Discussion

The results show that, on the whole, Independent Study Work packs are seen by the majority of students to be a very useful aid to their learning experience. Information gleaned from the study has helped to enhance, develop and inform the curriculum and the learning experience. In addition, it also aids the planning of innovative learning materials, which will allow for a wider participation amongst all undergraduates and teaching staff, and expand and enhance student modes of learning at Manchester Metropolitan University. The work packs we use at MMU Cheshire can be adapted to suit most subjects throughout the university sector as a whole.

The results of the study have also been used as an agenda for further research, currently being conducted. This has been funded by The Learning and Teaching Unit at MMU Manchester and goes beyond the work packs by examining the total student experience. This has involved group interviewing approximately 50 students on foundation (Access) courses, social science undergraduates and post-graduates all based in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at MMU Cheshire. Thus, the work pack research mentioned here should be seen as one set of data which will be analysed further in conjunction with the group interviews in an effort to create further ‘models of student types’. Additional research is also planned that involves interviewing the teaching staff who have taught all the students involved in both research projects.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to the Learning and Teaching Unit, MMU Cheshire, who funded the research. Thanks also to the students in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies, who completed the questionnaires, and to Sophie Johnson and Karen Goodwin, the postgraduate researchers, who helped with the data analysis.

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Experiences with developing an on-line Certificate in Egyptology at the University of Manchester

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Whilst in my previous post as a member of the Distributed Learning Unit at the University of Manchester, I was seconded to the Faculty of Humanities to provide pedagogic and technical support for academics wishing to develop online learning materials. I became heavily involved in a large project to produce the first fully online course in Humanities and this article describes how the first year of the project was planned, designed and run as well as some of the lessons learnt during the process.

Professor Rosalie David, the first woman to hold a professorship in Egyptology in Britain and an internationally renowned academic, has been teaching a well-established course which has run for over 30 years.

The course has attracted many applicants even without benefit of publicity and there is always a waiting list with enquiries from all over the world. The Certificate consists of 120 credits beginning with 60 at level 1 (equivalent to the level of first year undergraduate study) and advancing to 30 credits at each of levels 2 and 3. It runs over four years, the first three years being taught and the fourth involving independent study.

In the past, the distance learning course was paper-based and materials were sent out by post. It has now become the first fully online course in the Centre for Continuing Education and the first cohort of students started in September 2004. In October 2005 these students moved into their second year and a new cohort started Year 1.
Rationale

The online course was created in response to feedback from previous students who had indicated that they felt isolated and would like more informal contact.

Previously, the distance learning course had been delivered in the form of monthly booklets and students had been required to complete written tasks every month which were marked and returned by a team of tutors. The increasing interest in the course raised the issues of cost effectiveness for the Centre.

Online delivery would give course participants access to attractive visual materials, journals and articles which might otherwise be difficult to find and it would allow content to be easily updated in line with any new developments. Students would be able to communicate with each other on a daily basis and to interact more readily with tutors (as well as having input from Professor David herself). This would also bring the course more in line with the face-to-face equivalent.

Project Team

The project received some funding and support from the Distributed Learning Unit. The unit’s graphic designer created an attractive design for the course homepage, for the icons and for the database interface. The DL programmer created a free-standing database which was linked into the WebCT module. I worked (with a foot in both camps as a member of the Unit but seconded to work in what was then the Faculty of Humanities) on the WebCT structure and on the design of the content, inputting the text and images and giving pedagogic and technical advice and support. Ann Barlow, assistant director of the Centre for Continuing Education, drew the disparate elements together as project manager.

Planning and designing

A timeline was agreed upon and tasks were allocated during an initial project meeting. The entire team met frequently at the planning stages but it was felt to be more useful to meet in smaller interest groups as the project progressed.

It was agreed that the majority of the materials would be delivered in the University’s Virtual Learning Environment, WebCT, but supplemental materials would be made available via a database, including a gazetteer and high resolution versions of the images used in the course. The database can be developed over a period of time to stand as a useful resource in its own right to be used on other courses. At the time the University library was in the process of adopting some software which, it was hoped, could eventually be used to create a database of the images, with accompanying metadata, and which would allow students to zoom in on minute details – especially useful when examining hieroglyphic inscriptions.

The WebCT administrators were involved in discussions on various practical issues. Amongst other things, the study of hieroglyphs forms a part of the course during Years 1 and 2 and it was important to ensure they could be correctly displayed. We also needed to consider more long term issues such as how the course would be accessed by the second cohort of students – would a copy of the course be needed or would they access the same course with the Year 2 materials hidden from them, how would this affect the discussion areas? Arrangements were made to allow the students to be registered early.

The immense amount of paper-based material needed to be revised and re-structured by Professor David to suit the new medium. We mocked up some sample pages to see how this might work. Initially we took one unit which contained a lot of visual material and another which was mainly text to see how each would work.

The graphic designer and programmer worked with two Egyptology tutors on the design and population of the database. Ann Barlow and I met regularly to adapt Professor David’s paper-based activities for online use – including modifying the language to suit a more informal online style and creating initial postings which would encourage students to make their first contributions.

I created a template for a page and a stylesheet which met the w3c accessibility standards. Many of the images were in slide or photographic format. These were eventually scanned in to produce thumbnail and high resolution format. However, this could not be done until the summer as Professor David used them in her face-to-face teaching. Unfortunately this meant some duplication of work as I needed to add them in well before this. As a result Professor David would hand me sets of images when she was not using them and I scanned them in at a low resolution for the content pages. She also had to produce captions for all the images so I could enter alternative text for the images on screen. This was one of the most time consuming tasks of the project.

Professor David and I developed a method of working to fit in with her busy schedule and to ensure that I fully understood how she wished the materials to be structured. Once all the content was ready, we allocated two days to work through the materials together and make any necessary adjustments. Tutors were allocated units to proof read. As well as the usual typos, we were looking for inconsistencies, inaccuracies and any confusing instructions or unwieldy navigation. In spite of the many pairs of eyes we were still amending by the end of the year.

The external examiner (from North America) was shown the materials and as she was an experienced user of and advocate for WebCT we were pleased to have her favourable response.

Resources

The course was supported by a large collection of visual images and this raised the issue of copyright. Professor David identified particular images relating to the course material at each stage and the provenance was tracked. In many instances, permission was granted for free use of images from museum collections, while a small budget was set aside to purchase others.
They are also required to have access to a PC with adequate technical specification (details of which were available to them) and to have a reasonable standard of IT skills. Unfortunately their assessment of these two factors was not always realistic!

In terms of academic qualifications, participants ranged from those with no previous qualifications to highly educated and well qualified people. The age range also varied from those in their early thirties to retired people.

Precourse

The students were sent information via email on how to access the course and registered early to allow access to the Study Skills section.

Initiating the course

The project manager and the course administrator tracked the students to ensure all had gained initial access and later on to ensure that students continued to engage with the materials. The students were also given my email address as an added support mechanism. All in all most students had few problems and settled into the course successfully.

WebCT based content

The calendar tool provided information on dates for the release of modules and assignment deadlines.

Helpsheets were created and were made accessible online, using screenshots taken from the course, and these include information on how to navigate the complicated course structure.

Because of the complexity of the course, each section began with a guide to the structure of the unit.

The large course handbook was split into separate Word files to allow students access to download any sections of particular interest.

Given that students may be returning to study after some years out of the academic system, a study skills section, with materials created by Ann Barlow, was made available before the course commence. Students were encouraged to dip into this section at any stage in the course as they felt necessary. The materials were organized into eight timed-release main units with three or four sections each (Year 1 covered Predynastic Egypt to the reign of the Hyksos) and which dip in and out of the various themed pages on subjects such as religion, art and architecture. The themed pages can be read separately after the unit is completed and will eventually permit students to read about a special subject from Pre-Dynastic Egypt to the Graeco-Roman Period.

The database could be accessed by a link in WebCT but students were also able to click from a link in the text to the related database entry. This database could be made available to other courses. There were also links from the text to the glossary tool.

Where we linked to external sites, all correctly acknowledged and opening in new browser windows, we wrote to seek permission as a courtesy and our requests were well received. Often we included links to translations of Egyptian texts which were used in discussion activities. Many of the world’s most renowned museums now have web sites and we were able to link to their Egyptology collections.

Arrangements were made with a Swiss Egyptologist (and computer programmer) for a hieroglyph programme to be modified and made available for course participants.

Tutors

The first cohort of tutors were experienced Egyptologists who had taught face-to-face but who were all new to online learning and to WebCT in particular – they were all based off campus but came to the University on occasion for meetings. They felt they had varying degrees of computer literacy and it was important to offer sufficient support to allow each of them to begin confidently to etutor. Firstly, they completed either the University’s online emoderating course or the etutoring course. I helped facilitate on the emoderating course and this was my first contact with the tutors. The project manager had also been trained in etutoring. The course allowed them to experience the student side of online learning as well as familiarising them with the WebCT environment in general.

Whilst they were already familiar with the content of the Certificate in Egyptology, they needed to acquaint themselves with the online course navigation and structure. For this purpose, a one day face-to-face session was organized. The tutors were given a demonstration of the course features and then allowed time to experiment with using the discussion and email tools and to ask questions, raise concerns and make suggestions. They were also offered ongoing support via email and phone. They were able to communicate with each other by a private tutors’ area on the discussion board and via the course email.

Tutors were allocated to discussion groups on a rota basis.

To cope with the increasing numbers, as the second cohort of students begins the course this semester, new tutors have been recruited. The applicants were invited to contribute to a WebCT discussion board and this became part of the selection procedure.

Students

Huge interest (over 200 enquiries) was shown and of the 70 or more applicants, around 48 students were recruited from a wide range of countries including Australia, Egypt, the US, Mexico, Finland, Greece, Ireland, including a naval officer on shipboard. All were part time distance learners. They were invited to write a short piece on their interests in Egyptology and were chosen on the basis of enthusiasm, approach to the subject and level of interest rather than pre-existing knowledge.

They are also required to have access to a PC with adequate
Developing a community

The first activity students engaged in encouraged the students to use the WebCT homepage tool to say something about themselves and their interests.

The discussion board was set up with a main area all could access and private tutorial areas, facilitated by the tutors. It was particularly important to raise the students’ awareness of netiquette as course participants came from many different cultural backgrounds and English was not always their first language. Furthermore, they were mature students who were not necessarily accustomed to online communication. Under these circumstances it would be very easy to give or take offence. On the plus side, the discussion boards did allow students time to read and compose postings and the potential to prepare responses in a word processing package and take advantage of the spelling and grammar tools.

Whilst tutors were allocated to moderate each discussion group, they were encouraged to intervene only when a discussion needed moving on or clarification, allowing students the opportunity to contribute fully and develop their ideas.

The email tool allowed students to communicate with each other on a one-to-one basis.

Activities

Each section of a unit ended with an activity – often a discussion posting, occasionally a quiz. These were not assessed but students were expected to complete a percentage of the activities to show their engagement with the course.

The discussion activities were designed to encourage students to build on their own and each others’ knowledge and understanding but with the facilitation of a tutor. As the tutors changed the groups they facilitated every few months, all students were given the opportunity to benefit from the academics’ various areas of expertise.

The quizzes offered the students immediate feedback and could be taken over and over again. Problems arose when students started coming up with acceptable alternative names or spellings in their answers. I added to the possible answers so many times I began to feel under the curse of the mummy myself.

Assessment

Assessment was by electronically submitted assignment. There were two assignments per year and a fourth year dissertation.

Evaluation

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive but it was felt there were too many discussion activities, taking up too much time for both students and staff. This situation was worsened by students, unused to online communication, who posted mini essays to the board. This will be addressed by building in additional guidance and exercises for the next cohort of students. There will be fewer discussion activities in the second year and the groups are to be rearranged, putting students with greater knowledge and experience in the same groups. This will allow these students to be stretched without intimidating others who are newer to the subject.

Students valued the increased access to resources but many of them stated that they printed off material rather than reading on screen.

A real community was created and some students even arranged to go on holiday to Egypt together. The sense of becoming part of an academic community also extended to the tutors who have felt the benefit of being interact and observe each others’ teaching.

Conclusion

By the time I left the University, there were over 600 pages and around 1000 images online and materials for the second year were in development.

The first cohort of students had completed their first year and the second cohort was already recruited. The course has fulfilled the student need for more personal contact and opened up access to a wealth of resources.

This achievement would not have been possible without Professor David’s commitment of time, energy and enthusiasm to restructuring the material and the determination and hard work of the team members acting together to produce the course.

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