queries’ discussion board, with questions posted on recommended reading and access to relevant resources.

Focus group feedback

Three students volunteered feedback on their learning experiences using the module site. They agreed that the VLE was effective as a space for hosting learning resources, with all key information stored there:
"The essay titles, books were very useful and the seminar information. Some people put links and newspaper articles up there."

"The lectures notes and books were a plus."

"The Resource List was very useful and is still there for revision purposes."

The collaborative activities met with a mixed response though, reflecting the varying levels of student experience with these tools prior to the commencement of the course. The blogging exercise for instance attracted a high level of participation at the beginning of the course, with some students posting up to 3 times a week, but these focused on students making new entries, rather than comments on existing postings.

"I was expecting a lot more discussion. I made a lot of posts, which tended not to get responses."

"People did not want to offend. On the web you can be anonymous and be prepared to take things on a bit, but it is different for a course, although the seminars can be heated, but none of that was transferred on-line.

"It is a cultural thing. If you are into blogging, then fine. But if you are not but are told to do it, it is a major difference. It was new to me. The first I heard of it was when the course started."
The blogging exercise attracted a high level of participation at the beginning of the course with some students posting up to 3 times a week, but contributions were based on students making new entries, rather than making comments on existing postings.

“Brian did post a few things. He was overseeing it on a very regular basis. You could tell that Brian was on there – making comments on certain blogs. He participated as a lecturer and gave his opinion on certain things.”

The wiki group spaces were less successful however. There were three seminar groups running in parallel, each discussing a topic.

The aim was to get workshop presenters to share ideas, but some presenters did not realise who they were meant to collaborate with, and others did not understand the technology, or wish to share their work in this way. In general, the focus group respondents lacked confidence in using this new tool and were unclear regarding the rationale for working collaboratively on-line in preparation for the seminar presentations.
Exit survey feedback

The exit survey attracted a much lower response rate than the entry survey, with only 37% of the cohort (16 students) completing the survey. The numbers are too small to draw any firm conclusions, but the results highlight trends which appear to match the evidence gathered from the activity statistics and focus group feedback on student activity in this course.

Table 1: Selection of results from the exit and entry surveys

(%) Exit survey results shown first, entry survey results in italics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A VLE enables instructors to provide a wider variety of learning resources for students</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A VLE supports ideas and experience sharing amongst students</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A VLE increases opportunities for discussion and debate amongst students outside class</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A VLE helps instructors to be accessible to students outside class</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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</table>

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

The survey responses indicate that the VLE was viewed as a valuable tool for presenting course materials to students. As one student noted, the course site enabled the instructor to present resources in a coherent manner:

“All the information is available so that if I have forgotten something I know where to go to find the answer.”

The release of lecture notes prior to the class sessions also had a positive impact on the student learning experience:
"Having the lectures published before the actual session was also useful as it allowed me to download them onto my laptop and make notes onto them as the session took place."

"The lectures and seminars promoted discussion, and the VLE had reading on it that complemented that discussion."

The survey results also indicate that the VLE supported ideas sharing outside class, with students posting article and resources relating to the fast moving field of new media:

"People would post readings and sites which I may never have visited if I had not seen them on the VLE, which meant I was able to read more accessible information which was current and up to date."

"At first I thought it was just a way to make the workload even heavier, but it makes the subject more interesting as there is a lot more input and ideas from the other students, so it does have benefits."

**Course Instructor’s feedback**

Brian had concerns about the time investment required to set up the module – an awful of time was required for “front-loading” in developing the module site, although he appreciated the flexible nature of a blended course design approach, which differs from distance learning in enabling changes to be made to the course site later on in response to student feedback. The development of the module was “stressful”, but the aim was to deliver a simplified course design model, which would engage students and give them a useful introduction to new media. With the blogs and discussion tools, students had experience of different media, which appeared to work well.

"The introduction of the blog was an experimental aspect of the course, which worked very well and is something that I can take forward."

"I did spend a lot of time on-line, but this was not a problem. It was reassuring, providing support in between lectures and seminars or simply lurking or encouraging, seeing students share information between themselves."
On balance the course design was effective, although some rethinking may be required in relation to the workshop wiki spaces, in order to engage students to use this tool effectively:

"I was satisfied with the course this time around and the collaborative exchange between students, but I would like more next time around. The structure around the class wikis did not work. Students were provided with a space for discussion, but they didn’t use it. The aim was for group collaboration, to share information and ideas, which would require them all to sign up, but they didn’t. The key to motivating students to engage on-line is to make it a requirement for the course, or for the instructor to be engaged. I did this for the blogs, providing feedback, and this was an active area of the course."

**Student skills required & developed**

Feedback from students on this module reflected varying degrees of confidence in using the collaborative tools hosted within the VLE. The blogging tool was intuitive to some, but others requested additional support from the course instructor to post their entries, and struggled with their first few attempts at making entries. The wiki tool was poorly understood by many students, and this suggests that a dedicated induction session is required on this tool, to encourage students to use it and to explain how to develop and edit content within the wiki pages. There is also an underlying issue of motivation that needs to be addressed, in encouraging students to engage with these new tools. The VLE and associated tools need to be promoted to students, so that they understand why they are using them, for what purpose and which specific tasks.

**Staff skills required & developed**

Brian valued the training sessions that he followed on the VLE, but developed his skills largely through “learning by doing”, drawing on support from the ELDT where necessary. The training provided a general introduction to the system, but only when he engaged in the design of the course site did things start to fall into place. Complementary information on assessment activities was “edited out” during the training, and represents something to pick up again in future modules.
In Brian’s view though, the key challenge in developing a blended course is in planning out the design of the course in advance, before the ‘build’ stage gets underway:

“Staff who are approaching the VLE for the first time should be aware that they will need to put a lot of work in upfront in terms of the design of a blended module – thinking things through if it is a new programme or module. This might not be the way they are used to working – preferring to work week-by-week in the development of a course.”

For the delivery of the module, the VLE tools were quite intuitive. Brian found it very easy to communicate to students. In the department there are no email lists, and communications with students need to be directed through the administrator. With the VLE, Brian could contact the cohort at any time, by posting on the blog or discussion board. This was necessary in the initial stages of the course, to support students and help them get to grips with the new tools.

“(Staff) will also have to log on regularly and respond to students, especially those new to a blended course. Students will eventually take things on and occupy the (virtual) spaces.”

**Actions for further development**

Future actions for this module include a dedicated training session on wikis, with the introduction of some form of course requirement for students to use the tool. There is also scope to introduce a podcasting resource, which is something to develop for the future, if issues related to IPR and copyright can be overcome.

The Department is currently developing a Master’s programme in Social Informatics and Management, a one-year course with six modules. In Brian’s view it would be good to build the VLE into the design from the outset, which would enable the Department to approach the instructional process in a different way.