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### Overview

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>World Politics (Spring Term 2006)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pedagogic theme</strong></td>
<td>Case-based research and collaborative report writing (blended learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Keywords</strong></td>
<td>Group work; case-based learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject area</strong></td>
<td>Politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student level &amp; profile</strong></td>
<td>First year Politics single subject and joint degree students and students from Economics, PEP and Sociology, based on-campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No. of students</strong></td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Key conclusions** | 1. The VLE was effective in providing an environment to support group-based research activities through the presentation of group assignments, resource links and a dedicated space for each group to work in and develop weekly reports.  
   2. The group-based model and blended course design achieved its aims in engaging students in collaborative research activities, providing transparency to student learning activities outside class, and introducing an element of competition between groups in the report writing activity. A high level of workload was required of students, who benefited though in terms of the regular feedback received over the duration of the course.  
   3. Online activity should not be viewed as a replacement for face-to-face discussion, but may often serve as a trigger for informed debate. Encouraging students to exchange reports and comment on them in an online forum can represent excellent preparation for seminar sessions. |
Background

**World Politics** is a new 20-credit module in the revised Politics Part 1 undergraduate programme, which is compulsory for all first year Politics students and available as an option for students outside the Department.

The module explores the institutions and practice of contemporary politics through the analysis of diverse cases from different regions. World Politics is lecture and tutorial based, with 14 lectures providing outlines of theoretical debates, one organisational tutorial and seven one-hour tutorials, which take the form of a debate on a key issue in contemporary world politics.

The introduction of an online component, comprising case studies and group-based research activities, was designed to address problems that were identified in a previous first year programme, which was based on lectures and tutorials alone. Dr Rob Aitken, the course instructor, describes the rationale for a blended course design as follows:

"Too many students did the minimum of reading, and tutorial discussions could then become based too much on opinion rather than informed by reading and empirical cases. In the case of some students this could then set a pattern of low expectations of the amount and level of work expected of them. By including the online case studies we aim to encourage independent learning and research skills as well as increasing collaboration and discussions amongst students. This will, we hope, help to develop research skills and expectations in the 1st year that they will carry through to..."
For this module, students were organised into seminar groups to present different positions on the issues under debate. They were expected to analyse contemporary issues in world politics with references to case studies. This would involve researching and analysing a case study, and in some weeks preparing a case study report to be submitted to the seminar group as a whole. A typical example of the format for most weeks was the week titled ‘Contemporary Armed Conflicts’. The online case studies provided students with guidance, background information and links to internet and library resources to conduct a conflict analysis of the Sri Lankan conflict.

As a work group, students then compiled a brief conflict analysis report, based on a structured report format provided in the case study, to submit to the seminar group and tutor. The tutorial debate focused on different theoretical approaches to understanding post-cold war conflicts and students were required to debate the general assumptions of the theories and their applicability in relation to the cases studied. Rob explains the rationale for this new course design as follows:

“By reorganising the module and introducing the VLE, my aim was to promote deeper understanding of the issues through the investigation of case studies working in small groups. These work groups produce weekly collaborative reports which are presented in class to larger seminar groups. A further aim was for students to engage with a richer variety of primary and secondary sources through greater use of electronic resources.”
Description of approach

The blend for this module was based on seminars and lectures for the face-to-face component, and case-based research and collaborative report writing for the online component. The learning objectives of the online component were to:

- Provide students with an introduction to diverse political institutions through detailed study of a number of case studies. This was intended to help students to develop the ability to research, comprehend and analyse detailed empirical cases and draw conclusions from them.
- Give students an introduction to researching case studies. The online format provided them with guidance and access to data and arguments not only from academic sources, but also from international organisations and NGOs.
- Facilitate discussion and collaborative learning amongst students outside of the tutorial by providing them with a work space where they could post notes and messages to be used by group members in preparation of case study reports.

Learning activities & tools

The online component of the module included:

- Lecture materials. Weekly units of the module were
released with PPT slides and outline notes of lectures, lecture bibliographies, instructions and key readings for tutorial discussions.

- Online access to case studies for the work groups to study.
- Research resources, with documents containing key information and instructions as well as links to internet resources, journal articles or library catalogue entries. Students were given direct access to the library catalogue and to relevant bibliographic database and web pages.
- A ‘Good Reports’ section, outlining examples of weekly case study reports, nominated by the group tutors.
Work spaces in which students collaborated to prepare case study reports, for submission to the seminar group and tutor in advance of the seminar. Each group was allocated their own group pages area, with a file exchange area and discussion board. Seminar groups (comprising several tutorial groups) were also allocated a file exchange area, so that work groups could submit reports, contributing towards a portfolio of reports for the whole seminar group. Each group was free to organise how they collaborated in the development of the weekly reports, and the group tools in the VLE were entirely optional.

**Student profile**

All World Politics students completed the entry questionnaire during the induction training activity.

**Experience with computers**

The entry survey results revealed that students were established users of computers for information search activities, with 82% of the cohort accessing information from the web on a daily basis. Two-thirds of the cohort had also used chat tools for communication on a regular basis, although discussion forums were less familiar to them, with a third of the class declaring that they...
had never used them. Two-thirds of respondents declared that they could confidently upload files / resources to a website.

**Experience with computers for learning**

Only a small proportion of the cohort had prior experience of using collaborative tools in formal learning situations. 9% of respondents indicated that they had used discussion and chat tools for this purpose, with 23% following courses in which course materials and resources had been delivered online.

**Expectations towards the VLE**

Expectations towards the VLE were quite positive, with two-thirds of respondents agreeing that a VLE would support ideas and experience sharing amongst students, and increase opportunities for discussion and debate outside class. A similar number of respondents felt that the VLE would provide flexibility to learners in terms of their study needs.

**Outcomes of the pilot**

The module was delivered over the Spring Term 2006 (Weeks 2 to 8), with students attending two hours of lectures, a one-hour tutorial and 17 hours of independent learning and group work per week. Feedback was collected from the instructor, tutors and students on the learning outcomes from the revised course design.

**Activity statistics**

Of the 185 students enrolled on this course, 88% were active users of the VLE, logging in 10 or more times over the duration of the module. Student log-in patterns were consistent across the module, with no major peaks or troughs. The group pages accounted for the overwhelming majority of hits (73%) on the module site, with 44 of the 45 tutorial groups using the file exchange tool to support the development of their weekly reports. The adoption of the discussion boards was less uniform however, with three groups posting over 100 messages, as opposed to half of the groups, which posted less than 10 messages on their boards.

**Focus group feedback**

A subset of the cohort (six students) was interviewed on learning experiences using the module site. The consensus view on the
weekly VLE usage pattern was that students logged on to access content resources (module descriptions, library resources) and case details, and then used the group file exchange tool to upload files and develop the group reports. The discussion board was used initially for communication purposes between group members, but after a while students reverted to using email. Overall the VLE helped to make the group work processes transparent, providing an audit trail of how group members had interacted and how contributions towards the weekly reports had developed. When it came to the face-to-face presentation in class, it became clear who had contributed to the group posts and at what level.

Key challenges that students faced in using the VLE related to access to Library resources, with some Metalib links not working. The file storage quota was also too low for some groups, which forced them to delete files from the file exchange and therefore remove part of the audit trail.

Students also noted the high weekly workload in preparing the group reports, which restricted the scope for wider reading. Consequently, only limited use was made of the ‘Good Reports’, which were consulted in the first week but reviewed less frequently thereafter.

The blend between the online and face-to-face components of the course appeared to vary between tutorial groups, with some groups viewing the VLE as a student tool, something "apart” from the class experience. Another student highlighted the frequency with which her tutor alluded to the VLE in seminar sessions, referring to module resources, which reassured her that she was working along the right lines. Feedback to students was relayed though exclusively by email, with tutors using the VLE primarily to access the group reports.

**Exit survey feedback**

Half of the World Politics cohort completed the exit survey, which invited students to reflect on their expectations to the VLE based on this course experience. Interestingly, the exit results matched the entry survey expectations of the class in a number of areas, with over two-thirds of respondents agreeing that the VLE provided flexibility to learners in terms of their study needs, as well as enabling instructors to provide a wider variety of learning resources for students. There was indeed an increase in support for the statement that the VLE helps students to prepare well before class, with 63% of respondents agreeing with this view.
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>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A VLE provides flexibility to learners in terms of their study needs.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A VLE enables instructors to provide a wider variety of learning resources for students.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A VLE helps students to prepare well before class.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A VLE makes individual students’ contributions more transparent to the instructor.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A VLE increases opportunities for discussion and debate among students outside class.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Respondents in particular highlighted the support which the VLE provided for report writing and preparation for seminar sessions:

"Using the VLE made us keep up to date with our reading and really put some effort into the research that we did so that we did not disappoint other students in our group."

"It enabled more effective preparation for seminars, and we could consequently contribute more in the seminars. This led to broader and more informed discussion, which aided learning and understanding of the subject."
Access to resources and links to useful websites were picked out as strengths of the VLE, as well as the file exchange tool for sharing background work. However, students were quick to point out that the VLE did not replace face-to-face contact within the work groups, but acted more as a trigger for discussion to take place:

"It is still necessary to meet up with your group in person to edit reports and discuss work properly. VLE is not always adequate for understanding what other people mean and how they have approached the report. Conversation in person can make this far more clear."

The activity statistics for the module support this picture, with students using the VLE for file exchange and sharing, with only limited use of the discussion boards for the negotiation of meaning for the writing up of the weekly group report.

Overall though, two-thirds of respondents agreed that the VLE component of the course complemented the class-based learning. The online resources and group work facilities enhanced the class-based experience:

"It ensured that everybody was well prepared for the discussion and therefore contributed the most they could during the class. It has also developed a relative competition amongst the groups which made it more interesting and engaging."
Instructor and tutors’ feedback

The objectives of the revised course design appear to have been met, in terms of the engagement of students in case study research, and the collaborative learning process, as evidenced through the development of the weekly reports. Tutors agreed that the group areas of the VLE enabled them to check who was contributing to reports and to make working processes more transparent.

The design of the module had a dual benefit in the eyes of Dr Rob Aitken, the module convenor. Students benefited by receiving regular feedback on their weekly reports as they progressed through the course. Tutors were also able to reinforce guidance about plagiarism and referencing, addressing these issues via group areas within the VLE.

In summary, Rob felt that the VLE-supported small group model generated “more commitment and responsibility in members toward one another, as well as the incentive to contribute.”

Student skills required & developed

Training for students was focused on their use of the VLE, with a dedicated induction session introducing them to the module site and group tools that they would be using. Students deemed this to be sufficient, although further guidance would have been valued on file management and quotas within the group areas. From the exit survey feedback, technical problems in accessing the VLE appear to have been minimal for the duration of the course.

Students also received advice on how to tackle the report writing activity, although there was no formal advice on group roles and how to manage the workload. The focus group feedback suggests that students soon got to grips with this, with group members making contributions and rotating the editing role.

Staff skills required & developed

Tutors on the module ran the face-to-face seminars and did not engage in e-tutoring. They took the same generic Blackboard training as students on how to navigate around Blackboard and use the group tools. They used the VLE to access the reports submitted by students and to check student participation in report preparation when necessary.
### Actions for further development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adoption of the wiki as the principal tool to support group work</strong></td>
<td>The file exchange led to duplicate copies of files being uploaded and was an awkward tool for collaborative writing. The wiki introduced into Blackboard for this session (Autumn 06) will allow file uploads to be combined with online editing and report writing. This will facilitate a more collaborative approach to report writing, rather than simply cutting and pasting together sections written by individuals, while still allowing tutors to monitor individual students’ contributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Further guidance for students on group work</strong></td>
<td>Some students were unsure about how they were expected to work together in groups. In a few cases they did not use the online tools except to upload the final report. Further guidance will be provided in future, emphasising the importance of contributing notes and editing the report online, as well as meeting up face-to-face to discuss the main argument of the report and edit the final report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Further guidance and group area for tutors</strong></td>
<td>Tutors had only the same information as students on the case studies and how to run the seminars. A face-to-face meeting was held half way through the term to reflect on experiences but more could be done to share experiences. For next year tutor notes will be added on how to run the seminars and on the case studies. A tutor group area will also be added to allow tutors to share experiences online.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One less case study report</strong></td>
<td>The module was deliberately demanding as students will get more out of a module that they engage fully with. However, the demands of writing the weekly reports did limit the time that students had to research around the topics. One of the reports will be omitted in the next session to allow more time for students to carry out their own research and prepare their essays.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anonymised Assignment</strong></td>
<td>The Anonymised Assignment tool was tested on this module. A double submission method was used for assessed essays, on paper and electronically, to be safe in the trial. Double submission will continue to be used in future due to the potential administrative work involved in printing a large number of essays.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Make it clear how you are using plagiarism detection software</strong></td>
<td>The Safe Assignment plagiarism detection software was also tested on this module. This proved a useful tool for detecting plagiarism though it does not give you a simple YES/NO answer. However you MUST be clear to students whether you are using Safe Assignment as a pedagogic tool to point out to students problems with their writing style, or are using it punitively to catch plagiarism. It can only be used as a pedagogic tool where the piece of work concerned does NOT count towards their final degree classification. Guidelines on the use of Safe Assignment need to be agreed with</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the Standing Committee on Assessment and University Teaching Committee.

Example of one of the collaboratively developed weekly reports executed in the VLE’s wiki tool.