Online Discussion in English Studies

A Good Practice Guide to Design, Moderation and Assessment

The
Higher English
Education Subject
Academy Centre

What the students said...

What does using an online discussion board add to the study of English as you have experienced it at university?

It can sometimes be disheartening on a module when you study a different strand/text each week but ultimately only write on two or three of them. It can be easy when you are busy to neglect the ones you don't intend to write on and this detracts from the point of studying. The VLE discussion activities defeated this problem. I am personally very glad that I could engage with all the texts on the course via the VLE.

It's imaginative and interesting and a memorable form of learning.

By having to research topics the online sessions have offered a more rounded learning experience, giving a fuller picture of the period we studied.

I like the idea [of having a discussion board]. It makes the study of English that bit more 'refreshing'. It is more interesting to be assessed in different ways, unconventional ways, rather than just doing essays all the time.

It adds another way to express yourself apart from the academic essay.

One main advantage was getting to know other members of the class better via the discussion forums. It then made it easier to contribute during [face to face] class discussions as it wasn't like sitting in a room full of strangers.

It helped me develop relationships with my fellow students – more so than in seminars as I felt people spoke more freely in the forums.

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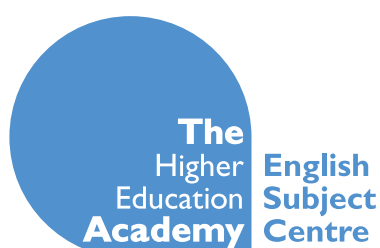
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Report Series

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Foreword

Christopher Ringrose
The University of Northampton

It was an MA module on 'Research Methods' that suggested to me how online discussion could transform a class. The students enrolled there had very varied research interests and methodological needs; most of them worked part-time and attended class one evening a week. By setting them specific limited on line discussion tasks, getting them to engage with each other's research issues and needs, and find their own voice within the group, the actual face-to-face evening classes were made more productive and the group cohesion stronger. That, in turn, made me wonder whether a pre-module discussion board to break the ice could also be productive.

Dialogue has always been seen as central to literary education, but this fine Good Practice Guide suggests that we need to rethink the contexts in which such dialogue can take place. Online discussion, together with blogs and wikis, provide spaces in which students can share insights, readings, discoveries and creative work. Such e-spaces are open 24 hours a day throughout the year and supplement the kinds of dialogue that take place in face-to-face seminars and workshops. In addition, the contributions on Creative Writing from Heather Beck and Michael Symmons Roberts demonstrate that they can be used to replace face-to-face workshops as part of a distance learning programme. Online discussion forums may, in fact, be of advantage to those students who feel they need more time for reflection before offering an opinion – particularly those who find that coming up with a critical response to other students' poetry and fiction in a conventional real-time workshop leaves them feeling rushed. Moreover, as many of the writers here make clear, technology-enhanced learning, far from downgrading academic discourse, puts the spotlight on students' writing skills, and their ability to subtly adapt their discourse to a variety of contexts and audiences. The formal academic essay remains central to what we do, but the examples of student work included here show how forums (like Stacy Gillis's on detective fiction at the University of Newcastle) can develop critical insight alongside an awareness of the influence of the observations of others. Teachers will find many examples here of the ways that 'writing communities' can be productive.

So, contrary to the view that Virtual Learning Environments are being superseded by a variety of independent Web2 technologies, I would agree with the one implied in this Good Practice Guide: that a number of the tools available on university VLEs have yet to be exploited to their full capacity. When one considers the nature of the subject and its extensive use of seminars and workshops and heuristic learning through discussion and practice (whether of literary critical and research skills, or creative writing) one wonders why the tools available on university networks are not employed more than they are. This excellent Subject Centre guide advocates the use of online discussion boards as an extension to the English and Creative Writing classroom, sets out their possibilities and shows how

they have been used in the UK by a number of skilled teachers. Its coverage of the topic is well organized in terms of design, moderation and assessment, and gives additional space to the special opportunities offered by this medium to creative writers.

I encourage you to let this guide make you think again, even if your previous experience of online discussion has been of an embarrassing dead end, petering out after a few entries by only the most committed students. It should convince you that, well designed and expertly moderated, it can add an extra dimension to dialogue between students and between tutors and students, and encourage research and experimentation. I wish I had been able to read this guide before my initial experiments with the medium. I would have been alerted to the following: (a) to work successfully, discussion forums must not appear half-hearted; they need to evidence genuine commitment and imagination on the part of the tutor; (b) as tutor-moderator, you don't have to go overboard and comment on every entry as it shows up. As Francis Wilson says in Section 2, if you are aiming at a "student-centred pedagogy", don't fuss – make your interventions focused and just sufficient to make clear your interest in the work underway; (c) there is no reason why contributions to boards cannot be summatively assessed, given the right strategies. I would add another lesson, learned in practice and from Gilly Salmon's useful books on E-tivities: that students need to be eased into the process of posting, through gentle introductory activities that establish their presence on the discussion board.

The layout of this guide is logical, comprehensive and clear, and I learned something from each section. The test of Benjamin Colbert's account of online discussion design is, perhaps, whether one would like to take up the challenge of the exercises for oneself. Benjamin's ten suggestions emerged successfully from this test for me: I can imagine subscribing to exchanges on textual analysis – on poetry, for example – or group problem-solving around new theoretical concepts or applications, or even problems of pedagogy in English Studies. The role play ideas are fun (I have heard Rosie Miles give a conference presentation on her students' Dickensian re-creative writing); the example of how one might use the Stowe landscape garden website made me aware of what could be done by way of online sources and their application to literary study. The suggested using and sharing of databases is also intriguing. In my role as student, I would of course take care to avoid 'cutting and pasting' information into my entries on the discussion board.

I hope that the work of Rosie Miles, Brett Lucas and the team will not only encourage individual English lecturers to experiment with on line discussion boards, but be a platform for Departments to establish a strategy for technology-enhanced learning, to vary the student experience, including such work wherever it is most appropriate, and avoiding duplication of tutor effort and student learning experiences.

Preface, or On the Virtual Couch with Ms E-Mentor

Dr Skeptikk, who teaches English at the University of Nether Popplewick, is keeping his weekly appointment…

Dr S: "…and I've been trying to use one of those Virtual Learning Environment Discussion Board things with my students recently. I told the class that after each session they can discuss the text we talked about that week online if they want to. At first there was some interest by about half the class, but it's now week six of the term and if they do still post something it's about *Eastenders*… I just set it up and let them get on with it, of course."

Ms E-Mentor: "Have you thought about giving them specific activities to work on?"

Dr S: "That's a slippery slope isn't it? How much time is it going to take me to do that? Have I told you before that I keep having a recurring dream in which my Dean of School issues an edict that all lecturers have to be permanently available 24/7 online and I am being bombarded by emails from students in my class called Joan Milton, Nigel Foucault and Timothy Beowulf? The problem with this VLE thing is that it could end up taking over my working life. I have too many other things to do."

Ms E-Mentor: "It's quite possible to set boundaries around the time you might give to developing and looking after a VLE activity."

Dr S: "I have another colleague who is using a VLE quite extensively in her course and she's even assessing what the students are doing. I mean…that's going too far. I'm sure if I looked my class are all making posts in some kind of abbreviated textspeak that won't help their development as English students at all. How can you assess that? Or think it's academically rigorous? I secretly suspect that this colleague is a bit of a techno-nerd in disguise, although she does keep it well hidden."

Ms E-Mentor: "A number of your colleagues in the English Studies community are assessing online discussion activities very successfully."

Dr S: "…and besides, I'm an English lecturer. I like books. I don't want to be staring at a screen all the time. I don't want my students to be doing that either. And if we all start using these online spaces too much computers will render us redundant."

Ms E-Mentor: "I think you'll find that your English colleagues using VLEs like books very much too. Detailed textual work and using a discussion board aren't incompatible activities – quite the opposite, in fact. And you'll also find that most of your colleagues using VLEs are using them alongside face-to-face teaching as a means of extending and enhancing the work they do there. A VLE discussion board is a space – a virtual space – in the same way that a classroom is a physical space. It's what you and your class do in it that matters. Can I gently suggest that for some self help you read this Guide…"

With apologies to Emily Toth of Ms Mentor fame. See Emily Toth, *Ms Mentor's New and Ever More Impeccable Advice for Women and Men in Academia* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

Introduction: Virtually There – Online Discussion Activities in English Studies

This is a virtual world. This is a world inventing itself.
Daily, new landmasses form and then submerge.
New continents of thought break off from the mainland.
Some benefit from a trade wind, some sink without a
trace. Others are like Atlantis – fabulous, talked about,
but never found.

Found objects wash up on the shores of my computer.
Tin cans and old tyres mix with the pirate's stuff.
The buried treasure is really there, but caulked and
outlandish. Hard to spot because unfamiliar, and few
of us can see what has never been named.

Jeanette Winterson, *The PowerBook* (2000)[1]

Many of our current and future students in English studies have grown up and come of age with the virtual world, the world constantly inventing itself, as an integral part of their lives. This Good Practice Guide to Online Discussion, which focusses on Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), enters the non-virtual world at a moment when Web 2.0 tools and applications – social networking sites, wikis and blogs, for example – have become the stuff of everyday internet use. Whether you are or not, your students are all on Facebook. To paraphrase Sven Birkerts, in ways that would no doubt make him weep, next to Web 2.0 applications the scheme of things represented by VLEs and their sometimes slightly clunky interfaces may look stodgy and dull… If VLEs were then, Web 2.0 tools are now.[2]

However, in this *Guide* we very much want to suggest that VLEs, and the multitude of online activities which can use the 'learning spaces' within VLEs for discussion, exchange, and group activity, still have a valid and valuable contribution to make to teaching and learning within our subject. VLEs still offer a distinctive opportunity for learning within the educational environment, and increasingly commercial, open source and in-house platforms are developing the means to incorporate Web 2.0 style tools within them. The asynchronous space in a VLE is often referred to as a **discussion board** or **discussion forum** (both terms are used in this *Guide*); the synchronous or 'real time' space, a **chat room**. Students and tutors can access discussion boards and post messages and replies at any time, from University, home, or work. The asynchronous nature of the space is one of its particular strengths. As discussions develop, students reflect on the material accruing, conduct research online or in libraries, returning to the discussion board more informed and ready to share new insights with others in their study community. The discussion board expands and dissolves the walls of the classroom and throws away the clock (the worst enemy of tutors when things are going well). It encourages students to consider learning as an open-ended, collaborative process, informed by research.

The increasing importance and availability of online study tools – bibliographical search engines, databases, scholarly websites, and e-books – enhances the value of VLE discussion boards. It is a simple matter to embed links to online resources within discussion activities – for instance, helping students to distinguish peer-reviewed from untrustworthy internet sources – or to design activities that teach students how to exploit research tools. Digitisation of archives and library holdings, the availability of online media for fiction and poetry, and the rise of new literary genres – e.g. the travel weblog – mean that English studies will need to keep apace with the technology that is transforming it, using these tools to critical advantage and teaching students to apply analytic techniques self-reflectively to the proliferation of texts and hypertexts.

This is not to say that English lecturers must revolutionise what they do or invest heavily in IT knowledge; the skills needed to operate a VLE are easily mastered. In fact, most of us who use discussion boards do so as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, traditional methods of textual and contextual study. The VLE can be another space for achieving ends similar to seminars and lectures, is advantageous to shyer students (this is well documented in e-learning research), and certainly offers all students experience in information gathering and reflection. Students may develop analytic skills more informally than in an essay but often more rigorously than in a face-to-face seminar. To be sure, outside of distance learning contexts VLEs cannot adequately replace seminars. Spontaneity, working face-to-face and oral skills will always be part of English studies. But VLEs emphasise the literary relations between individuals: online, we are what we write. Style becomes more important than personality; or, rather, students learn to express their personalities through style. Ideas must stand up to the grammar in which they are expressed.

Within distance learning contexts, the discussion board and chatroom bring together students who might not be able physically to occupy the same space, opening up the possibility for national and even international collaboration (see Heather Beck's and Michael Symmons Roberts' case studies for examples of exactly this in Chapter 4). We might extend this rubric to include students with disabilities (although more work needs to be done in accommodating the visually impaired). Traditional classrooms too can benefit from distance learning techniques, for example, in online conferencing, in which experts exchange ideas with students, or students on related modules interact online.

In this *Guide*, we take these benefits for granted – that online discussion activities can both reinforce and enhance what and how we teach in English studies, and can help drive the discipline forward in the twenty-first century. What we present here is the distillation of our experience at the University of Wolverhampton and of other colleagues pioneering VLE discussion activities in English studies and Creative Writing in the United Kingdom. In Chapter 1, 'Design', we explore how

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1 Jeanette Winterson, *The PowerBook* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 63-64.

2 In Sven Birkerts' *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994), the author laments what he perceives as the passing of the era of print and the concomitant capacity of human beings for sustained reading: "Next to the new technologies, the scheme of things represented by print and the snail-paced linearity of the reading act looks stodgy and dull. Many educators say that our students are less and less able to read, or analyze, or write with clarity and purpose. Who can blame the students? Everything they meet with in the world around them gives the signal: That was then, and electronic communications are now." p. 119.

to integrate discussion into modules and programmes; how to design activities; and give examples of activities that have been used successfully in English studies. Chapter 2, 'Moderation', discusses the role of the tutor in facilitating online discussion and in providing feedback to participants. Chapter 3, 'Assessment', provides detailed information for those who choose to integrate discussion activities into modules as assessed components, including recommendations on assessment criteria and feedback. Chapter 4 focuses on the use of discussion boards and a chatroom within Creative Writing. Whilst we do not explicitly cover English Language in this guide, colleagues working in this area will find many of the examples and advice useful.

The overwhelming majority of what is presented in this *Guide* comes directly out of actual teaching experience. The English Department at the University of Wolverhampton began using online activities in 2003-04, introducing pilot schemes in Years 1 and 3. Within two years VLEs were being used to teach and assess students across all three years of the English programme. Eventually Wolverhampton colleagues working in the cognate subject of Creative and Professional Writing, and later in English Language, also incorporated discussion forums into their own modules. The case studies included in this report suggest only

a small sample of how other colleagues have been achieving results similar to ours through their own methods. Throughout this period of discovery, the overwhelmingly enthusiastic expressions of student support for such use of online activities in our programmes has been an important and consistent part of our motivation for producing this *Guide*.

This *Guide* also arises from a research project based at the University of Wolverhampton from 2005-07, funded by the Higher Education Academy English Subject Centre, and also drawing on the results of an online questionnaire hosted by the Subject Centre as well as a day-conference at Wolverhampton on 25 May 2006 on 'Creating and Assessing Online Discussion Forums in English Studies'.[3] We have included the report on the questionnaire as an appendix and a report on the conference is already in the public domain.[4] We hope that the ideas contained within this *Guide* will encourage English colleagues and many others beyond our discipline (for much of what is said here applies to any pedagogical uses of discussion boards and the creation of successful online activities, whatever your subject) to consider that using discussion boards can be satisfying teaching and stimulating for learning. Trust us. We're telling you virtual stories.

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3 Slides and presentations from this event can be viewed at: **www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/events/event_detail.php?event_index=178**

4 See Rosie Miles, 'Research, Reflection and Response: Creating and Assessing Online Discussion Forums in English Studies'. *English Subject Centre Newsletter 12* (April 2007), pp. 32-35. **www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/newsletters/newsissue12/miles.htm**

1. Design

Benjamin Colbert, University of Wolverhampton

1.1 Online Discussion and Programme Design

Online discussion activities can be integrated into the modular structure in several ways. Some tutors use them to *prepare* students for seminars – developing material, discussion questions, and fact sheets collaboratively that will then be brought into the classroom, where tutors can help demonstrate the links between these preliminary discussions and module goals and outcomes. We more customarily use discussion activities to extend seminars and lectures, giving students hands-on applications that can deepen, or fruitfully complicate their understanding of our inquiry. In this way, the discussion board can also extend the reading list of a module, as students bring seminar questions to bear on works they have found for themselves.

In its post-seminar incarnation, the discussion board has been used as a student-led, interactive notice board, where students might post summaries of seminars, generate their own essay questions or topics, solicit commentary and feedback from tutors and colleagues, and share writing advice. The discussion board also becomes a valuable tool for revision insofar as discussion itself becomes a resource that might include reading lists and links, activities and practices, set tasks, and the like.

Although many use discussion space in this informal manner, we have had success in integrating discussion activities into formal assessment patterns (see chapter 3), encouraging students to feel that this kind of writing is as valuable in its way as other more traditional expository forms. The assessed discussion board also allows us to get students to reflect on a wider range of readings than they might consider if assessed by an essay alone, with online discussion often helping them to develop questions and approaches of direct relevance to their essay research.

Discussion boards may be used to advantage across an English programme. Discussion activities can function as a means of building first-year students' confidence in using IT even as we encourage them to develop their subject knowledge. An early training session ensures that all students grasp the basics – logging in, posting messages, and replying – while activities in subsequent weeks may grow in complexity (thus, an early activity we have used, involves a group writing exercise in building narratives from varying points of view, which also doubles up as practice in building discussion strands in an orderly fashion). We also use Year 1 activities to introduce the kinds of databases that we would like students to visit as a first port of call throughout their studies – for example, *Literature Online* (LION), the *MLA International Bibliography, Oxford English Dictionary* (OED Online), and the *Dictionary of National Biography* (DNB Online).

At upper levels we use these resources in tandem with library-based research and online repositories, such as *The Victorian Web* or the British Women Romantic Poets Project at University of California, Davis,[5] assuming that students are ready for more self-directed learning. Students also take more responsibility for shaping and directing study within discussion groups rather than taking their

cues from the tutor. Discussion boards at these levels can be a way of getting students to engage with reading for the entire module and beyond. (For an example of an integrated approach to VLE use at MA level, see Heather Beck's Case Study, p.35.)

1.2 Design Tools Basics

Most VLE software systems will share most of the following basic design features:

- VLE home page or 'course page' for non-interactive material, e.g. posting of module guides, assignments, lecture notes, handouts, etcetera.

- Interactive space for students to post messages and reply to others (bulletin board, discussion board, forum, etc.).

- 'Post / edit' feature where students can compose new messages, insert images and sound clips, or embed html links, as well as edit or delete past postings (Note: some systems omit the edit / delete functions, although we would argue that these have important pedagogic uses and should be options that tutors can enable or disable).

- Administrator functions that allow tutors to create workgroups (accessible only by those assigned to them).

- Administrators' view that allows tutors to monitor / participate in all forum activities, edit or delete student postings, and view postings by discussion strand, by date of posting, or by individual students.

Within the interactive space, our focus in this section, the most basic building block for all successful discussion is the Post/ Reply feature. Students can post a message that, for example, responds to a discussion prompt posted previously by the tutor; they can also post replies to each other. When two or more students post and reply to each other, a discussion 'strand' is formed. Several strands can develop in tandem, or new strands can develop out of existing ones (Note: it is important to make sure that students grasp the difference between posting a 'New Message' and 'Replying' so that they do not unnecessarily clutter a discussion board with new strands.)

VLEs offer opportunities for whole class or 'global' discussion as well as 'workgroups' limited to assigned participants and tutors. Global and Workgroup discussions can also work in tandem. Workgroups constructed by the tutor/administrator are visible only to those who have been assigned to them, providing a sense of privacy to the participants (for example, we have used this feature in a large creative writing module to allow small groups of students to read and discuss each other's work outside of seminar as a preparation for specific in-class activities.) In both Global and Workshop forums, students and tutors can upload text files (e.g. copies of student work in progress, etcetera.) presentations, or images into folders that in turn might be used as material to augment or supplement discussion.

Administrator / Tutor monitoring features, finally, are crucial for successful e-moderation and assessment (see chapters 2 and 3, respectively). These include group email functions (that allow one to contact individuals, workgroups, or the entire class);

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5 See The Victorian Web, **www.victorianweb.org/**; British Women Romantic Poets Project at UC Davis, **http://digital.lib.ucdavis.edu/projects/bwrp/** [accessed 13/07/09].

discussion activity viewing options (by individual postings, by strand, and by date of posting); and delete / edit command over all postings. Some VLEs (e.g. Moodle) allow tutors and students to see who is using the system in real time as well, enabling better communication regarding activities, assistance, or matters arising.

1.3 Effective Design

Designing online discussion activities is analogous to designing small group work activities in seminars; tables and chairs are replaced by the discussion board and conversation by postings and replies. In both instances, the tutor may set up prompting questions and students work towards a solution with reference to texts, their own experiences, and dialogue with one another.

The asynchronous nature of online activities, however, potentially adds a research dimension to the activity. Students can search for information in libraries or online, in texts and databases, bringing the fruits of their enquiry to bear on the activity, while many activities embed a research element within them. VLE users in English studies all agree, however, that successful discussion depends on setting open-ended questions. Questions should encourage students to inform discussion with research data, rather than merely reporting on their research (over-emphasis on data can lead to students cutting and pasting material from sources into their postings rather than reflecting on their reading).

Here are some additional tips:

- Provide scaffolding: for example, identify a clearly-defined space where discussion folders will be posted (some VLE platforms allow one to embed this in the 'Home' or 'Course' page) and make sure instructions are available to students on how to access and participate in the forums or individual activities.

- Make discussion a stated aim for activities and reinforce this through repetition (we often specify minimum numbers of postings and replies per activity).

- See as students see: make sure instructions and questions are clear, unambiguous, and jargon-free.

- Decide on a format for the presentation of discussion activities/tasks (e.g. embedded in the web page or downloadable as a text file?)

- Test (or update) links to websites and databases (URLs change or are modified; institutional subscriptions may also be altered while we're not looking!).

- Know how a website or database should be interrogated, including steps needed to get from the link to the data areas you want students to investigate. Build directions into your instructions.

- Be explicit, using bullet points rather than continuous prose if necessary. Students should be able to take in the main points at a glance. Use bold to underline key points.

- If using a downloadable text document to present your exercise, try to make it as accessible and user-friendly as possible.[6]

- Be creative – take advantage of the multimedia possibilities of online discussion by embedding images and illustrations, audio- or video-clips, or attractive text features in the environments you are working with (e.g. VLE homepages, discussion activity instructions, or discussion activities themselves).

- Keep it dynamic, for example, by changing the image on the homepage each week or providing spaces for students to post quotations, images, sound clips related to the module or the week's themes.

- Personalise your forums, discussion activity assignments, and content, so that these emerge from and contain the spirit of the module (humour and wit are advantages). Here's what the Welcome page to one forum looks like for a Year 3 module on Eighteenth-Century Literature:

Welcome!

You've entered MRS. MIGGINS' AUTHENTIC 18TH-CENTURY COFFEE-HOUSE! (Mind your heads, and wipe your feet!) It stands in the shadow of what was the first Hanging Tree in London – before the fun shifted to Tyburn – on the site of the old Debtors' Prison, just outside Cripplegate.

Because of an unfortunate accident in the Kitchen with the Deep-Fat Wilde Boare Fryer, we will have to get by initially without any of Mrs. M's famous sticky Buns (with their dubious Raisins), but the word about Towne amongst the Learned and Discerning suggests that this might be no bad thing! Intellectual Congress will take place in the FORUM (see below for directions on how to find it), with new Activities posted throughout the Module. Listen for the Bell to catch the details from the Towne Cryer (or – if you are a heavy Sleeper, consult the 'Weekly Programme' section of your Module Guide, and watch for Announcements).

Welcome page to a discussion forum on a Year 3 Eighteenth-century literature module

1.4 Types of Online Activities

It's always worthwhile setting up informal spaces – off-topic forums or a chatroom – where students can meet at any time during the term to discuss anything about the module or matters arising from it. What follows here, however, is a list, by no means definitive, of more formal online activities that we and other colleagues around the country have used in our VLE provision.

1.4.1 Textual Analysis

(students read a posted or assigned text and respond to / initiate discussion questions)

By far the most common VLE discussion activity is simple textual analysis, in which tutors will post discussion questions on set texts (and the texts themselves, if appropriate). Students may be asked to respond citing textual evidence for their opinions – and be encouraged to respond to each other by supplementing, building on, or politely contesting ideas.

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6 For more information about creating accessible documentation please refer to the JISC TechDis Accessibility Essentials series: **www.techdis.ac.uk/index.php?p=3_20**

As a pre-seminar activity, Textual Analysis can yield more sophisticated engagement with the reading; as a post-seminar activity, more extensive reflection on problems raised. In either instance, the asynchronous nature of the VLE allows respondents to follow up textual leads, conduct research, reflect on others' ideas and bring all of this into the conversation.

Instructions

PRO Forum 1 – Milton's Rhetoric

This inaugural session of the **Paradise Revisited Online forum** will build on the work begun in seminar on Milton's rhetorical language by extending the focus to include another passage of the epic.

In **Book IV, lines 32-113**, we see/hear Satan in a very different context: i.e., without an audience for which to perform.

Re-read this section, and then post your response to the following:

a) **What are the most significant ways in which this passage is linked to the passage we analysed in seminar – Bk. I, 84-124?** How does your knowledge of one section influence or enhance your interpretation of the other? What questions are raised by this dialogue between the two passages? Be specific in your use of textual evidence, and provide the relevant line numbers for quotations.

 [**Note**: Use the '**POST**' command to publish this part of the activity.]

b) **After you have posted your own findings, reply to the posting of at least one colleague – here using the 'REPLY' command.**

Deadline: 6 days from assignment's posting – so midnight Wed. 24th.

Example of Textual Analysis from a Year 2 Classics in Literature module

1.4.2 Group Problem Solving

(student workgroups collaborate on set tasks)

While many tutors prefer to engage the entire class in a single online discussion, most platforms allow tutors to divide students into smaller workgroups or learning sets. These subgroups can then be responsible for developing research projects or sub-tasks, communicating with each other online, and perhaps reporting back to the larger group in seminar. The discussion board thus provides a set of minutes, a point of reference when writing up reports or providing feedback.

For an example please see the Case Study by Christina Lee: Virtual Vikings, p.13.

1.4.3 Group Writing

(students 'build' texts together)

Another application for the reflective responses that are enhanced by the asynchronous mode of the VLE is in group writing exercises, where students learn about form, register, style, technique, etcetera, by building texts together; for example, contributing lines to a sonnet, a ballad, or a villanelle, or developing plotting and characterization in a collaborative novel or short story.

While there are obvious uses for this kind of activity in Creative Writing modules, we have used it in Year 1 to reinforce a discussion about narrative point of view and character development, while at the same time giving students practice in orderly online strand building. In the example that follows, we've provided three alternative beginnings for a sequel to Angela Carter's *Wise Children*, each from a different point of view, and asked students to continue the narrative. Their additions respond not only to each other but to the original novel itself, reinforcing their comprehension of major themes, motifs, and characterization.

STRAND ONE [Tutor's posting initiating the narrative]
W., F. P. @ 10/10/2007 09:50:30
Reply | Edit | Delete | Notify

STAGE LEFT: or, Exit Pursued by Bear

(The Sequel to *Wise Children*)

 by The Wolf Literary Collective

'I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man in the world. Marry your auntie instead', Tiffany had barked at Tristram, before riding off in the taxi into the night, and the rest of her life. It wasn't long, though, before her newly-found sense of independence began to fall as flat as yesterday's champagne. Single, pregnant, and without prospects, she quickly went through the money the pawn-broker had given her for the mink stole. She knew she could never go back to the Chance-Hazards, even if Dora and Nora were good fun. 'But that begs the question,' she pondered, 'what next?…'

RE: STRAND ONE
B., L. @ 10/10/2007 12:50:07
Reply | Edit | Delete | Notify

Of course she had many valuable attributes, but these wouldn't last long. What good was the catchphrase, 'lashings of lolly', without Tristram or the television show. Her sultry yet innocent appearance would only cut it so far when the baby bump would start to show and those god forsaken motherly hormones would sweep in and take over. 'Nora and Dora always said I'd make a great dancer if i put my mind to it', no quicker had this thought flashed through her mind then her fingers were frantically dialling every agent her memory could recall.

RE: STRAND ONE
B., N. E. @ 10/10/2007 14:04:57
Reply | Edit | Delete | Notify

It wasn't easy for Tiff to try and find an agent after all that had happened. However she always kept in mind the faith that dear old Nora and Dora had always shown in her, after all Dora had always said 'she was born for the stage'. All those memories of rolling back the carpet in the big front room and learning ballet and tap came back to her and inspired her to show everyone what she was made of. All her hard work paid off and she was taken on by an agent who saw the potential that she had to offer. Although she could only work for a short while, she made a big hit in the world of dancing and was signed up for a show that would not start to well after she had given birth. Things were finally looking up for her and only time could tell what would happen next.

Example of Group Writing from a Year 1 Introduction to Literature module

1.4.4 Peer Assessment

(students discuss and critique each other's written work)

VLE discussion boards are especially effective in mirroring and supplementing in-class peer-review workshops, in which students share and learn to critique each others' work as well as developing their writing skills through revision. We use peer assessment on creative writing modules to prepare students for in-class peer-editing workshops. In the following example, we put students in small online groups, or 'Critique Groups'. Students then post original work in Word, download each others' work and, using a peer-reviewer's guide, post responses in the same forum. These responses then form the basis for structuring in-class workshops.

Instructions

Author's duty

- Post your piece, max. 2 pages, double-spaced, wide margins, in the appropriate Critique Group folder (click Upload)
- by 4pm of the Monday preceding the travel writing class

Responder's duty

- Print off a copy of every piece posted in your Critique Group folder.
- Read the piece twice, the first time simply as a reader. Put a tick in the margin next to anything you really appreciated.
- Now make short comments in the margin, and longer ones related to HOW IT WORKS, at the end.

Post annotated feedback by Wednesday midnight

- Bring What it is; How it Works, into class on Thursday, to be handed back to author.
- There will be group discussion of every piece.
- It's feed forward, not criticism, so don't be nervous.

Example of Peer Assessment from a Year 2 Travel Writing module.

1.4.5 Structured Response

(students post replies following set rules, e.g. email games)

Gilly Salmon refers to a technique of electronic interaction that she calls 'email games'. For example, she describes a simple game to help students write a précis. Here, students post 50 word summaries of a 100 word passage, then 25 word summaries of the 50-word versions and so on, perhaps reducing the original to a sound byte or a set of key words.[7] We have

mainly used structured response in Group Writing (see Type 3 above) or Role Play (see 1.4.6 below), but it is mentioned here as a potential technique, awaiting the imaginative applications of users of this guide.

1.4.6 Role play

(students assume personae and respond in character to a given situation)

Role Play activities are among the most creative approaches to teaching literature online using standard VLE platforms. Here students are invited to extend fictional worlds by assuming character personae and by responding in character to a variety of literary (and extra-literary) situations constructed by the designer. Students might, for example, assume personae from different literary texts and then explore by this means how characters would respond outside the contexts supplied by their (original) authors. This is what Jerome McGann has referred to as 'deformative criticism',[8] learning by manipulating and transforming rather than 'decoding' texts, and is the basis for sophisticated stand-alone programmes such as the IVANHOE Game, developed by the University of Virginia's Applied Research in Patacriticism workshop.[9]

We've tended to use Role Play as a cumulative way to apply research at the end of a module. For example, on our Introduction to Literature, which treats texts by Angela Carter, Blake, and Shakespeare, students are invited to the online 'Twelfth Night Saturnalia on the Echoing Green' (suitably occurring just before or after the Christmas holidays), where their characters arrive in disguise and trade gossip about each other. In a similar holiday vein, students from The Victorian Vision, a Year 3 module, enter a 'Victorian Christmas' forum as characters studied during the term – John Thornton, Lady Audley, Krook, Peepy, Heathcliff, the Lady of Shalott, etcetera – and let each other know what they will be up to over Christmas (the students have first to research Victorian holiday customs and practices, and are expected to exploit what they know about their character from the text s/he inhabits).[10] In another Year 3 module, Eighteenth-Century Literature, students are invited in character to a fancy dress party by the fourth Lord Burlington at his country estate, Chiswick House, on 23rd December 1785, held in honour of Lord Burlington's friend William Wilberforce. The partygoers bring a gift for Burlington, a book for Wilberforce, and make a pitch for a favourite Club or Society to anyone who will listen. Here are the instructions for posting:

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7 Gilly Salmon, *E-tivities: The Key to Active Online Learning* (London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2005), pp. 132-4.

8 Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 109.

9 See IVANHOE, **www.ivanhoegame.org/**. The designers describe the site thus: 'An online collaborative playspace, IVANHOE exposes the indeterminacy of humanities texts to role-play and performative intervention by students at all levels' ('About', **www.ivanhoegame.org/wordpress/?page_id=2** [accessed 13/07/09]

10 See Rosie Miles, *Text. Play. Space: Creative Online Activities in English Studies*, a case study on the English Subject Centre Website: **www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/casestudies/technology/textplayspace.php**> [accessed 13/07/09]

You have been invited to a Christmas party by the 4th Lord Burlington at his country estate, Chiswick House, on 23rd December 1785. Although the occasion is officially linked to the seasonal festivities, the party is actually being held in honour of Lord Burlington's friend William Wilberforce.

In keeping with the party's 'fancy dress' theme, you should come as either a character from or author of a text studied on the module. Though this would normally make it difficult for some of us to get past his Lordship's security, Chiswick will be an 'open' House for the day, welcoming those from all classes and backgrounds – especially fitting, given Mr. Wilberforce's wide range of humanitarian interests.

First Posting

Perform each of the following at the party:

a) Use your alias in the title of your posting.

b) Present Lord Burlington with a Christmas gift. He has suggested that 'something for the garden' would be particularly welcome.

c) Join the other guests in their efforts to replace Mr. Wilberforce's library – recently consumed by fire – by presenting him with a book. The description of your donation should meet the following criteria:

- The volume should be one that really existed on 23rd December 1785.

- It should NOT appear on any of the following: your module guide; handout materials accompanying lectures; the further reading list attached to the essay assignment sheet, or in your essay.

- It should include the full title, author's name, year of publication, and a brief (1-2 sentence) description explaining why you think this text will interest Mr. Wilberforce.

d) Imagine you are the recruiting secretary for one of the many Clubs or Societies springing up in the 18th Century, and that you hope to recruit some new members at the party. Draft a brief script which you can use to introduce yourself to fellow guests, and which can function as a 'sales pitch' for your organisation. You can represent an actual Society authentic to the period, or create one of your own.

Your description should include the essentials necessary to establish the organisation's identity (e.g., when founded; where located; its purpose; accomplishments; noteworthy members, etc.), along with any other details you think will make it seem interesting or attractive to other revellers.

Second Posting

Now respond to at least one other colleague's posting, offering your reaction (questions? suggestions? indignant objections??) to their recruiting invitation.

Third Posting

Before you are done for this week's activity, respond to at least one of the colleagues who have commented on your own posting. If no one has, then make another response to a new colleague's posting.

Example instructions for a Role Play from a Year 3 Eighteenth-Century Literature module

1.4.7 'Open' and 'Closed' Database Analysis

(students search the web or interrogate a database and respond to / initiate discussion questions)

Open and Closed Database analysis activities, give students guidance on how effectively to interrogate and apply information gathered from databases and websites. By 'open', we refer to activities in which students must search for and identify appropriate data sources, usually but not always on the internet; by 'closed', we refer to activities in which students are asked to use a particular database (e.g. Dictionary of National Biography Online, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO), Literature Online (LION), the Old Bailey Online, William Blake Archive).

We have used 'open' database techniques in several ways. In Year 1 Introduction to English, students track down and discuss intertextual references found in Angler Carter's richly allusive novel, *Wise Children*, learning how to use search engines (e.g. Google Advanced Book Search) and databases (e.g. LION) in the process. In Year 3 on Eighteenth-Century Literature we ask students to extend a seminar discussion on 'the sporting gentlemen' by finding examples of sporting literature in the eighteenth century and discussing representations of gender, class, and national identity ('Sport and the Gentle Classes'); in The Victorian Vision, students supplement their study of poetry by finding examples of Victorian songs (using the Gilbert and Sullivan Archive, the British Library's Victorian Popular Music site, the Victorian Women Writers Project, etcetera), citing and discussing lyrics (and constructing a resource bank of Victorian songs in the process – see 1.4.8 below).

Closed database activities, in Year 1, show students how to use the OED to recover meanings and associations of words and phrases no longer current in standard English (students reread selected poems from *Songs of Innocence and Experience* based on their research into identified vocabulary). In the third year we have used this type of activity frequently on Eighteenth-Century Literature, a period well-endowed with reputable online research materials. Thus we have students supplement an in-class discussion of criminal biography by comparing fictional representations of crime with the reports (sometimes lurid indeed) of prosecutors and witnesses as recorded in the Old Bailey Online site; students visit the 'Virtual gallery' at the William Hogarth and 18th-Century Print Culture website and compare Hogarth's satires on urban corruption with John Gay's vision in *The Beggar's Opera* (the course text); and, in 'Stowe and the Scene of Man' (see Example below), students use a virtual tour of the grounds at Stowe as a springboard for discussing the social and aesthetic implications of landscape design.

MMC Session 5 – Stowe and The Scene of Man

This session of Mrs. Miggins' Coffee House Forum will focus on the country house (as exemplified by the estate at Stowe), and what it can tell us about 18th-century attitudes towards art, nature, and society.

First, you will need to visit the **Stowe Website**, click on the link for 'Stowe Landscape Gardens Website', and take a walk around. (As a result of an unfortunate misunderstanding on a previous visit involving Mrs. M., a Ming vase and some chewing tobacco, we will almost certainly not be invited into the house.)

To orientate yourself, we recommend that you start your tour by consulting the 'Character Areas Tour', which will give you an overview of the estate and the names of its major parts. You can find your bearings with the help of the 'Virtual Walking Tour', but make sure you check out the 'Virtual Reality Panoramas', which is a spectacular feature.

Take a thorough look around and enjoy yourself. Then hop in a coach (or on top of one, if you can't afford the posh seats) and make you way back to Mrs. M.'s. When you get here, post a response to the following question:

1) To what extent does Stowe engage with the ideal of a 'harmony between discordant opposites'? If the country house embodies the rural idyll or a secluded paradise for a select few, does it also reflect any awareness of other states of reality, other narratives outside that frame of reference (i.e., where: the concerns of 'city' impinge upon those of the 'country'; the colonised peek out behind the trappings of Empire; the lower classes counterbalance nobility; the discourse of new science competes with classical tradition, etc.).

Use the excellent tools provided on the website to assist you in identifying what you are seeing (e.g., the links for 'Buildings & Monuments', the '**Glossary of Gardening Terms**', the '**History of the Gardens**' pages, etc.). And *if any parts of Pope's poems 'Epistle to Burlington' or 'Windsor-Forest' are useful to you for framing the discussion, use those too (giving the line numbers, of course).*

2) And finally, in addition to your own posting, reply to at least one other person's contribution as well (and remember to USE THE 'REPLY' button when doing so).

Deadline for submission: midnight of Monday 5th November.

Example of a Closed Database Activity from a Year 3 Eighteenth-Century Literature module

1.4.8 Resource Bank

(lecturer / student develops resources related to a text or topic and students discuss or comment on them)

Resource banks might consist of images, texts, timelines, or weblinks (e.g. to e-book passages, images, databases) constructed around a particular theme, author, topic, period, genre or context. The process of constructing such a resource bank, particularly as a group project, itself can be a rewarding learning experience.

As the instruction below for an activity on a Year 3 Victorian Literature module shows, we have used virtual spaces for students to store / upload texts, weblinks and images, making them accessible to the entire class and underpinning the discussion exercises that ensue. Note how the instructions provide technical, 'how-to', details specific to the VLE platform.

Victorian Vision Online Session B
(Monday 8th October – Sunday 14th October 2007)

Exercise One
Welcome to **VVO Session B**. We're going to try two exercises for this session. First of all we're going to create a bank of Pre-Raphaelite images and generate some discussion about them. So here are the instructions:

1. **Using the www, find an image by a Pre-Raphaelite painter**, or by another artist whose work is related/associated with the Pre-Raphaelites. There are numerous ways to do this. One is to use **Google's Image Search Engine** and just type in the name of a painter or (if you know it) the title of a painting. If possible, try to locate your image on a website that is (a) **reputable** and (b) **tells you something about the image**. Under the 'Weblinks' section on VVO I have also offered a number of Pre-Raphaelite-related pages which can offer you lots of leads as well.

2. Once you have found your image, you need to **write down the web address for that page**. It's at the top of your screen. Make sure you write it down accurately! [N.B. You don't need the http:// bit at the beginning]. Alternatively, hold your cursor over the area where the web address is and **right click** then click **Copy**.

3. Now you're going to load your weblink into VVO, so go into **TOOLS** at the top, then **SHARED URLS**. You should see a folder entitled 'The Pre-Raphaelites'. Click on the icon on the right (if you hold your cursor over this icon it will say 'Add URL' so you know it's the right one). **IGNORE** the 'Add a Base URL' and 'Add a Base Folder' blue buttons.

4. Type your chosen web address exactly in the 'Location' box. If you right clicked and copied then hold your cursor over the Location box, right click and press **Paste**. Then give your weblink a title in the box above. I suggest this takes the form of: **Artist's name [:] title of painting**. Now click Save. Your weblink should be added to the Pre-Raphaelite folder, with your name beside it.

5. Well done! The second part of this exercise is then to take yourself into the 'Pre-Raphaelite Painting' Forum (**TOOLS > GROUP FOLDER > GLOBAL > PRE-RAPHAELITE PAINTING > FORUM**) and post a message to your classmates telling them a little bit about your painting and what interests you about it. Again, use the Artist's name: title of painting in your subject line. Over the week take a look at the growing list of shared URLS, and return to the Forum if you can, and respond to a few of your classmates' postings once you've seen their images.

6. **Remember** that it's always possible to print out anything that you are looking at online (including on WOLF) by right clicking and then pressing **Print**. It is likely that you will want to write a few things down before you post your message about your painting. Maybe you've found out something interesting about your painting from some of the other links that you'd like to tell us about…or from some books on the PRs.

7. You may also like to try **inserting your weblink actually into your Forum message**. You can either type the full web address and it should automatically become a live link once you hit the Return key, or you can do the following:

• In your Forum message box highlight the text that you want to become the live weblink.

• Click on the weblink icon (second from left: chain links)

• Type the web address accurately in the URL box.

• Give it a title (N.B. this won't affect your originally highlighted text)

• Click 'OK'.

Example of a Resource Bank from a Year 3 Victorian Vision module

1.4.9 Live Chatroom / Real time

(Students 'chat' in real time with each other and/or experts)

While most VLE activities are asynchronous – meaning that students visit the forum at any time in the activity period – there is also the opportunity for narrowing the activity period sufficiently to ensure that students are responding to each other in or closer to 'real time'. Tutors and visiting experts, too, can make themselves available at specific times to answer questions, participate in discussions, or work with students. In theory, guests from other institutions and other countries might join a discussion at specified times, although this would be subject institutionally to IT access policies. (See Christina Lee's account of an interactive lecture using a chatroom in her 'Virtual Vikings' case study below; Michael Symmons Roberts' case study also includes an example of a chat room being used on a Creative Writing MA, p. 38).

1.4.10 Blog / Learning Log

(students post on set or shifting subjects in the manner of a weblog)

The above discussion activity designs have assumed for the most part a limited activity period, but there is of course no reason that the activity period shouldn't be extended, perhaps for the duration of a module. The forum might thus become a space for blogging (or developing a learning log), where students could post reflections on a set or developing subject, with fellow students responding at any point. This kind of blogging itself might become a resource, a record of reactions, and the formation of more complex/complicated considerations of an idea.

1.4.11 Multi-part Activity

(students participate in an activity that combines design features)

Of course, the foregoing design features might be and very often are combined. Any design activity might contain a 'Real Time hour' (1.4.9), for example, in which a tutor or guest is available to interact with students. Role Play (1.4.6) might involve research that involves interrogating open or closed databases (1.4.7) or a resource bank (1.4.8) and the collaborative aspect of this might be said to be a more complex version of Group Problem Solving (1.4.2). Almost all the above activities, furthermore, contain at some point basic Textual Analysis (1.4.1). Similarly, activities might be designed consecutively and cumulatively, for example, with one week's Database exercise setting up another week's Blog.

1.5 Conclusion

We hope that the above examples will inspire users of this *Guide* to develop ideas for their own modules, perhaps even developing discussion activities that we have not foreseen. New technologies will no doubt suggest useful modifications (e.g. using wiki platforms to enhance the text building tools in Group Writing discussion activities) and some might find it pedagogically advantageous to set more advanced students the task of designing their own online discussion activities. In this way, the VLE becomes more than a repository for course materials; it becomes a forum for active learning, where students and tutors meet in virtual spaces that complement (without replacing) the more traditional classroom and library. The technical components of VLE discussion boards are easily mastered by tutor and student alike, so investment of time for effective and creative design at the outset – as we hope the examples here have shown – can make a valuable and lasting contribution to teaching and learning in modules and throughout English programmes.

Case Study: Virtual Vikings: Delivering an Interdisciplinary Year 2 Module

Christina Lee, University of Nottingham

Dr Christina Lee's research interests are in the impact of migration on the formation of England and Englishness in the Early Middle Ages, as well as in attitudes towards disease and disability during this period. She has published on food and drink as markers of cultural identity (*Feasting the Dead*, Boydell and Brewer, 2007), as well as leprosy, attitudes towards the impaired and female historiography. As one of two Principal Investigators on the project Genes of Gallgoídil: Migration of Irish, Hiberno-Norse and other Gaelic-speaking populations in the Viking Age she tries to get geneticists and linguists talking to one another.

Example of a blog-type activity from a Restoration and Eighteenth-century writing module at Aberystwyth University. (Screenshot courtesy of Louise Holmwood Marshall).

The School of English Studies at Nottingham has an established research reputation in Viking Studies, i.e. in the languages, literature and material culture of the Scandinavian world circa 700-1200, which includes the study of the impact of Old Norse on the English language and the reception of Old Norse literature by English authors.[11] The School offers modules in Old Norse and Viking Studies in years 2 and 3 of the degree course, as well as at postgraduate level. VLEs support the teaching of modules at every level, but especially on the second year 'The Viking Age'. This module offers an introduction to the culture of medieval Scandinavia, combining the impact of Viking movements on the people of Europe with the migration of Scandinavians to the British Isles, across the Atlantic and towards eastern Europe and beyond. A lack of written sources by Scandinavians themselves requires students to learn about other sources of evidence, such as archaeological artefacts.

The Viking Age uses WebCt as a vehicle for delivering module resources, such as bibliographies and time-lines, but also as a learning environment. The e-resource was developed with support from the University of Nottingham's Teaching Development Fund. Design features are important for students with vision impairments, but it is not really necessary to have a very flashy page in order to get started. Once the page has been designed and materials have been uploaded it is possible to update and improve it year-by-year. I have used student evaluation forms to improve the design and structure of the module over the past four years. The web resources for the 'Viking Age' module have grown steadily and we have subsequently introduced e-resources, such as hypertext editions of Old English and Old Norse texts with supporting grammar and vocabulary glossaries. One of the most important pieces of advice that I was given during the writing of the home page was that if a page is not integrated into the teaching it will not be useful, no matter how sophisticated the design may be. From the start I had to consider issues such as accessibility, user-friendliness and the place of the virtual learning environment in the design of the course structure.

On the Viking Age module, instead of being presented with chosen pieces of text, students are encouraged to research their own evidence and prepare a 'seminar template'. This is a formatted template which can be downloaded as a Word document and where students add their chosen piece of evidence as well as an evaluation. Each seminar features a topic, which can be approached from a number of angles, either through linguistic, historical, archaeological or text critical methods or a combination of them. For example, for a seminar on language contact students may supply evidence from place names, or a modern English word derived from Old Norse or even an inscription which shows cultural hybridisation. The evidence has to be described (what is it?), giving it a date and provenance, then a relevant example featured in detail and an evaluation. Here students should discuss what this evidence could be used for, how it could be used and the problems of using it. They are also asked to provide a bibliographical note (further reading). The seminar template of each student is discussed in class, requiring them to be able to debate why they had chosen this specific item and be able to present it to others as part of a larger theme.

All templates are uploaded at least two days before the seminar, giving students the chance to read each other's work before the discussion. Discussions take place in small groups (about three students each) before being taken to the whole seminar group.

Second year students thus learn to go beyond the reading list, to take responsibility for their learning and be able to present a formerly unknown aspect to their peers. We often have lively discussions when two pieces of evidence seem to be contradictory, or we have two different readings of the same evidence. This is an important step, since many students have not yet been able to separate themselves from ideas such as 'truth' and 'the right interpretation'. It shows that depending on their angle, their methodology and their reading experience, evidence is a matter of debate.

The format of weekly assignments has worked well. Students like the fact that these are relatively small pieces of writing, in which they can practise their research and evaluation skills. The module is assessed by two essays that focus on the themes which have been covered in the seminars, such as using a specific text or artefact as evidence for Viking migration. Students are also encouraged to use each other's templates for ideas.

In previous years the chat function on WebCt has also been used for interactive lectures. One of the textbooks for this module is written by an eminent Danish archaeologist, who kindly agreed to give an hour of her time for an interactive lecture. She stipulated a theme for her lecture and students were subsequently split into small groups who were instructed to plan for the lecture by reading up on the given topic and prepare one question each. I set up a separate chatroom on the WebCt menu for this meeting and instead of a lecture theatre participants met in a computer suite. My colleague in Denmark then linked herself into the system for the lecture. Students then posted their questions on the message board and discussed their queries online. I told students not to take notes at this stage but to concentrate on the dialogue. Instead I saved the contents of the discussion and posted it to the discussion board afterwards. This form of interactive lecture was very well received. Students felt empowered by being able to discuss their work with the person who had written their textbook.

The only negative side of a module that is dependent on students' contributions, if at all, is that I cannot be sure what kind of evidence will be brought to class and have to be prepared for anything, including the odd non-relevant source. However, for me this form of teaching is exciting and in contrast to traditional methods it provides me with immediate feedback on whether my students have achieved the learning outcomes or whether I need to expand and clarify. Additionally, the weekly assignment allows all students on the module to contribute. The VLE allows students to revisit seminar discussions and reflect on what they have learned. I have also observed that overall performance has improved. Students have a much surer grip of the material which leads to better course work. Instead of using the essay to familiarise themselves with the concepts and the material, they already have an idea of the debates and the methods that can be applied, and are therefore more ready to focus on the evaluation of different types of evidence and secondary reading.

11 See the Centre for the Study of the Viking Age homepage: **http://viking.nottingham.ac.uk/**

2. Moderation

Francis Wilson, University of Wolverhampton

2.1 Introduction

The conceptual nature of English studies and its cognate subjects dictates that students learn through dialogue with tutors and fellow students, testing the limits and boundaries of their knowledge. Within English this might be better described as a three-way dialogue, for we are all engaged fundamentally with the literary text: its 'voice' serves as the object of study, while in some cases analysis of genre, form or linguistic structure can have a great impact in shaping our method. Even at basic or introductory levels, our students learn in complex, multivalent ways, engaging in what we might call 'deep' rather than structural learning. As tutors, we ask that our students function creatively, critically, and independently. Online tutoring makes similar demands, although virtual spaces do involve the development of new ways of thinking about knowledge as a work in progress, and one that emphasises the dialogic processes that underpin the discipline.

The following section supports this dialogic model of learning which characterises the traditional classroom in English studies, with its responsiveness to collective and individual needs, while still privileging literary texts and text production. We aim to provide practical tips and ideas on implementing online discussion boards that will help both new VLE tutors and more experienced colleagues, and perhaps shed light on a few issues of interest to those still undecided about whether to incorporate this valuable pedagogic tool into their teaching.

From responses to our online survey and conversations with colleagues across the sector, it is clear that many in the discipline worry that the responsibilities of the VLE moderator would increase what is perceived as the tutor's already-crippling workload. However, this is not necessarily the case. As far as general discussion board maintenance is concerned, it is not only unnecessary to reply to each participant individually, but also ill-advised to do so. To avoid dominating discussion, tutor responses should usually be directed at the whole group, and only to individuals in exceptional circumstances. Matt Green, who has incorporated discussion boards extensively into his teaching at the University of Nottingham, and whose case study concludes this section, recently recommended the following ways to make the best use of VLE moderating time:

- incorporate VLE preparation into the seminar planning process.

- maintain a strict schedule for responding e.g. 15-20 minutes per group.

- publish clear guidelines from the outset establishing what students can expect in terms of the rate / total number of interventions from staff per discussion activity.

- print out student postings and work from hard copy – it is faster (with additional advantage of mobility: the work can be done at odd or unexpected moments throughout the day).

One respondent to our online survey also argued that access to a reasonably fast broadband service at home is a prerequisite for maintaining any meaningful moderating role without compromising other commitments (personal or professional).

In this vein, we will attempt to suggest ways in which effective VLE moderation can be done efficiently.

We have divided this topic into three subsections employing a spatial metaphor: the Virtual Classroom; the Corridor; the Traditional Classroom.

2.2 The Virtual Classroom: Inside the Discussion Board

By 'virtual classroom' we are referring to the discussion board itself, the principal 'space' in which online interaction takes place. At the heart of approaches to moderation is a paradox. The discussion board is, as some think, a free space for student expression and development of ideas, while others stress the importance of tutors being very clear as to what is expected from students there, setting clear tasks with well-defined learning outcomes. So should tutors take a hands-on or hands-off approach? In our view, these are not mutually exclusive positions. Experienced discussion board tutors almost unanimously argue that a light touch should conceal a firm hand.

2.2.1 Tutor as Subject Authority

Asynchronous discussion requires a different type of tutor presence than synchronous/real-time/chatroom discussion, where the tutor's role is more pronounced in some ways. Immediacy may produce equality up to a point – everyone becomes a contributing colleague – but the constraints on time may force the tutor into playing a more authoritative role. (Synchronous discussions also require careful planning and set-up, as Gilly Salmon warns.)[12] Discussion in this format becomes more like online conferencing.

Our own work using virtual classrooms at all levels of the undergraduate programme suggests that tutor presence depends on the level or position of the module/class in which the VLE is embedded. First-year work requires a judicious touch from the tutor; an immediate or heavy moderator presence could shut down dialogue and experimentation (the tutor becomes the star pupil, in effect). Years 2 and 3 require a firmer and more distinct presence: activities are more complex and often consist of several separate tasks (e.g. find a relevant image on a website or virtual gallery, mount it in the designated place, then post an analytic comment on the discussion board). In such instances a tutor might even consider 'modelling' or demonstrating an appropriate posting, as happens on our Year 3 module The Victorian Vision, where students are asked to explore the links between Pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry. In this part of the exercise, students have posted up a weblink to a Pre-Raphaelite painting in one area of the VLE and are posting a comment on their chosen painting for the rest of the class. The tutor kicked off the discussion:

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12 Gilly Salmon, *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge Falmer, 2004), pp. 67-74.

Henry Wallis: "The Stonebreaker" (1857)
Miles, Rosie @ 12/10/2006 17:46:53

Wallis's The Stonebreaker has always been one of my favourite Pre-Raphaelite paintings. One of the reasons I decided to carry on further with English postgraduate study was because as an undergraduate at Birmingham University I 'discovered' the Pre-Raphaelites at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery – there was an exhibition on at the time of some of the many PR drawings that BM&AG owns. I remember going to many lectures on the PRs that were put on, and I remember encountering this painting, which is owned by Birmingham too.

Unlike some of the images we saw today its content (and message) is actually very contemporary – the image shows a man who has been working so hard that he seems to have fallen asleep with exhaustion. There is the PR attention to detail here, and the colours are very striking – the red and green of the hillside contrasting with the yellow-brown of his overalls – and the lurid reflected light of the lake as the daylight fails.

But this is an image we need to look at again, for its hidden detail. If you look closely at the man's outstretched foot, you'll see that there is a stoat climbing on it. And an animal wouldn't come that close to a human unless... The man almost looks as if he is somehow blending in with the natural landscape, which is, of course, exactly what he is going to do.

RE: Henry Wallis: "The Stonebreaker" (1857)
Taylor, Emily @ 14/10/2006 17:12:29

I was about to choose this one for myself but you beat me to it. I have accidentally put another web address on for it. It attracted me because of its pastoral, idealised view. Your eyesight is good though – I still can't see the stoat.

RE: Henry Wallis: "The Stonebreaker" (1857)
Taylor, Emily @ 14/10/2006 17:21:01

Sorry Rosie just discovered why I couldn't see a stoat as 'my' Stonebreaker http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/online/pre-raphaelites/stonebreaker.asp isn't asleep. Mine is by John Brett and he is very much awake. Also the dates are the same just to add to the confusion.

RE: Henry Wallis: "The Stonebreaker" (1857)
Miles, Rosie @ 16/10/2006 12:24:40

Dear Emily,

Yes, there are two paintings with this title – want to comment on the Brett one? It's always seemed somewhat twee in comparison with the Wallis to me, but maybe it's still making a point...what do you think?

Rosie

RE: Henry Wallis: "The Stonebreaker" (1857)
Taylor, Emily @ 18/10/2006 09:30:10

I thought it very true to life myself but...he does look very well fed and it is perhaps too idealistic rather than real. He doesn't really look as though he is on the parish doing a menial job to put food in his mouth. If someone posed for this one it was probably one of Brett's own relatives, at a guess. Need to do more research on this one. Willl post later when I find out what's going on.

RE: Henry Wallis: "The Stonebreaker" (1857)
Quigley, David @ 15/10/2006 14:26:14

Whilst observing Henry Wallis' The Stonebreaker I could not help but find comparisons with The Blind Girl by John Everett Millais. The man in The Stonebreaker is obviously working class due to his clothing garments and his job occupation. I assume that being a Stonebreaker is a job that this man needs in order to survive in this Victorian capitalist society. However, the hierarchy which this man works for will grow richer from his labour whereas this man will never better his station in life.

So why does this man choose to spend his last moments alive in nature? I believe it is the same reason as to why the Blind Girl and her companion do. Nature does not judge, and nature will always accept the living as equal to one another. What I find most poignant about this painting is that for me it suggests that we are all the same, regardless of what station or class one belongs to. Humans are all born in the same way, and regardless of how many riches one may have, they, like The Stonebreaker, cannot prevent their inevitable demise. When we die we will all belong to nature, poor and rich will both share the same ground, the antithesis to when alive. Henry Wallis' The Stonebreaker says to me; that whilst living hierarchy will always separate, in death we will all be equal.

Sample discussion thread from a Year 3 module: The Victorian Vision

Intervention in the first year may often involve a greater proportion of time on the re-directing or focusing aspects of the moderator's responsibilities. The tutor may need to step into discussion strands that are wandering off the topic's radar screen, as can happen with students new to higher education and trying to determine the proper role for subjectivity, personal experience, or supporting evidence within academic discourse. Frequently students at the start of Year 2 need encouragement to incorporate research into their responses to the more ambitious activities they now encounter (while our experience suggests that Year 3 students often require the opposite advice: here research material can dominate postings, and some participants must be urged to re-discover their own voices).

The moderator must also safeguard accuracy. A percentage of discussion strands within VLE forums at all three levels will stray into the realms of guesswork, and benefit from the injection of reliably correct information (was that metonymy in stanza four, 1with pointed windows?). Creative speculation and productive 'play' should not be checked, however – especially when the programme of online activities contains exercises that ask for creative work (e.g. use of role-play, or group writing), and where students are therefore transferring skills encouraged and developed earlier. Moderators at all levels of study will also find themselves engaging in aspects of quality control, such as the monitoring of web-based work to ensure students are using sites of academic quality. Thus far VLE discussion forums mirror traditional forms of coursework in bearing testimony to the fact that – while often able and willing to vet bibliographic sources quite efficiently – students from all social, political and ideological backgrounds appear united in the belief that all websites are created equal. Fortunately tutors can pre-empt many of the problems stemming from poor resource selection

by recommending appropriate electronic materials within the instructions for activities, and embedding links to these resources for immediate access.

The need for the moderator to act in some form as subject-authority will pervade VLEs throughout an undergraduate programme, though over time the number of instances should increase wherein students successfully perform for themselves some of the moderating functions outlined above. Students actually have a tremendous capacity to serve as self-moderators, performing certain functions quite routinely (e.g. 'cross-pollinating' or transferring ideas between distinct discussion strands; questioning the usage of literary terms; or comparing the relative merits of websites/databases and swapping lists of URLs). There is a strong sense in which the public nature of the discussion board can encourage students to put their best foot forwards. One intriguing idea for the future development of e-moderating practice would be to capitalise on the potential of this resource by introducing a rota of students acting as 'Group Leaders' in a series of VLE workshop sessions.

2.2.2 Tutor as Motivator

In addition to subject specialists, moderators are also facilitators, working to encourage students and – up to a certain point – motivate them to participate. This facet of moderation seems best achieved by establishing an open, informal and friendly tone (though not so much as to compromise the ability to be firm when needed). Like the activities, the tutor's expectations should be challenging, but not intimidating. It is also important for tutors to demonstrate their own sense of commitment to the VLE forum itself, as distinct from the subject of English or literary study, or even the module's seminar sessions. Commitment can take the form of responding to postings on a 'regular basis' (however frequently or infrequently this rate of input has been defined with the discussion group at the outset) – though conducted without dominating or interfering, as we have noted. Personal enthusiasm is crucial, since it sets the example for the manner in which the work is to be done, as well as the tone of its expression. Both students and tutors have remarked in the past that the moderator's occasional willingness to reveal 'personal opinions' – to step out judiciously from behind the mask of scholarly detachment – is frequently interpreted as an indication of genuine interest, accessibility, and personal investment in the group's activities.

Tutors should also be aware of the potentially threatening nature of online work to certain groups of students. Feedback from both module evaluation forms and surveys specific to online learning indicates that a small percentage of students feel more uneasy about discussion boards than seminar participation because there is a 'permanent record' of their contributions: the one virtue of seminars for the less confident is that the content of these is quickly forgotten. The problem can also be exacerbated by in-house software which prevents students from deleting or even editing their own postings once these are published. A few colleagues using discussion boards report a palpable sense of inhibition in their students, who equate online participation with a process of self-exposure and risk-taking. These anxieties can be reduced and participation levels increased by providing the cloak of anonymity – most easily achieved by having students register a pseudonym with the tutor.

Moderators must also think about those students to whom Gilly Salmon refers as 'lurkers': people who participate minimally because they are intimidated by online work, or perhaps feel they have inadequate IT skills; or those who freeload on other students, posting the absolute minimum, replying only, and rarely making any original contribution to the group's efforts. Tutors can address this challenge online by aspiring to the objectives outlined above, but obviously may also need to pursue the issue in directions leading outside the VLE: i.e. in terms of the spatial model employed in this discussion, within the Corridor and/or Classroom areas adjoining the online forum space.

2.2.3 Assessment as Motivator

The role of moderators as encouragers and motivators is significantly altered when discussion boards are assessed. Assessing VLEs at a sufficient weighting will solve the problem of non-participation in all but the most extreme cases, but it will also introduce another potential source of anxiety, so clarity in stipulating how the VLE will function within the course or module becomes even more important.

If clearly-articulated assessment criteria can largely ensure the existence (and to some extent, even the regularity) of student postings, making the VLE 'count' in this way will not automatically result in an improvement in the 'quality' of contributions across the discussion board, simply because more students are taking the online learning programme more seriously. Despite what we might often assume will be their proficiency in blogging skills, students will still need assistance in envisioning how to excel in this particular online environment. For instance, it is useful to remember that, besides making clear the essentials of each task (what to do, how many times, by when, ecetera), tutors may need to provide specific guidance clarifying what they expect in terms of the length, form, style, and register of postings. Reviewing a sample posting in some detail with the group at the outset can minimise the appearance of 'mini-essays' or – at the other end of the spectrum – contributions that linguistically most resemble phone-texts or Tweets (if, indeed, tutors wish to restrict or prohibit these forms of discourse). The subject of assessing online learning is addressed in depth in the last section of this guide.

2.2.4 Netiquette, or Style Management

In terms of guardianship, the moderator must define boundaries for expression within the VLE, and be prepared to police these when necessary. In our experience, however, the need to encourage discussion is more important than the need to patrol it. Students on English modules are generally quite courteous; only very rarely does intervention need to be admonitory (prompting the question: does knowledge of the tutor's presence - however ghostly - act as a control?). If anything, more moderating time is spent exhorting students to venture something other than complete mutual agreement in their responses to each other (an observation confirmed by our written feedback on assessed VLE activities).

Where a firm hand is required, a sense of discretion is essential for maintaining an up-beat, non-threatening and focused discussion forum. This usually involves using a parallel line of communication operating outside the very public space of the discussion board. In such instances, email becomes an invaluable tool for quietly counselling students who may be dominating

discussion through the sheer number of their contributions, or inadvertently intimidating colleagues from participating with a shrill or aggressive tone. Very occasionally, a slightly more proactive approach is required: e.g. when the tutor must remove a blatantly offensive contribution, or maybe one which is merely very weak, revealing the student's complete failure to understand the activity's instructions, but which – if posted early enough – can potentially ruin the entire activity by leading the rest of the group astray (i.e. the elephant's tail syndrome). In either case, such an action should be followed up with an email explaining the reason behind the intervention and inviting the student to post another contribution. But we stress again that, fortunately, such cases are rare, and can be effectively managed with limited inroads on the tutor's time by routinely keeping an eye on things, and acting swiftly when called upon.

2.3 The Corridor: Moving Between Virtual and Traditional Spaces

Passage between the virtual and the real classroom includes virtual communications and physical presence. The corridor is about getting students into the virtual environment. The traffic is two-way, leading from the VLE to the traditional teaching venues of lecture and seminar, and then back again, providing the conduit between online and traditional modes of learning. In a sense, then, lectures and seminars can also be seen as having 'doorways' and 'windows' opening onto the corridor. This section focuses on communicating to students about what they should be doing, and how they should be doing it in the VLE.

2.3.1 Communication

By communication we refer to the extended and multi-dimensional process of employing all means necessary to reinforce what it is that we expect from students, how it is to be done, and why it can be both meaningful and exciting for them to do. Apart from the instructions defining each activity, our expectations are conveyed most immediately through 'scaffolding' or published guidelines for online usage (i.e. introducing them to the capabilities of the online system, but also to the specific way(s) within those capabilities that students are required to use the technology on that particular module or course). Some useful points to consider concerning the effective drip-feeding of the essentials:

- Students will need to encounter these initial guidelines and basic how-to instructions repeatedly, over a number of occasions and preferably in a variety of places (for example: distributed as hardcopy at the initial teaching and/or IT workshop sessions; incorporated in whole or part within the first few VLE units; mounted electronically if possible on the website in proximity to the actual discussion space).

- Such repetition should not be labour-intensive: publishing Word and HTML versions of documentation early in the schedule of activities, and retaining both for easy future access, will cover it.

- Regardless of the position of a given module or course within the overall programme, always ask specifically and *repeatedly* over the first couple of weeks whether anyone needs an introduction to the technology. Odds are that someone will, and was waiting for an invitation. (It may also be useful to publish a written version of the invitation – posted on the website or in a general email to the class – as described above.)

Below is an example of such scaffolding taken from a Year 2 module, Classics in Literature, which directs students to their first session on the VLE programme examining Milton's *Paradise Lost* (and is itself entitled Paradise Revisited Online – or PRO).

Accessing the EN2008 *Paradise Revisited Online* (PRO) Forum:

1. Click on the '**TOPIC TOOLS**' link below '**Menu**'.

2. Click on '**GROUP FOLDER**'.

3. You should see a folder designed specially for your group – labelled either '**SERAPHS**' or '**SATANISTS**' .Only those in your group will be a able to view/access this folder containing the weekly online activities. If you don't see a folder, you have only recently logged onto the EN2008 home page and therefore have not been placed electronically into a group. NOTIFY THE MODULE LEADER IMMEDIATELY so this can be rectified.

4. To open the general folder for your group and access the specific folders for each activity, **click on the '+' sign** to the left of the folder.

5. Select the folder for the current week's activity, such as '**PRO Forum 1 – Milton's Rhetoric**'. Now to the right on the same line, click on the '**dialogue bubble' icon** in the '**FORUM**' column: the latest WOLF activity will then appear. [Make sure you click on the '**bubble' / FORUM icon** for the specific week you want, not the one for the general '**Satanists**' or '**Seraphs**' folder above – this will be empty.]

6. Follow the instructions for the activity, and use this '**FORUM**' venue to discuss your findings on this particular assignment with your colleagues. As you explore the discussions in progress, use the '+' and '-' **signs** to the left of the other postings to access and hide replies, as necessary.

7. When you have finished, exit the '**FORUM**' by right-clicking your mouse and selecting the '**Back**' option: this will return you to the '**GROUP FOLDER**' screen.

Example of 'scaffolding' from Year 2 module, Classics in Literature

These instructions are posted on the module's homepage with other documentation relevant to the module (see 'Topic Menu' below). For first year modules tutors might consider also providing a hardcopy version.

As we have indicated, E-mail is a key tool for circulating information within the corridor, enabling group mailings and individual student enquiries to tutors. This conduit is especially efficient at conveying timely information in both directions concerning any sudden breakdowns in IT systems or other technologies which will hamper the completion of the activities.

Website noticeboards are one of the best means of disseminating the most current information about the module or course, such as alerting and reminding students of upcoming work requirements, or alerting them to changes in the syllabus or room timetabling. This form of communication also offers a couple of additional bonuses, for by using it along with the traditional mechanisms listed below, the tutor is reinforcing the students' perception of the online space as a dynamic resource and an integral part of the course. And as with email messages and the 'Course Page' described below, the tutor can embed links to other websites, electronic materials, or the discussion boards themselves, further encouraging students to respond to the prompting in the message.

The 'Topic Menu', as it is called on our own in-house platform, or the document archive facility linked to the VLE 'space', provides the ideal place to publish all module or course documentation in a virtual one-stop-shop, and especially the information crucial to the online work: the 'how-to' guides; weblink 'bibliography'; netiquette guidelines; and assessment criteria (where applicable).

Conventional Noticeboards offer a valuable safety net to online forms of communication, along with the time-honoured note posted on the tutor's door (though perhaps less effective, this too can serve as a means of communication, and the office door is sometimes as far as the student gets to approaching the tutor). However, tutors must be careful not to reinforce student reluctance to get online.

2.3.2 Lectures

Lectures can be regarded as situated in both 'the classroom' and 'the corridor' (i.e., as a moderating space). Lectures can be used to introduce work undertaken on discussion boards: setting out its parameters; providing materials; introducing or demonstrating featured resources – especially websites/databases. Conversely, VLE activities can re-integrate materials back into the following week's lecture. Tutors could spend the first ten minutes of a lecture commenting on and summarizing online work, for instance, thereby constructing a bridge to new territory while reinforcing the VLE's centrality within the module. Establishing this link between classroom activity and the online programme is vital to the integrity of both within the course / module: see Section 3 below.

2.3.3 Feedback

Whether or not discussion board activities are assessed, students will need to know how they are progressing. Such feedback on ongoing progress can include a 'summary' posted on the discussion board or emailed to the class (or smaller sub-group) by the tutor after an activity is finished. This input can also be supplied while discussion is in progress (especially useful if the activity gets off to a slow start and could benefit from some timely encouragement). But remember that often 'less is more' when intervening in ongoing activities, as explained in Section 1.1 above.

Obviously with large classes/discussion groups, it may well be too labour intensive to give individual feedback on progress, particularly where formal assessment feedback is also required at the end of the activity schedule. Regardless of the VLE's relationship to the assessment regime, clarifying from the outset what method and level of feedback students can expect is crucial here. Tutors need to be systematic and consistent in approach and – where responses to individual postings are supplied – equitable in their distribution.

2.4 The Traditional Classroom

The traditional classroom, dominated in English Studies by the lecture and seminar modes (though including the workshop and tutorial) both nourishes and is nourished by the learning undertaken in the virtual classroom. Online activities can form preparation for seminar, workshop, and tutorial discussion: (a) by setting up a given task, or extending the focus on that task; (b) by summarising discussion strands as the means of generating questions and topics. The tutor mustn't overwork this linkage, though, as students may feel they are being interrogated about their contributions to the discussion board.

In the case study which follows, Matt Green explores some of the opportunities for integrated learning which can be developed through effective e-moderation, suggesting how ideas developed through online discussion of texts can enrich both lectures and seminars, and vice versa. Through this programme of positive reinforcement, Green demonstrates how online learning enhances the pedagogic activities which rightly dominate the classroom in English studies, and shows that it can be a highly effective tool within our discipline.

Case Study: Discussion Boards

Matt Green, University of Nottingham

Dr. Matt Green is a lecturer in the School of English Studies at the University of Nottingham. He is Director of The Byron Centre for the Study of Literature and Social Change and the General Editor of the online journal *Working With English*. Matt acted as the e-learning co-ordinator in the School for three years and is currently Director of Undergraduate Studies. His teaching includes Romanticism, The Gothic and Literary Theory, whilst his research concentrates on the works of William Blake and Lord Byron in a twenty-first century context.

Background:

I have been incorporating discussion boards in my teaching since 2003, when I was appointed e-learning co-ordinator for the School of English Studies at Nottingham. Though I have advised and discussed the topic with other tutors and lecturers teaching on a range of courses, my own experience of discussion board usage has been in mid- to upper-level undergraduate teaching on both team-taught survey modules in modern English literature and literary theory (Year 2), and individually-taught specialist modules in Romanticism and the Gothic (Year 3). All of these modules incorporated some form of blended learning in which online discussion was combined with traditional teaching practices (lectures, seminars and one-to-one tutorials).

1. Obstacles and Objectives

To date, none of these modules have directly-assessed discussion board postings, which has necessitated the implementation of a range of creative strategies for motivating student participation. While fostering participation has been the main difficulty in generating a pattern of effective usage, other difficulties have included concerns over parity across seminars and the investment of staff time. The latter is directly tied to moderating practices. The issue of parity – arising both on team-taught and individually-taught modules (with multiple seminars and discussion board groups on each) – is related, but not limited solely to, discussion board usage. Just as each seminar constitutes a distinct learning environment, so too each discussion board will

develop differently. While it is important to ensure that one group is not unfairly disadvantaged, those differences can be productive and can contribute to, rather than detract from, students' learning experiences.

The main objectives that I have identified in my own reflection on e-moderating are:

- to secure as close to 100% participation as possible on a voluntary basis.

- to monitor indicators suggesting that discussion board activity contributes to the learning process already underway in lectures and seminars.[13]

- to achieve the points above with a reasonable investment of staff time.

The second point has proved the easiest to achieve, and I have had reasonable success in achieving full participation as well. The trade-off has occurred on the third objective, for while there are a number of ways of making e-moderation more efficient and combining this with more traditional forms of teaching preparation, in my experience modules incorporating discussion boards continue to involve a greater investment of time than those which rely solely on face-to-face teaching.

2. Two Models for Discussion Board Usage

My own experience with discussion boards has involved two different models for combining these with traditional modes of teaching and learning: a tandem model and a parallel model. Each model has different advantages, with the tandem model enhancing the depth of a student's learning experience, whilst the parallel model allows for a greater breadth of material to be covered.

2.1. Tandem Model

The tandem model directly links work undertaken in seminars and/or subjects covered in lectures with online discussion topics/tasks via pre- and/or post-seminar discussion questions. In this model, online discussion works in combination with classroom teaching to achieve a shared set of learning outcomes and/or cover a shared body of knowledge. So, for example, at the end of a seminar on William Blake students could be asked to discuss his ideas about nature and humanity, in anticipation of an upcoming session on Wordsworth's response to industrialisation. In this way the discussion board not only allows students to explore their own ideas in further detail, but it also acts as a bridge between sessions, thus contributing to the coherence of the module as a whole.

2.2. Parallel Model

The parallel model, meanwhile, uses the discussion board to address topics distinct from, but related to, those covered in class. Online discussion and classroom teaching work in parallel, seeking to achieve different learning outcomes and/or familiarise students with different bodies of knowledge. Thus, for example, a classroom discussion of cosmopolitanism and fear of the other in Dracula could be accompanied by

a corresponding online discussion about representations of alterity in contemporary vampire fiction.

3. Discussion Boards as Drafting Tool

In addition to using discussion boards as a forum for the general exchange of ideas, I have recently begun using this resource as a mode of providing feedback to draft work. In my third year module during the autumn semester 2006, students were divided into discussion board groups of 4-5 and throughout the module each student posted a draft version of their assessed essay, which other members of the group read and commented on. The rationale behind this was to give students the benefit of feedback from several different sources, and to give them experience in reading, critiquing and responding to the work of their peers in a constructive manner. (I also provided feedback on each draft, which was valuable, though time-consuming.) In the majority of instances, this worked well, but there were some students who did not respond in a timely fashion to their colleagues' drafts. In order to avoid this in the future, and to further vary module assessment, I am planning to assess this feedback when the module runs again.

4. Strategies for Increasing Quality and Quantity of Participation

Integration and consistency of usage are the most important factors in ensuring participation by fostering a sense amongst students that online discussion is a meaningful and productive activity.

4.1. Consistency

Consistency involves not only ensuring that the discussion board is used on a regular basis, but also that it remains an important component of teaching and learning. This goal is achieved by clearly integrating online discussion with other module activities in a sustained manner.

4.2. Integrating Online Discussion

It quickly became apparent to me that successful integration of online and face-to-face discussion involved more than careful planning on my part as a module convenor and e-moderator. In order for this planning to pay off, my own sense of the discussion board as an integral part of a module needed to be communicated to the students. Beyond the planning stage, therefore, integration involves referring directly to relevant discussion board postings during face-to-face teaching and vice versa.

At the most basic level this simply includes making reference to content from the discussion boards during lectures or seminar discussion. Much fuller integration can be achieved, however, if the discussion board content is incorporated in the planning stages of lectures or seminar activities. Thus, in seminars students could be asked to respond directly to questions or comments posted by their classmates. This could involve the tutor pin-pointing shared ideas or disagreements and asking students to investigate these further, or it could involve splicing postings together to create a short piece of expository prose (or

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13 These potential indicators include: improvement in students' results across the module; high achievement within a seminar group (in contrast to other groups not participating in discussion boards); perceived links between online sessions and enhanced student performance during traditional teaching activities of lecture, seminar and/or tutorial; student reports via module evaluation forms and informal feedback in seminars/tutorials.

even a prose-poem) and using this as a set text for subsequent seminar discussion. The same process works in reverse, with the tutor setting discussion board questions that are not necessarily pre-planned, but arise out of seminar discussion, which means tailoring a different set of questions for each seminar group. A variation on this might involve having students and/or tutors posting a post-seminar blog or learning log.

4.3. Identifying the Moderator's Role

In addition to integrating discussion board work with other forms of teaching, it is important for tutors to clearly identify and perform their roles in discussion board activity. As one of the main benefits of the discussion board is allowing students to develop their own ideas further, it is worth specifying this from the outset. It is also essential to make clear how much involvement the tutor will have, what form this involvement will take and the pedagogical rationale for this.

In my experience, students do not respond well to an entirely hands-off approach and discussion board participation definitely increases when there is a sense that postings are read by tutors. This does not mean that tutors need to respond individually to every message, and responding to each seminar group as a whole can work well, allowing the tutor to draw student postings together into a coherent body. If the tutor is not making postings to the discussion board, then it is essential that this content is clearly integrated into other module activities. If students are not being assessed on postings and they feel that tutors are not reading postings, they will not continue to participate.

4.4. Motivating Through Activity Design

The types of activities associated with the discussion board are also very important. In my own experience, students respond well to creative or unconventional tasks, provided that: a) these do not appear gimmicky or artificial; and b) they clearly have intellectual value. One task that worked particularly well was asking students to put together a playlist of songs that commented on themes/issues raised by the poems we were studying. Students enjoyed the task, but also found it meaningful because they were required to discuss their selections in a sophisticated and critical manner. (See Chapter 1 on Design, and especially sections 4.3. and 4.6. on using creative tasks.)

5. Concluding Thoughts

Provided that students perceive discussion board work to be a meaningful and productive experience, much less persuasion will be required to encourage participation. That said, if students are new to discussion boards or if they have previously had negative experiences, I find that during the first few weeks they need to be reminded to make their postings and the value of this work needs to be clearly and convincingly emphasised.

When they work well, discussion boards provide an opportunity for students to develop their ideas further and to engage in wider range of activities, developing a number of skills. They also allow tutors to gain a much greater insight into the thoughts and personalities of each individual student, which has a very positive effect on face-to-face teaching.

3. Assessing Online Discussion

Rosie Miles, University of Wolverhampton

> Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said: 'one can't believe impossible things.'
>
> 'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'
>
> Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (1872)[14]

> At first people refuse to believe that a strange new thing can be done, then they begin to hope it can be done, then they see it can be done – then, it is done and all the world wonders why it was not done centuries ago.
>
> Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (1911)[15]

3.1 Introduction

It seems appropriate to start the section of this *Guide* that concerns assessment with the above two quotations. For some reading this, you may thus far have been persuaded to try out a few online activities in a future class or course, but then to assess that… A minority of colleagues worry that assessing discussion forums turns them into a version of Foucauldian panopticism whereby every metaphorical move a student makes online is scrutinized and judged, and that this negatively affects student behaviour online. This is not, to be honest, the experience or opinion of the authors of this *Guide*, and this chapter aims to set out the whys and hows of assessing online discussions. Indeed, it is our view that assessing online work is integral to its success on a course.

3.2 Why Assess Online Discussion?

It is now something of a mantra within higher education pedagogy that there should be what John Biggs calls 'constructive alignment' between what we teach, how we teach it and how we assess the work that students then produce as a response.[16] It is also fundamentally the case that what we assess on a course, and how we assess it, 'signal[s] what knowledge skills and behaviours [we] believe are most important'.[17] From the moment students arrive with us in the First Year we as their tutors are introducing them to what we value in the discipline of English studies, and a key part of that will be communicated implicitly if not explicitly through the assessment activities we devise. Whether we as tutors like or lament it, our students also function significantly via what Meg O'Reilly and Denise Newton call a 'paradigm of learning via assessment' – i.e. it is assessment that focuses many of the choices students will make about how they will construct and demonstrate their knowledge on a given course.[18] It thus behoves us as English tutors to think carefully about the methods of assessment we are using, and to offer students assessment activities that will engage and stimulate them to show off their knowledge and learning to best effect.

3.3 Six Impossible Reasons…

So… let's say you have planned a number of online activities across a course, which have discussion forums as the place where students will respond to those activities. Why should you consider assessing this work?

1. By doing so you are communicating that the online component is an integral part of your course. If students perceive something on a course as integral to it then they are much more likely to take it seriously.

2. It makes no sense to take the method of assessment out of the online space (e.g. back to an essay, say) if the actual work the students are doing is online. What this necessitates on the part of the tutor is a recognition that what's going on in the discussion forum is indeed academic work.

3. You are valuing the student time and effort that your class will put in to the online work (and if you get the activities right they will want to participate and put in the time).

4. Your class are more likely to be motivated to take part in the online activities you have devised for them, including those who may initially be a bit more reticent or tentative about what might be a new form of learning activity.

5. You are likely to get 100% participation and not just the keen ones. This is actually a way of saying everyone's contribution to the discussion is valued.

6. It is a way of assessing students' engagement across a whole course. When I assessed a course via two essays or an essay and an exam some students made strategic decisions at certain points in the course as to which texts they were going to engage with ("I'm not going to read/attend the class on XXX as I'm not going to write on that in my essay/in the exam".) It could particularly be an issue in relation to long novels. Having a number of online activities throughout the course, which the class know from the outset are going to be assessed, is very likely to increase the overall sense of engagement with and commitment to the course content as a whole.

3.4 Introducing Assessment Online and Assessment Criteria

As a way of modelling how to go about assessing online discussion, what follows is a discussion of the assessment framework and guidelines that I have employed for the past four years on a Year 3 undergraduate course entitled 'The Victorian Vision: Literature and Culture c. 1830-1880'. The course has seven online sessions across a twelve-week teaching term. Each week the students have a lecture and seminar on a given text/topic and on the weeks when there is a 'VVO' (Victorian Vision Online) session they then pursue the topic further through guided activities online. The VVO component of the course makes up

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14 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (Oxford: OUP, 1982), p. 177.

15 Quoted in Tisha Bender's *Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning: Theory, Practice and Assessment* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2003), p. 155. Appropriately, the quotation heads up her section of the book on assessment.

16 John Biggs, *Teaching for Quality Learning* at University, 2nd ed. (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), p. 27 ff.

17 Karen Swan, Jia Shen & Starr Roxanne Hiltz, 'Assessment and Collaboration in Online Learning', *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 10: 1 (2006), p. 45 (45-62).

18 Meg O'Reilly & Denise Newton, 'Interaction Online: Above and Beyond the Requirements of Assessment', *Australian Journal of Educational Technology* 18: 1 (2002), p. 57 (57-70).

40% of the overall mark; the remaining 60% is assessed via a 2500-3000 word essay. If across a course you have more or fewer activities, then you may wish to adapt the percentage grade accordingly. Here are the assessment guidelines and criteria given to the class at the beginning of the course:

VVO Assessment

Your participation in VVO will be assessed and will constitute 40% of your overall mark for the module.

Assessment Guidelines and Criteria

- To obtain a D grade or above for VVO you will participate in a minimum of 5/7 sessions, during the appropriately designated time for that session. We hope you'll take part in all 7!

- You will respond in the Forum as an individual to the various online tasks set, but by its very nature the Forum also enables you to engage in discussion and dialogue with your peers (and with your tutors) and thus in part to construct your learning through that dialogue. Thus the assessment will take into account the quality of your interactions as well as your individual comments. Perhaps unusually within your academic study, what is being assessed here is much more of a process rather than an end product (such as an essay).

- Below are some guidelines as to how VVO will be assessed, and what your tutors will be looking for in your online responses. They are not meant to be prescriptive in a limiting way, and as with all assessment in English, intelligent and original engagement with the texts and topics under discussion is actively encouraged.

F0: No postings; no participation.

F1-3 (Fail): Took part in 3 or less sessions.

E (Fail): Took part in 4 or less sessions.

D (Third): + Took part in 5/7 sessions (or more) but very limited contributions. Often only a single post per session and little evidence of real engagement with the tasks. Impression given of 'doing the minimum'.

+ Limited or no responsiveness to the postings of others.

C (2:2): + Took part in at least 5/7 sessions.

+ Satisfactory individual contributions which show engagement with the tasks, materials and texts under discussion and some evidence of critical thinking about the topic.

+ Some engagement with the postings of others, which further the discussion to a limited extent.

B (2:1): + Took part in at least 6/7 sessions.

+ Good quality individual contributions which show evidence of intelligent analysis and critique in relation to the topic. Good use of the materials and texts under discussion.

+ Good engagement with the postings of others, including evidence of new ideas and strands being developed out of previous lines of thought.

A (First): + Took part in at least 6/7 sessions. Likely to have taken part in all 7.

+ Very high quality postings. Original thinking about the topic, and a clear ability to analyse, critique and synthesise ideas. Evidence of real engagement with VVO.

+ Excellent engagement with the postings of others. Frequent evidence of new ideas and strands being developed out of previous lines of thought as well as evidence of the ability to exploit the capabilities of WOLF as an environment to further learning.

Assessment Criteria and guidelines[19] for the Victorian Vision Online Module

There are a number of points to note here:

1. The minimum threshold of participation needs to be spelt out explicitly, so that what constitutes a fail is very clear. Here failure is based on a lack of participation in an appropriate number of sessions. Once the requisite number of sessions have been participated in, then all passing grades are qualitative in their focus.

2. This kind of assessment certainly seems appropriate for a Year 3 module. For a first year module (say) which wishes to introduce and encourage online participation in a discussion forum at an earlier stage of students' careers this model could be adapted slightly, although an expectation of credit given based on the quality of posts should always be there.

3. It is stated explicitly here that the students should post during 'the appropriately designated time for that session'. On this course students had one week (starting on the day of the face-to-face class) to engage with each activity. As VLE discussion forums record the time and date of all posts made it is perfectly possible to track this.

4. It is also made clear that each student will be graded as an individual for their online work, but what in part is being assessed is the quality of their interactions with their classmates. All of the qualitative descriptors for A, B, C and D grades express this.

5. Never underestimate the capacity of students (particularly at the borderline pass/fail end of things) to find tiny cracks, small holes or even gaping fissures in the boundaries of your assessment criteria. This is why you need to be explicit. This point is made after four years of honing and refining these assessment criteria, often after a student has somehow managed to pass on one aspect of whatever assessment criteria I've set up, when I haven't thought they deserved to based on other deficits.

6. Much more positively, the assessment criteria here are aiming to motivate and encourage participation. Many students do want to do as well as they can, and the descriptors here make it clear what kinds of demonstration of their knowledge and interactive learning are likely to gain higher level grades.

7. The grade descriptors here use evaluative and comparative terms such as 'excellent', 'very good', 'good' and 'satisfactory' and some schools of thought on assessment would query the use of such terms on the grounds that what is excellent to one marker, may not be to another. Obviously the rest of the descriptor elaborates on and explicates what is meant by these terms here. For some examples of differently organized "grading rubrics that assess specific [online] discussion

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19 The assessment criteria here have been adapted and developed from Stuart Sutherland's Appendix to his online article, 'Assessing Online Collaborative Activity on the Warwick MBA by Distance Learning', Interactions 7: 2 (2003). **www.warwick.ac.uk/services/ldc/resource/interactions/archive/issue20/sutherland** (Accessed June 2009)

behaviours" see Swan, Shen and Hiltz's article on 'Assessment and Collaboration in Online Learning'.[20]

8. It is perhaps also worth noting what isn't stated to the students in these assessment guidelines. Nowhere do they specify any kind of explicit notion of 'X number of posts = Y grade'. This is not something I personally wish to do, although students do sometimes ask how many posts they are expected to make each week. My response is framed in terms of the general guidelines my class are given at the outset of the course about the online component, in which they are encouraged to return to the forum several times in any given week both to continue creating and to follow the developing discussion.

3.5 Marking Online Discussion

The online work is not marked until the end of the course and all online activity has concluded. However, students may well appreciate a bit of feedback early on, particularly if they are new to online activities, as to whether they are on the right track. One way of doing this, without having to give informal feedback to every student individually, is to make a post into one of the discussion forums – say the third – on how they are progressing. This is really also an e-moderating point, but it does clearly pertain to assessment. By doing this the tutor shows that s/he has been engaging with what has been going on thus far in the forums (indeed, it's highly possible that as the tutor you may also have been a presence in them) and you are able to offer some general points of guidance. What's going well? What's the level of interaction like? Are there some students who could be returning a few more times to the discussion? Are there any misunderstandings that several students are following?

My actual feedback form for assessed online work is very simple: it contains a space for the student's name, the number of sessions they have engaged in out of the total, the grade and a blank space for me to write detailed personal comments pertaining to that student's performance. The form could easily be broken down into further headings such as

- quality of interaction with classmates, including the extent to which discussion is furthered and developed through this interaction

- depth/quality of engagement with the online activities

- appropriate writing style

'How long does it take to mark discussion forums?' is a question I have often been asked when demonstrating my own VLEs-in-action to colleagues in English departments around the country. It's undoubtedly the case that a discussion forum can generate a lot of posts…multiplied by however many forums you have across a course. Many VLE platforms have a way that the administrator/e-tutor can 'sort according to user', bringing up on screen all the posts by one specific student in any given forum. I mark using this facility. It can take a while to read through every post, certainly, but by comparison it is quicker, in my experience, to mark 30 students' contributions to a number of discussion forums than 30 essays. For one thing you are not 'writing' on the posts in the way one annotates an essay.

3.6 The Nature of Communication in Discussion Forums: Listening by Reading and Talking by Writing

My suggestion in 3.5 above, of having a heading on a feedback form that comments upon appropriate writing style, raises an issue which can also cause concern, if not alarm, to some when they consider how it might be possible to assess what is going on in a discussion forum. Colleagues who have never engaged with students posting in discussion forums may have fantasies of an entire class engaged in a term's worth of txtspk, unable or unwilling to string a grammatical sentence together. Our experience at Wolverhampton is very far from this, but at the same time students may need some guidance at the outset of the course regarding 'netiquette' and what kind of writing is appropriate (see 2.1 for more discussion of this). On my courses with an online component students are encouraged to write as clearly and accurately as they can. The expectation from the outset is that they will be endeavouring to do this.

The reality of what actually goes on in online communication within a discussion forum is to me an exciting one and it should be of particular interest to English scholars, concerned as we are with the nature of language and its myriad possibilities. If your students are posting small essays or essay-style chunks as responses to an online activity then perhaps that's not quite appropriate. The place for essay writing is – well – an essay. As Marshall McLuhan said, the medium is the message, so the very form of the learning space that is a discussion forum – one that is online and allows for, and indeed encourages collaboration and interaction – will influence the kind of communication that works best within it. I would also suggest that communication within an educational online discussion forum is *its own distinctive form of academic writing*. Again, from the perspective of the tutor, particularly the tutor new to e-learning, this can be a bit scary. We know where we are with marking an essay. We know how to do that because we know what an essay is. But this new form of writing, which some of our English students are now engaged in creating, is less predictable, less durable, arguably more 'dynamic' in the sense that it inhabits time in a different way to writing that is offline, and it is formed through and out of the interaction of a given learning community. It is still perfectly capable of containing many of the elements that we value and wish to encourage in our English students: attentive textual knowledge and reading, critique and analysis, and the development and elaboration of a discursive point or argument. In the discussion forum there is the possibility – indeed, probability – that this latter skill will be demonstrated through interaction with other posts.

If the communication that takes place in a discussion forum is not the same as an essay, then neither is it the same as a classroom seminar discussion. You may refer to your online classes as something akin to 'virtual seminars', and in one sense they are, but the discussion that goes on in a VLE forum is different from a real time seminar in two important ways: firstly it is text-based rather than verbal, and second, it happens asynchronously. As Garrison and Anderson note, 'the compelling educational advantage [of e-learning] is its capacity to support reflective text-

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20 Swan, Shen & Hiltz, as 17 above. Quote here from p. 48.

based interaction, independent of the pressures of time and the constraints of distance'.[21] Garrison and Anderson discuss further the nature of student participation in discussion forums. What do students 'do' online? They read (the posts of others) and write (their own in response to those posts, and as a means of knowledge construction). Thus in a discussion forum

> …reading becomes both a means to acquire information as well as to 'listen' to the views of the teacher and students. Correspondingly, in an e-learning context, writing becomes the means both to construct meaning and communicate questions and ideas with the teacher and fellow students. With e-learning and computer conferencing, we listen by reading and talk by writing.[22]

Gone from a discussion forum is the 'traditional' classroom interaction between teacher and student which is predominantly oral and 'hierarchical' in the sense that in a face-to-face classroom a fair bit of the discussion and avenues of thought pursued will be at least focussed through the lecturer, if not entirely led by her or him. Whilst an e-tutor may be a presence in a discussion forum, it is not her/his job to dominate it and in that sense the discussion forum is again a different kind of learning space which poses challenges to more established models of teaching and learning. What I am hinting at here – and it's echoed elsewhere in this *Guide* – is perhaps some level of relinquishing of control on the part of the e-tutor. In her book on *Teaching Literature*, Elaine Showalter quotes a teaching assistant as saying, 'I learned a great deal about letting go of control over content and having faith in serendipity and process, student creativity, and letting the discussion take its own course'.[23] You never quite know what is going to happen in a discussion forum, but neither do your students. You have to be prepared to let that unknown and unfamiliar thing happen, and then be committed to finding a way to assess it. Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt say that 'there is nothing more exciting than to log on to a course site and see groups of students actively engaged with the material. We find it energizing and exciting…'[24] The authors of this *Guide* agree and would encourage you to take the risk too.

3.7 Student Perspectives on Assessing Discussion Forums

Since I have been working with discussion forums I have also been genuinely interested in student responses to this kind of learning. My first discussion forum was a four-week experiment inserted into my Year 3 Victorians course with an evaluative student questionnaire at the end. On the basis of the responses I got from students at that time I integrated and extended the scope and number of online activities for future iterations of the module and haven't looked back since. The evaluative questionnaires have remained and have provided a rich source of information for me as to what works well and what could be improved. The first time I introduced assessment of the discussion forum it was only to the tune of 10% of the overall

grade for the module. At the time this represented my own tentativeness about such a 'new thing'. I had no model within English studies of anyone doing anything like this. It was my students, however, who told me once the course was over and they were evaluating it, that I'd got the assessment percentage wrong. Many had put in significant amounts of time and effort into the online activities and they rightly thought that the work was worth more than 10%. The very first time I asked a cohort whether they thought online work should be assessed, which was after my four-week experiment in 2003-04, which of course wasn't assessed, the response was mixed: 38% said yes, 57% said no and 5% gave no reply. In 2004-05, when the online work was assessed as 10% of the overall grade the figures changed significantly: 67% said yes, 20% were 'not sure'[25] and 13% said no. On my Fin de Siècle module which ran the same year, also with a 10% online component, the statistics were 88% saying 'yes' and 4% 'not sure'. At the time of writing I do not have figures for more recent cohorts but my general perception is that support for online work being assessed is now almost universal on these two modules. This is not really surprising: once online work is presented as an integral part of a course and students are putting time and effort into doing that work, they want and expect credit for it. Below are some of the comments made by students in response to the question, 'What difference has it made to your motivation to take part in [online activities] knowing that you are going to be assessed for the work you do on them?'

- 'More students will participate. More effort is put into each session.'

- 'It makes you take it seriously.'

- 'One tries to say relevant and accurate things'.

- 'Every difference. What more encouragement do you need? If I had been assessed another way VVO would have received a cursory glance, I'm afraid. Not enough time for everything.'

- 'I think it is an excellent way of motivating students and keeping [us] up to date with the reading.'

- 'VVO ensures that you are … having a practical involvement with lots of texts, rather than just four if you were to write two essays.'

- 'I think that I would have taken part regardless of assessment criteria – but I'm sure it gave me extra impetus to contribute as fully as possible.'

- 'It encourages/reminds you that you have to be committed to participating in the forum on a regular basis. What's more it also encourages you to do further reading than you otherwise perhaps would have done.'

- 'I researched more to answer, and it encouraged me to take part in all sessions.'

- 'I made sure that I took part in as many [sessions] as possible – even if it was 2am in the morning!'

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21 D. R. Garrison & Terry Anderson, *E-Learning in the 21st Century: A Framework for Research and Practice* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), p. 6.

22 Garrison & Anderson, p. 77.

23 Elaine Showalter, *Teaching Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 116.

24 Rena M. Palloff & Keith Pratt, *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), p. 49.

25 For further discussion of this see Benjamin Colbert, Rosie Miles and Francis Wilson, 'Designing and Assessing Online Learning in English Literary Studies', in *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 6: 1 (2007), pp. 74-89.

3.8 Student Participation in Assessment

If the notion of tutors assessing student contributions in discussion forums is a new enough idea then one radical step further may also be to consider whether it is possible, or indeed desirable, for students to play any part in this process. One interesting example of an attempt to involve students in evaluating the quality of what goes on in a discussion forum has been tried by Jodi Dunlap, who is based in Denver, Colorado. In her blog 'Thoughts on Teaching' she outlines the notion of 'karma points', whereby students are allocated a number of karma points that they can then assign to specific posts in the discussion forum that they consider to display the shared values of learning quality that any given educational community or cohort wishes to promote. Dunlap suggests that such karma point criteria (which are determined and agreed with the class at the outset of the course) might include 'sharing original ideas, writing clearly, presenting a coherent argument, providing evidence to support an argument, "listening" to others and incorporating their ideas and perspectives, and so on'.[26] In Dunlap's model her students 'assign' karma points through responding to the post they wish to attach them to. In theory it could also be possible for students to assign them 'anonymously' in the sense that student A decides to award a karma point to student B by informing the tutor that s/he wishes to do so and why, but the points don't actually 'appear' in the forum. Dunlap comments on the process that

> The community-centered focus of karma points improves the quality of each post during a discussion because students are more reflective and thoughtful about their responses, make sure their responses are supported by evidence, and work hard to provide value to the learning community by moving the discussion forward.[27]

See also Stacy Gillis's case study on assessing discussion forums at the end of this section, in which she awards a small prize to the student considered to have made the most original postings, with the vote made by the students themselves. Gillis also consults her students about what the assessment criteria should be in relation to the marking of her discussion boards. This is a commendable move, which can only enhance students' sense of their communal 'ownership' of the online work they are doing.

3.9 Non-Assessed Discussion Forums

It is obviously the case that this section is in favour of assessed forums, for all the reasons stated, but there may well be instances where non-assessed forums are more appropriate or all that is going to be possible. If you are thinking of 'trialling' a discussion forum as a pilot experiment, for example, your forum may well not be assessed. Key issues in respect of non-assessed forums are around motivation and participation.

You may consider that you have highly motivated students who don't need either the carrot or stick of assessment in order to participate in online discussion, but there may still be issues at points of pressure in the term, or indeed just in terms of maintaining interest in the forum across an entire course. You will also need to consider how you are going to get *all* of the class to participate, if that is something you regard as important. Perhaps for all discussion forums the issue boils down to creating online activities that your students will find simply irresistible…

3.10 Conclusion

Discussion forums in English studies courses can be highly successful when the online activities are well designed, when the e-tutor is enthusiastic and committed to the online work and when the student work produced in discussion forums is valued as an integral part of the learning on the course via assessment. Gilly Salmon has suggested that 'as e-moderators become more comfortable with their online teaching roles…they will start to look closely at online assessment and evaluation, and will not wish their time and their students' time to be contained by old assessment methods'.[28] Let's not be afraid to innovate in terms of assessment in English studies. If we are open to creating new kinds of learning activities within the subject using the possibilities that online technologies afford then appropriate assessment has to follow. As the authors of this *Guide* have said previously,

> When we introduced the VLE and set about assessing online work, we would stress that *nothing changed* in terms of the skills and talents we wished to develop in our students. We still want to see the same problematising of their reading, imaginative engagement and independent thinking that we are encouraging through paper-based discursive forms of assessment.[29]

There is actually relatively little in this chapter that pertains solely to using discussion forums in English studies: almost all of what is said here is relevant to using discussion forums whatever your subject or discipline. But it is absolutely the case that all my experience of devising assessment for discussion forums comes directly from using online activities successfully within an English context. To return to where this section began, it is also no coincidence that the two quotations which preface it come from children's literature. There are definitely possibilities for some 'serious play' within the ludic space that an online discussion forum can be and this kind of creative and intellectual exploration is not incompatible with assessment if we academic grown-ups are only prepared to give it a go.[30]

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26 Jodi Dunlap, 'Karma (or inspiration) points for discussion assessment'. Post made on Friday May 25, 2007 on the *Thoughts on Teaching blog*:
http://thoughtsonteaching-jdunlap.blogspot.com/2007/05/karma-points-for-discussion-assessment.html (Accessed June 2009)

27 Dunlap, ibid.

28 Gilly Salmon, *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online* (London: Kogan Page, 2000), p. 93.

29 Colbert, Miles & Wilson, p. 76.

30 See Pierre Bordieu on the notion of *homo scholasticus* as 'someone who can play seriously', in *Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p.128. Cited in Mary Evans, *Killing Thinking: The Death of the Universities* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 26. I have written on the ludic possibilities of VLE space in 'Text. Play. Space : Creative Online Activities in English Studies' (October 2007), a case study on the English Subject Centre website:
www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/casestudies/technology/textplayspace.php

Case Study: Assessing Discussion Forum Postings

Stacy Gillis, University of Newcastle

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I have been attaching a discussion forum to various modules since 2000 but have only recently begun assessing the postings. In my experience, students in the first year of university on large team-taught modules are more inclined to use a discussion forum. The reasons for this are variable but certainly the opportunity to communicate easily with students in other seminar groups is paramount. My *Murder 101: British and American Detective Fiction and Film* upper-level undergraduate module usually has about 50 students. All students attend a weekly lecture and seminar (15-18 students in each). Each seminar is divided into research groups (4-5 students) who meet for an hour before the seminar and who present once in the semester. When I taught this module in previous years, I always had an online learning environment with a discussion forum. Tracking student usage indicated that while students used the site regularly, they never went to the forum. I am keen that upper-level students share their work across seminars and thus decided to assess postings on the discussion forum for one of my upper-level modules. I created a strand for each week of the module. Students were allowed to amend their own postings and they could not post anonymously. I also had a competition for the consistently most original and useful postings on the discussion forum. The prize of a detective novel was awarded to the student most voted for by her/his fellow students (sent via email to me in the final week of the module).

The Assessment section of the website clearly laid out the assignment:

Discussion Forum Postings

- Each student must submit five 250-word entries on the Blackboard discussion forum. These entries may be original postings or responses to other students. Postings may be in one strand or spread over several strands. Students must be discussing topics related to the module and must present these postings in the form of critically engaged dialogue (i.e. typing the words 'Sherlock Holmes' over and over - indeed, 125 times - does not count). The deadline for submissions is 5.00 on Friday, March 23rd.

- Percentage of Final Mark: 10%

In the opening lecture I went through the procedure for posting on the discussion forum. This is crucial as even those students familiar with online learning environments may not have entered the forum space. In particular, I showed them how to respond to other students and how to attach documents. I also spoke to them about online etiquette and I drew their attention to the following document posted on the site:

This module is supported by a discussion board and its use is part of your assessment. It is vital that you join in the debates and discussion of the forum as a way of developing your skills in analysis and argument - both individually and as part of your research group. Participating in the discussion board will help your study in a number of ways - it will help you to formulate your ideas in preparation for your study groups and seminars, it will help you to continue discussions that began in seminars, and it will help you to work through your ideas in preparation for the exam.

The discussion forum is monitored by the tutor. Please join these discussions - you should feel free to join in the conversation without feeling that you have to have an answer to all the questions that the module presents. The forum is one of the places that you can experiment with ways of tackling these questions.

While multiple and various contributions are welcome, please follow the below guidelines:

- Please stay on topic. The discussion forum is for discussion of ideas related to the module.

- When you are joining in a discussion strand remember that you are engaged in communication. By all means be rigorous in your argument, but try to do so in a courteous and constructive way.

- Remember that your readers may have different cultural and linguistic reference points to your own. Sarcasm may well be misunderstood by other readers.

- You are responsible for the content of your messages. Remember that you are participating in a public forum and do not post messages which contain offensive or illegal material.

Initially, the students were reluctant to use the board in the first weeks and I had to remind them each week of the deadline. Once several (brave) students first posted, however, most of them started posting regularly, even those who did not have to (i.e. Erasmus students). Initially, some students felt the need to include footnotes and references for each posting – I stressed that these were meant to be informal and most reference-endowed postings stopped. In addition to the individual postings, I also occasionally gave the research groups assignments which required them to post material on the discussion forum. Overall, of the 54 students on the module, only two did not complete the full five assignments.

In terms of tutor feedback, there was very little. I logged on several times each week and ensured that the discussions were not ranging too far off the mark and that nothing offensive had been said. I have only had to intervene once and this was

to clarify some historical evidence before the discussion went too far down a misguided strand. Many of the students were keen to self-police – they regularly said "I'll stop now because I'm getting off topic" or nudged another student back into the relevant discussion. The marking was the most difficult component. Because of the vagaries of the particular learning environment that I use, I had to print out all the postings, give each a mark and then put this into a spreadsheet so I could pick out the top five marks for each student. This was hugely time consuming. In future, I will keep track of the postings each week. Another consideration is that the School marking criteria does not always work for the postings. In future, I will do what I do with assessed presentations – ask the students to come up with marking criteria in the first seminar.

The following are postings from the module, demonstrating the range of discussion. All postings have been anonymised and permission has been given by the students. What is relevant for this discussion is the way in which students in different seminar groups were working with one another across the forum. They were also referencing previous work on the seminar and looking to material outside of the module's primary texts. This posted material was a crucial component of their exam revision.

Forum: Patricia Cornwell
Author: STUDENT A
Subject: "Postmortem" – The Killer.

Was anyone else disappointed with the end of *Postmortem*, or felt a little cheated by the fact that the killer turned out to be "just a pasty-faced boy with kinky dirty-blond hair [whose] mustache was nothing more than a dirty fuzz"? I'm not sure why, but I expected something more, something better, something more interesting.

Knox's rules tell us the criminal should be someone we've met early in the story, but whose thoughts we haven't followed. S.S.Van Dine's rules (quoted by Todorov) say the criminal should be a main character. Cornwell's killer is neither. Granted, these rules weren't written about modern detective fiction and detective novels don't have to follow the rules (it would come to be quite a dull genre if they all did). Still in this case it's more than a little disappointing. How could we ever have guessed it would be this guy?

With the exception of Poe's Ourang-Outan, this might possibly be the most disappointing criminal on the course. The Moonstone had a nice twist when it was revealed that Blake and Ablewhite stole the diamond. It was a slight shock to discover Stapleton was behind the hound in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. We didn't expect Dr Sheppard to have murdered Roger Ackroyd, or Carmen to have killed Rusty Regan, and it was something of a shock to find that Dudley Smith was behind the killings of *LA Confidential* (I've missed out *A Rage in Harlem* on purpose, because just about everyone is a criminal in that book!). My point? This is the first time we've had a criminal (except Poe's Ourang-Outan) that wasn't a part of the story, and who we couldn't possibly have guessed at. It's disappointing...

Forum: Patricia Cornwell
Author: STUDENT B
Subject: Re: "Postmortem" – The Killer.

Disappointing? Well I must say I wasn't disappointed at all but I can see why one would be. The expectation with detective fiction is that the reader already knows the killer (a convention identified by the two gentlemen you quoted) and should be able from the clues presented determine which member of the cast is the killer.

If you apply 'Post Mortem' to the conventions of Golden Age detective fiction then it is undoubtedly disappointing (although potentially subversive as I intend to point out) but 'Post Mortem' fails to conform to genre conventions in a number of ways. Most Golden Age detective fiction is built around the 'locked room mystery' model, even if there is no locked room there is still usually one single event being investigated i.e. one murder, and one area in which it occurred. 'Post Mortem' because it is about a serial killer has multiple murders, multiple times and multiple locations with simply too many facts to juggle to build up retrospectively the story of the event. Further there is an astonishing lack of clues in the novel, and the clues present are all generally cheats. It would be tantamount to inventing a rare Amazonian poison to use the obscure Maple Syrup Disease in an Agatha Christie mystery. The reader would have no idea what it is and so it is not a valid clue.

Having established that the novel does not follow detective genre conventions then really how could the ending? The break with conventions demands a further break with convention. Yet the revelation of the murderer as a 'nobody' some youth that couldn't even grow a moustache is equally as subversive as the revelation in Christie's work that it is the middle class doing all the killing. Both subvert the mindset that murder is done by obvious criminals such as the obviously criminal looking Stapleton (he may dress nice but remember he has evil looking eyes). In Christie the notion put forward is that your killer could instead be someone you know very well, someone you assume you know the thoughts of (i.e. the good doctor to whose thoughts we are privy) that anyone could be your killer, but in Cornwell the notion is that your killer could be anyone, someone you don't know, have never met and have had no more contact with than a phone call. It's a movement from the Holmesian, killers kill because they're killers, to the Christie motive led killings to a notion that there is no need for a motive whatsoever, that anyone could kill you at any time.

Forum: Patricia Cornwell
Author: STUDENT C
Subject: Re: "Postmortem" – The Killer.

I agree with STUDENT B although I can understand STUDENT A's disappointment at our not being familiar with the murderer, and I did feel a momentary pang of deflation when I realised the murderer was a new character in the novel. I think that Cornwell plays on this expectation that the reader has in order to further heighten the suspense of this scene; the murderer's voice 'was familiar' to Kay, although on reflection we remember that she knows the voice through hours spent trawling through the recordings of the 911 calls. Regardless of my immediate and momentary dissatisfaction of the murderer's identity, in retrospect and in terms of the novel as a whole, if the stocking had been pulled off to reveal Matt Peterson, Bill Boltz, Marino or even Abby Turnbull I think in the long term I would have viewed the novel as far more disappointing. As has been said, the fact that the murderer is a motiveless 'nobody' and could be anyone, makes the notion of the murderer far more frightening then the murderers in any of the previous books we have studied, due to the fact he becomes a much more realistic character and therefore more threatening. As Gerard Collins has observed, it is the killer's anonymity that 'allows the killer to infiltrate society like a virus and to go undetected for a long time' which emphasises and justifies the theme of paranoia in the book and Kay's personal feelings of anxiety.

Forum: Patricia Cornwell
Author: STUDENT D
Subject: Re: "Postmortem" – The Killer.

I'm in two minds about this killer. On first reading, my immediate reaction was to agree totally with STUDENT A. More than anything else in a detective novel I want to be given the clues so that I can attempt to work out who the killer is – or at least as in 'The Murder of Roger Ackroyd' be able to do it in retrospect. I enjoy being able to follow a logical progression of clues towards who the killer is even if the motive is generated from a kind of psychosis and isn't itself rational. Having said that after discussing it in seminars I understand why Patricia Cornwell has chosen to make her killer a faceless, quite random figure.

There is a potent sense of paranoia that pervades every aspect of the text. The seeming advantages of being a detective within the Establishment, as opposed to individuals working alone like Poirot or Holmes, are negated by the constant betrayals of Kay Scarpetta by the people she is supposed to be able to trust. Even though Amburgey clearly does not like Scarpetta, as a man in a position of authority, she should be able to trust him in a professional capacity. The fact that his undermining of Kay Scarpetta is done in a covert manner as opposed to on a professional level further invokes paranoia into the text. In addition to this there is the sense that Kay Scarpetta

is not privy to all the information necessary to solve the case – in stark contrast to the previous detectives we have seen who are given access to all areas of the investigation in order to solve the crime, particularly seen in Poirot and Holmes. Patricia Cornwell asserts that Scarpetta's disadvantage stems from the fact she is a woman and the industry is sexist. Whatever the reason the shutting out of Kay Scarpetta provokes yet more confusion and the lack of information serves to make both the reader and the detective increasingly paranoid.

Forum: Patricia Cornwell
Author: STUDENT B
Subject: Re: "Postmortem" – The Killer.

There are of course two very distinct notions of "scary" being toyed with in detective fiction. What is scary within the context of a work of fiction and what is scary within a phenomenal (or "real") world.

Most of the devices you mention in your post i.e. dramatic-irony or knowing the killer's identity and waiting for the police to find it out, always one step behind and in danger, are perfectly effective in a dramatic sense. These are the tools one uses to evoke a sense of fear within the reader in the act of reading.

But the final revelation in *Postmortem* is scary on a more cerebral level. It may not conform to dramatic convention but the revelation of the killer's identity as a nobody; and worse than that a nobody that people rely on for help, ties into notions of paranoia, literally the fear that everyone is out to get you. The revelation of *Postmortem* suggests that everyone is out to get you, and you cannot even trust those forces you rely on for your protection. Authority, civilisation these are the tools we rely on to feel safe but they are faceless and so we cannot trust them. While the revelation is dramatically a little bit unsatisfactory if one contemplates what the underlying message of that revelation is it starts to seem much, much scarier than the prospect of a personal enemy with a grudge out to get you.

P.S. I will cop to being very smug and actually figuring out the killer in *Postmortem* not that I could possibly have known his name or said "that character did it" but I did guess fairly early on that the murderer was a 911 dispatcher. Maybe this meant I wasn't as disappointed with the ending as some others.

Forum: Patricia Cornwell
Author: STUDENT A
Subject: Re: "Postmortem" – The Killer.

I should probably own up that my post was my initial response to the novel. I hadn't read the essay for the seminar at the time. Now I have read it and discussed the topic in a seminar, I have a slightly different view. I am still a little disappointed in the novel but for different reasons. As has been pointed out, the style of the story, and parts of it, can be disappointing. I also found the Maple Syrup disease more than a little ridiculous, and I thought that the ending (the killer attempting to murder Scarpetta, but ultimately failing) was fairly predictable. I have come to like the idea of the anonymous killer. It does seem more realistic and, in some ways, more frightening than a known murderer.

STUDENT D addresses the idea of paranoia in the novel and how the faceless killer adds to the feeling of unease and lack of answers. This is another aspect of *Postmortem* which disappoints and frustrates me. By the end of the novel, we have the answers to most things and through these answers, I feel, most of the paranoia and the uneasy feeling disappears. I am a person who scares easily

and, against Stacy's advice, I read the novel on my own at night. I expected to be frightened at the end, but I wasn't because of this element of resolution (although I did make sure the windows were locked before I went to bed!). We know that Scarpetta's paranoia was justified: there was someone trying to ruin her career, and she does become the next victim of the serial killer. The murderer is killed - there's no chance of him going on to kill any other women, so the threat is removed (at least until the next serial killer comes along). In this context, it seems quite strange that Cornwell didn't explore the idea of this killer at all. This still disappoints me. There's a lot of emphasis on psychologically profiling the killer, a process that can be carried out no matter who the murderer is or how many people they have killed. Why add this element of investigation to the text, if it isn't going to be addressed? I don't see how proving or disproving the profile would take anything away from the ending of the novel.

I've come to disagree with my own view that the killer should have been someone the reader knows, although I still feel the killer could have been explored a little more at the end. I like the idea of a faceless killer and I think it could work really well; I'm just not sure it does here.

4. Online Workshops and Discussion Forums in the Creative Writing Classroom

Jackie Pieterick and Candi Miller, University of Wolverhampton

4.1 Introduction

Much of what has been suggested in this *Guide* so far can and does apply to the use of online discussion forums in the teaching of Creative Writing. The case studies following this introduction demonstrate how these can be used. In fact, Michael Symmons Roberts suggests that using online discussion groups may be the best way of teaching a poetry MA.

But can discussion forums be an effective tool for engaging more inexperienced undergraduate students in writing communities and the creative writing workshop ethos?

The writing workshop is widely accepted as the cornerstone of the creative writing classroom because it encourages writing improvement, compels writers to exercise critical judgments and imagination, and offers them the opportunity to understand the many issues that confront creative writers – from inception to development, expansion, condensation and, most importantly, revision. Writing workshops also help students to develop authorial self-sufficiency through analytical and critical scrutiny and to enable novice writers to begin understanding what it is to become a writer through the process of collaboration. Despite its popularity, however, the traditional writing workshop model doesn't always work as effectively as it should – especially at the undergraduate level. Wendy Bishop, for example, points out that many undergraduate writers do not always possess the necessary linguistic, evaluative and aesthetic sensibilities that are required for effective participation in creative writing workshops.[31] According to her, the traditional workshop model tends to be instructor-centred and fosters a potentially stunting focus on product (rarely are stages in the writing process examined). Irena Pratis points to yet another flaw when she contends that the traditional workshop method doesn't work well with large numbers of students of varying abilities.[32]

Taking the writing workshop online can help circumvent some of these flaws. For example, when creative writing workshops go online, the teacher's voice is relegated to just another e-voice in the group and thus the writing pedagogy becomes more student-centred. Because students are posting and responding to multiple drafts, as well as talking to each other informally on forums, the online workshop reinforces – and records – the writing process. And when the workshop goes online, students can be more effectively grouped according to their abilities and writing interests, and larger classes can be broken down into smaller critique groups. More important, though, is that online workshops, like their face-to-face counterpart, value the improvement of student writing through interaction and collaboration with others.

4.2 From Face-to-Face to Cyberspace: Taking the Creative Writing Workshop Online

Since one of the popular ways to enhance students' participation is through classroom discussion, peer critique groups are considered a valuable pedagogical tool. In taking the whole-class workshop online, small groups can be created to compensate for classes in which too many students complicate workshop participation. Kim King suggests that because 'lack of participation may be the larger and most common pitfall of classroom discussion', online critique groups would fix, at least, that problem by requiring students to contribute a pre-decided number of critiques and comments.[33] And because many of our students are familiar with using discussion forums and posting their creative pieces online via social networking websites such as Facebook, they have shown us that they want to be involved in online critique circles. On average, over 85% of our first year students actively participate in online critique groups – and do so without the incentive (or threat) of assessing participation. This willingness to participate could be partially attributed to both our emphasis on the importance of receiving feedback from real readers and our assurances that online critiquing provides them with a less threatening and more collegial environment for exchanging feedback. In addition, discussion forums help train undergraduates how to read like writers, to value the process of writing as much as the product and to discover their writing voice – the three guiding principles of creative writing workshops.

4.3 The "Great Triumvirate" of Writing Workshops

4.3.1 *"Read Like a Writer"*

Writers must read not only for pleasure, but with an eye on technique and authorial choices in order to learn how to fix things in their own writing. Joseph Moxley suggests that '…we need to teach students to read like writers…the student writer's focus should not be on theme or principles of literary criticism, but on the choices authors considered when composing. Writers need to become active readers – to study the point of view, the tone, the plotting and other techniques that authors employ'.[34] What writers want to know, and need to learn, is reading for revision.

Reading and responding constructively to a group of peer writers about writing can strengthen students' independent ability to read for revision. In the online workshop, students practice making constructive comments that are directed *at writing* rather than *at writers*, a distinction that can help depersonalize the process and increase the usefulness of feedback comments. In addition, student writers are often relieved to get away from their own drafts for a moment in order to see how others are handling the assignment. Because they are not emotionally invested in a peer's work (work that they did not have to struggle to produce), student writers are often able to see and articulate big-picture revisions more clearly. At the same time, they (hopefully) reflect on the applicability of these comments to their own drafts.

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31 Wendy Bishop, *Released into Language: Options for Teaching Creative Writing*, Wendy Bishop (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1990)

32 Irena Pratis, "Piece Work: Pedagogical Bricolage in the Creative Writing Classroom," *New Writing: Theory and Practice of Creative Writing* 3 (2006), pp. 4-11.

33 Kim M. King, 'Leading Classroom Discussions: Using Computers for a New Approach', *Teaching Sociology* 22 (1994), pp. 174-182 (p. 177).

34 Joseph Moxley, *Creative Writing in America: Theory and Pedagogy* (Urbana, IL, IK: NCTE, 1988), p. 259.

To promote dialogic exchange (as well as to correct and confirm readings and expand aesthetic taste), we teach reader response through a variety of guided classroom activities. George Hillocks calls these types of learning experiences 'gateway activities' and advocates using them because they, 'engage students in using difficult production strategies with varying levels of support and lead eventually to independence'.[35] Gateway activities are thus based upon the assumption that telling is not teaching. Telling students how to respond is not teaching. Learning to respond requires that students discover for themselves the discourse features of productive response and then practice them. One gateway activity we use to help students learn to read like writers (and prepare them for peer critiques) is whole-class responses to shared readings followed by individual reading logs. This type of gateway activity draws attention to the dialogic nature of response and helps students develop and practice using language for talking about writing. By looking at what other students have done with their reading logs, they begin to develop and practice more productive responses.

The following examples show how first year students in our Craft of Writing module have expanded on their classroom experiences of responding as writers to Tobias Wolff's short story 'Bullet in the Brain'. The first response shows an apprentice writer thinking about how Wolff structured the story. The second builds on the idea of structure but then considers how this creates moments of character revelation. And the third moves both his peers' ideas of structure and character development towards an (original) explanation of the story's eloquent incident, its epiphany, and how it works to create meaning.

Example 1: Reading Log Forum

by C on 08 October 2009 16:34:40
RE: Tobias Wolff's Bullet in the brain

I don't know about you but that little short story gave me the chills with the way it was written.

The way he puts so much emphasis on the actual shooting, which happens in a split second, compared to the few minutes that he is in the bank makes it a story in two parts.

I'm definitely going to look into more of his pieces. I'm intrigued now :)

by M on 14 October 2009 19:05:11
RE: Bullet in the brain

When I started reading this there were passages I couldn't work out the reason for, or that didn't feel right, but when I got to the end and looked back over the story I could see how every part fitted. I especially like the passage about the roof- I feel it shows Anders detachment very effectively at the same time as moving the narrative along by providing the impetus to the gunman to shoot Anders.

I've not read any Tobias Wolff before, but I am going to in the future. If I am honest I have largely ignored the short story as a genre, and I am starting to think that may have been a big mistake.

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by L on 14 October 2009 20:36:28
RE: Bullet in the Brain

After today's lecture about openings in short-stories, I read the beginning of this only to be confronted by a wordy introduction, but unlike some of the examples we received, it didn't make me feel uncomfortable, or else laugh. So why?

It seems to express the silent rant of the protagonist's mind – oh, the inevitability; I would get stuck here, wouldn't I? It flows comfortably enough, it reads as spoken – '…never in the best of tempers anyway, Anders.'

...then the bullet enters the man's head. This was quite shocking - bearing in mind there were two pages to go. Despite being a fairly unlikable man, there is comedy in his cynicism, and so I really felt that bullet enter his brain, even before Wolff describes the process of the bullet in the brain.

But the profundity lies in the end, in turning the 'life flashing before your eyes' on its head, and the denouement...the telling of the life-he-doesn't-recall made Anders likable, and in turn made the story emotive...what he does remember made me think. I had to think. It didn't jump out at me, although it felt right and quite beautiful on the surface. But perhaps it is about self-awareness, and awareness of others, both of which often walk hand-in-hand. Anders stops himself from asking the boy to repeat his words, because it would sound like he was correcting his grammar, but that wasn't the reason. The reason was, of course, 'they is'.

They is – they exist. He's not alone.

That's how I saw it. Any thoughts, anyone?

4.3.2 "It's More About Process Than Product"

Most face-to-face workshops place emphasis on product, and even when the product is presented in draft form – as a work in progress – that text serves as the beginning and end of the workshop discussion. As a result, product is privileged over process, which distorts and undermines the importance of creative writing processes. Therefore, what is particularly useful for undergraduate writers is the way discussion forums emphasise the process over the product.

Undergraduates frequently start a module confident in their assumption that their classmates' writing is much better than their own writing. When they see their peers' drafts and realise that drafts don't have to be perfect and that those written by their peers look pretty similar to their own, they see that it is safe to loosen up and take risks in developing ideas. Krista Homicz asserts that 'the electronic environment can promote collaborative learning as [writers] post written work to the group, view common copy on screen, [and] respond to each other's work'.[36] Although in-class writing groups also accomplish these things, the electronic environment does them better because writers are able to see how other students have handled the writing process and the creation of their work. Our student writers frequently post threads for discussion (and feedback) about their writing process:

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35 George Hillocks, *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), pp. 149-50.

36 Krista Homicz, 'Virtual Arenas: Students' Computer Interactions Shape Their Perceptions of Themselves as Writers', *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 53 (2000), pp. 39-57 (p. 43).

Example: CW1001 Discussion Forum

by R on 16 October 2009 13:10:31
RE: nngghh... must... stop... writing...

when I get an idea about writing I find it hard to put the brakes on, with a stream of consciousness like a charging bull/speeding express train. Fortunately I was more restrained with my opening lines for the short story, but there was still too many of them, when compared to those marvellous people that can say so much in a single line...

by S on 16 October 2009 18:19:50

I alternate between spending hours and hours planning something, sometimes going as far as to plan each individual paragraph before I try to actually write it, and just having an idea and running with it to see where it goes.

Both have downsides, if I over plan it lacks an organic feel and it is very hard to free myself up to actually write creatively, and if I just free write I very rarely keep track of the original idea and often end up writing something that contradicts itself several times over. I'm currently trying to merge these two techniques in a way that produces something that is at least acceptable.

The ability to exchange revisions and commentary on texts via discussion forums also encourages immersion in the process of composition itself, and the online writing workshop becomes a discussion *in* writing. The student posts a story/poem, receives comments, responds through revision, receives more comments... etcetera. Discussion forums thus transform a static discussion 'about' a text into a kinetic movement through ideas, and place the creative piece in a continually changing context of communication.

As all creative writing tutors know, by embracing a new technique or idea, the writer may grow. However, in showing their work to others, especially creative work, which feels particularly precious, students can feel exposed and vulnerable – not just to the other participants, but also to new ideas. Accepting new suggestions about how to write/right one's story is a risky business for undergraduate writers. Therefore we want participants to enter the feedback dialogue with 'resilient vulnerability' so they not only learn from the process, but also survive it. In online dialogue, 'words linger, thoughts are not interrupted, and errors of spontaneity are forgiven by the chance for rewrite. The very limits of a purely text-based forum …turn out to be a great advantage'.[37] We know that writing is more about process than product; it is the journey, not the destination that will stand us in good artistic stead. After all, 'consistent perfection is not a requirement for becoming a writer'.[38]

The following exchange shows how the reader is responding to an early draft version of a short story that has not been entirely successful. The reader points to specific problems in the text, as well as places where it proved successful, and tries to point out why a particular technique isn't working by explaining generic conventions. The second responds with the sort of 'resilient vulnerability' that shows commitment to both authorial intention and revision.

Example: Critique Circle Forum

by J on 08 November 2009 16:57:36
RE: "The hard man" (short story)

The first sentence doesn't work for me because it's working too hard (i.e., a "faceless" casket that "stares" makes no sense, metaphorically or literally, and draws attention to itself).

The second paragraph is much stronger, more interesting and its descriptions delight (e.g., prison issue shoulders and tail of a tattoo snaking above the collar--both v. good details that show us he's a hard man). Nice touch with the way the mourners crowd the back-- as they do most noticeably at funerals.

Then I'm not sure where this heads to other than a series of flashbacks that roll too quickly and come too prematurely. There must always be a good reason for a flashback to occur in a story, and it needs to come at a pivotal point in the tale. More important, flashbacks in the best short stories tend to reveal the epiphany/eloquent incident rather than merely fill in gaps with a backstory. I think readers will be put off by all the temporal see-sawing that's going on here.

Hope this helps.

by P on 08 November 2009 18:06:51
RE: "The hard man"

Hi J,

the first line was meant to show that the mourner feels he is being watched by the corpse, there is a face there because the casket is open, but the mourner is unable to look at it. I can see what you mean though, saying it is working too hard.

The flashback paragraph was written forgetting the plot line. There are a number of flashbacks, each designed to show the personality of the main character or advance towards the crisis. When I wrote that part I forgot that memories play a big part and that paragraph is being re-written. I had already decided that before the critique on Wednesday.

I feel as the main characters relationship with his wife is pivotal to the story, and she is dead, memory flashbacks are needed to move the story forwards, but I would be very happy to hear if there are any other techniques I could use to achieve this.

It may not seem like it, but I do have a very good idea of where this story is going, though there is a lot of work to do to get to the end of the journey.

Thank you for your feedback, it will certainly help me improve this.

As this example shows, discussion forum posts also provide a record for the student of their reflective process – be it about a set text, a peer's creative piece, or one of their own (depending upon the parameters of the task set). Even if the forum is informal – more of an online 'café' than a structured place of learning, they can still look back and see how they've grown, changed in attitude, increased their skill level, etcetera. We ask them to reflect on this in a writer's log at the end of their course, and several of them cut and paste from the forums to illustrate their development to us, as part of their assessment portfolio.

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37 Barclay Hudson, 'Critical Dialogue Online: Personas, Covenants and Candlepower,' in Kjell Erik Rudestam and Judith Schoenholt-Read (eds.) *Handbook of Online Learning: Innovations in Higher Education and Corporate Training* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002) pp. 53-90 (p. 59).

38 Mary Cantrell, 'Teaching and Evaluation: Why Bother?' in A. Leahy (ed)., *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project* (Toronto: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2005), pp. 65 -75.

4.3.3 "Discover Your Voice"

"Nobody teaches a writer anything. You tell them what you know. You tell them to find their voice and stick with it, because that's all you have in the end…"
Grady Tripp in *The Wonder Boys*.

Creative writing tutors spend a great deal of time trying to get students to write as they speak; that is, to get them to unlearn the rather formal way of writing essays that schools seem to teach. Contemporary fiction and poetry is not written like this. It is written in a much more informal voice, using colloquialisms, even slang. It is written using a vernacular, the kind of language we find students slip into quite readily in online discussion. Barclay Hudson says that online dialogue has 'a mix of spontaneity and thoughtfulness'.[39] This is exactly the kind of tone or style we would want students to try to achieve in their fiction writing, especially in life-writing. The informality of cyber-talk seems to foster this, whereas the academic environment where students are learning can inhibit their natural style.

Gilly Salmon contends that discussion forums foster a hybridised form of discourse that straddles the formality and permanence of writing and the informality and transience of talking.[40] As a result, voices used in discussion forums can usefully be applied to students' creative writings because online conversations show dialogue writ large. Students are writing and reading through their own and each others' dialects, idiolects and online personae/roles, so they're beginning to develop a writer's inner ear for speech which can then find its way into narrative and character voices. When students' private voices become public and they're practising those public voices through posted conversations, a more comfortable, confident storytelling voice starts to evolve. Here's an example of how a first year writer infused an autobiographical incident with humour writing techniques to create a more public story-telling voice that intends to entertain.

4.4 Guidelines

> **Example: CW1001 Discussion Forum**
>
> **by DD on 22 October 2009 21:09:22**
> **RE: dogs ate my John Gardner**
>
> a true and tragic story:
>
> Last night, after an especially unproductive wrestling match with my short story plot, I turned in late and left my copy of John Gardner's Art of Fiction on my desk, forgetting to put it back on the shelf.
>
> This morning, I had a very early start, precluding even yesterday's dirty dishes—never mind tidying the rest of my sty. I was out most of the day. Upon my return, I was reminded yet again why i keep everything on 6'-high shelves in the first place: so that it is beyond Effective Dog Range.
>
> They have their own toys, but they get bored easily, and especially if I'm gone longer than a few hours at a time. The Art of Fiction has become the latest victim of my oversight.

> The binding has mostly been stripped of pages, the majority of which have been used in oral origami; some have disappeared altogether. I don't know whose idea it was, but I've informed all three of them that if they're going to start eating my textbooks, then they need to commit to crapping out at least one pass-grade assignment between them every week, or we're just not going to be able to do this.
>
> The best part: I had been considering rewriting my short story opening with a fictionalised account of the time Motke chewed up my painstakingly assembled and painted scale model of the USS New Jersey. Thankfully, The Art of Fiction should be easier to replace...

4.4.1 Setting Up Online Critique Groups

The focus of any creative writing module should be on small groups. Online critique groups should have between three and five members. Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet recommend the use of self-selecting groups based on writing genres. According to them, 'groups with common purposes and similar strivings feed off each other's energy'.[41] Forming online critique groups based on students' reading and writing interests allows them to exchange critiques with writers interested in genres similar to their own. They will share a generic language and conventional wisdom, so to speak, and therefore are more confident and better able to collaborate with writers familiar and excited with their genre of writing.

4.4.2 Steering the Process

Reading and responding constructively to a group of peer writers about writing can strengthen students' independent ability to read for revision. In the online workshop, students practice making constructive comments that are directed at writing rather than at writers, a distinction that can help depersonalize the process and increase the usefulness of feedback comments. Students will have much more success (both as reviewers and reviewees) if they write a formal peer response critique. The following strategies help move writers towards more thoughtful and helpful critiques:

- Practising as a large group, giving a mock critique of stories/poems primes the pump, gets students' critical and analytical muscles working, reminds them they know how to be readers, and gives teachers the opportunity to model how to reframe vague (or overly evaluative) comments.

- A laundry list of "I liked…" or numerous writing issues needing attention won't work, so provide reviewers with a couple of prompts based on the issues to address in the story/poem (e.g. What is it? How does it work?) to encourage more insightful, supported comments.

- Writing a self-evaluation/revision plan helps writers apply feedback (teacher's or other students') to their drafts and make real revisions.

39 Barclay Hudson, 'Candlepower: The Infinite Flow of Online Collaborative Learning' in Kjell Erick Rudestam and Judith Schoenholt-Read (eds.), *Handbook of Online Learning* (London: Sage, 2009), pp. 267-300 (p. 282).

40 Gilly Salmon, *E-moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online*, 2nd ed., (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004).

41 Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet, "The Writing Community: A New Model for the Creative Writing Classroom," *Pedagogy* 8 (2008), pp. 305-325 (p. 318).

4.4.3 Creating Trust and Commitment

Mutual respect within groups often leads to a greater willingness to accept criticism from others and the desire to improve week on week. We use discussion forums to allow students to introduce themselves. We also require the online critique circles to work together in groups during class time to build relationships and trust. Students frequently use the face-to-face group work in class to build on their online discussions and critiques of drafts, affording them the opportunity to expand on the feedback presented online and/or to bounce potential revision ideas off each other. To encourage commitment to helping each other become better writers, critique groups observe deadlines for uploading their work online. Reviewers respond initially through the forum and bring copies of their written responses to share in class. This pre-class conversation thus works much like a small workshop wherein each work is read and criticised by all. The work's writer does not respond verbally, but takes notes so as to work up a reflection and prepare questions for readers. During face-to-face workshops, students are then free to expand upon their responses and writers can seek clarification and respond to (rather than defensively refute) these comments based upon their online workshop reflections.

4.4.4 Mentoring and Guiding

Ideally, large creative writing modules should be team-taught. Two will usually do: one teacher to function as a mentor and one to function as a guide. Roles are interchangeable, but the teacher's primary job is to offer expert advice, to keep groups on task and, if necessary, to arbitrate in case of personal conflicts. Tutors should initially dip into the online conversations about scripts, responding to responses, guiding conversations by elaborating on a particular technique used or suggesting a technique that could have been used, and providing examples of works that effectively use these techniques. As the semester progresses, they can then respond more as a mentor and editor to peer-reviewed drafts, offering more specific and expert advice about revision strategies.

4.5 Conclusion

In writing, words matter – words are everything. Ours is not performance art. We only have words as our tools for capturing attention, for moving the reader. Therefore, to hone one's skills in an online environment which is all about the written word seems right and natural. Using this medium to teach our craft as well is exactly right; it's pertinent and entirely appropriate. Talking with peers about their work can strengthen students' ability to articulate specific reactions and suggestions. We know that negotiating a revision suggestion with our own colleagues can require a tricky balance of tact and clarity. When it is made clear that "good job!" and "this is perfect as is!" will not be considered satisfactory remarks, students will develop critical/evaluative thinking and speaking skills that they'll find useful in future scholarly and professional endeavours. After all, many of them will go on to ply their trade doing some form of professional if not creative writing in later life. It makes sense, then, that students need to develop their own critical and evaluative skills. Writing a report, or responding to a peer's piece, can help develop these. It's a skill which becomes invaluable for a writer when they leave the free-feedback environment of a writing course. (Out in the professional world, the only free feedback is rejection: usually polite, always unexplained. Not exactly the feed-forward they are nurtured with at university.)

Hearing the opinions and critiques of other writers, then, is a vital component of every creative writer's growth, and the use of online discussion forums and critique circles enable writers to receive commentary from a vast and diverse range of readers. While technology won't fundamentally alter the definition of what we do, there are theoretical and practical advantages to be gained when we supplement traditional creative writing classroom activities with online ones. These new technologies of space provide a place to expand workshop discussions, exchange writing, conduct classroom business and encourage student-to-student interaction.

Case Study: The Role of a Clear Discussion Board Structure in an Online MA in Creative Writing

Heather Beck, Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU)
Heather Beck is a novelist and short story writer and Senior Lecturer in the Writing School at Manchester Metropolitan University. She is editor of *Teaching Creative Writing*, a book in the English Subject Centre's *Teaching the New English* series; the volume includes contributions from over two dozen writers in the UK and USA (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

Introduction

I started the online MA in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) in 2002. The course runs on the VLE platform WebCT and is part-time with two strands: Novel and Poetry Writing. We use both asynchronous discussion boards and synchronous weekly online seminars conducted in chatrooms. While discussion board participation is not assessed, it is built into course structure and explicitly linked to subsequent online seminars and assessed essays at the end of each module. Discussion board postings are never anonymous as staff and students must take responsibility for their views just as they do in face to face discussions. The course was adapted from an already successful campus-based MA, but it was the first entirely online course at MMU. As such, I had to learn about discussion boards and how best to use them as I went along, through various mistakes as well as successes. If you're thinking of developing an online course, there are good books to read, such as Gilly Salmon's *E-moderating* (ibid. footnote 40 on p.34) but more importantly, try to see a range of working discussion boards, talk to involved staff and students, and even ask if you can sit in on a course over a period of time to see how it works week to week. In this case study I discuss the key role a clear structure plays in the effective use of discussion boards.

Although we run both a novel and poetry writing strand, we use one discussion board for the whole course. It is possible to separate the strands, and WebCT also allows you to group students, so they can only see certain parts of the board, but this is more complicated to set up and maintain. Moreover, I don't like the idea of hiding things from students. One communal discussion board likewise makes students feel less isolated, allowing them to see other seminar groups at work and helping new students learn from those 'ahead' of them. In 2002 when the course started, my first mistake was to have only two topic areas: novel and poetry. Within a few days, the board was chaotic. Novel students were posting to the poetry area and poetry students were posting to the novel area. Even worse, there were so many messages that it was hard to make sense of anything. Some postings were lengthy email-type discussions and responses, and while some were about the course, others were more personal, e.g., "My cat is a vegetarian. What does your cat eat?" Hence my second major mistake was failing to indicate how the two different topics should be used.

Current Discussion Board Structure

Through a process of refinement based on staff and student feedback, the current discussion board is structured from top to bottom into four main areas:

- topics common to both novel and poetry strands
- novel strand topics
- poetry strand topics
- archives

Each topic area's first posting is a message stating what the topic is for and explaining its protocol.

Common Topics

At the top of the board is a topic common to both strands entitled 'Online Student Handbook.' The first posting says 'This topic area contains the Online Student Handbook, including online etiquette, assessment requirements and deadlines. While you cannot post messages to this topic area, please contact your tutor to discuss any questions you have arising from the Handbook.' Below this there is another topic area entitled 'Student Announcements.' The first message explains the protocol: 'This is a news area to tell others about useful websites, competition details, literary festivals, and any publication successes you have had. If you want to engage in a discussion with one person in particular, please do this through the course email system as the discussion board is intended for group announcements.'

Novel and Poetry Topics

Topics for each strand are grouped below the common topics, and they all have clear content labels that don't leave users guessing what they might find. Because each tutor sets the guidelines for how her/his module will run, I will limit my discussion below to one module I teach on the novel writing strand before I turn to the final discussion board area, the archives.

Contemporary Literature Module

I've chosen to describe this module because the structure could easily be adapted to courses not specific to creative writing. Students read a range of contemporary novels selected for the stylistic and technical issues they raise for apprentice writers. Assessment is an end of course essay set by each student. The first half of the essay discusses a stylistic or technical issue in one or more novels from the course. The second half of the essay discusses how learning relates to decisions made in the student's own creative writing. The pedagogic reasoning for this assessment is that it reflects on the Literature Module but also prepares students for the next module, which is the Writing Workshop in which they post extracts from their novels to the discussion boards for feedback. As is described below, the Literature Module also introduces students to protocol that will be used in the subsequent Writing Workshop module. The Contemporary Literature areas of the board (in bold below) look something like this:

Topic	Unread Messages	Total Messages	Status
Student Handbook	0	2	Public, locked
Student Announcements	3	14	Public, unlocked
Novelists Cont. Lit. Mod. – **Agendas** (Tutor Heather Beck)	5	13	Public, unlocked
Novelists Cont. Lit. Mod. – **Agenda Responses** (Tutor Heather Beck)	3	12	Public, unlocked
Novelists Cont. Lit. Mod. – **Star Style Exercises and Feedback** (Tutor Heather Beck)	7	15	Public, unlocked
Novelists Cont. Lit Mod. – **Online Seminar Log** (Tutor Heather Beck)	0	1	Public, unlocked
Poets Workshop Mod. – Postings and Feedback (Tutor Michael Symmons Roberts)	6	7	Public, unlocked
Poets Workshop Mod. – Online Seminar Log (Tutor Michael Symmons Roberts)	6	7	Public, unlocked
Archives -- Novelists Cont. Lit. Mod. – Agendas (Tutor Heather Beck)	0	12	Public, unlocked
Archives -- Novelists Cont. Lit. Mod. – Agenda Responses (Tutor Heather Beck)	0	145	Public, unlocked
Archives -- Novelists Cont. Lit. Mod. – Star Style Exercises and Feedback (Tutor Heather Beck)	0	133	Public, unlocked
Archives -- Novelists Cont. Lit Mod. – Online Seminar Log (Tutor Heather Beck)	0	9	Public, unlocked

Top level of the discussion board headings for the Online MA in Creative Writing.

Students post messages each week by deadlines and after each weekly online seminar I move the postings to the Archives section. This clear structure means students have to do something on the board continuously, yet they can still access past work.

As before, the first message in each topic area explains what the topic is for, sets protocol and explains the reasoning behind the protocol.

Agendas

In the Agendas topic area, I post an agenda of three to four questions for each novel as well as a list of relevant websites. I explain that Agendas refer to websites in at least one question to familiarise students with specialist knowledge as the module progresses; for example, to answer a question they might have to look at the British Council website of Contemporary Authors or an author or publisher's website. I post all Agendas to the discussion board at beginning of the module, to give students time to answer the questions. (I would prefer to release Agendas gradually, so students don't try to work too far ahead, but their feedback insists a preference for everything at once because of their busy work and family commitments.)

Agenda Responses

In this topic area, students post their answers by at least two days before the weekly online seminar meets. Protocol is set that they answer each question in 250 words or less. I call this the 'bonsai principle' and explain in the topic area that it helps them focus only on essentials. I ask students to read the posted responses before our weekly online seminar, and the bonsai principle ensures that apprentice novelists don't write novel length answers to questions that are so long that no one has time to read them. Rather, students are encouraged to 'grow' their short answers during the weekly synchronous online seminars; likewise, they are asked to respond to their peers' thoughts during the online seminar or via email, but not via subsequent postings as this creates unmanageable congestion on the board.

Star Style Exercises and Feedback

This topic area helps students read more closely as writers and introduces them to feedback and editing skills they will develop in the subsequent Writing Workshop module. I establish a rota of 2-3 students to 'star' each week. At least one week before their starring seminar occurs, the weekly Stars post a style exercise that imitates or parodies the weekly novel. This gives the others enough time to post feedback to the stars as well as preparing their own agenda responses, and as with the Agenda Response protocol, the non-stars post their feedback to Stars at least two days before the online seminar, so the stars have time to read feedback. Stars do not post their 'feedback on the feedback' to the board; as with Agenda Responses, all this is saved for the weekly synchronous online seminar.

Each week I post tutor feedback to Star Style Exercises and Star agenda responses, giving individuals formative feedback and encouraging others to learn by reading what I have said to their peers. For the first few weeks I post my feedback early,

so everyone can see an example of what to do, but after a few weeks, I post on the deadline, so students don't merely echo my responses. The first message in the topic area explains the protocol and also includes the rota list, so students can look here rather than ask their tutor if they forget when it is their turn.

Online Seminar Log

This topic contains transcripts of the weekly online seminars. WebCT automatically creates these and I post them after each seminar for students to read at their leisure. Online seminars are notoriously fast and furious and students really appreciate being able to reflect on what was said at length. Likewise, logs are useful if a student misses a seminar. Students complain bitterly if the log is not posted straight away, so this aspect of the board is clearly well used.

Archives

The bottom portions of the discussion board menu consists of Archives, which grow as the active parts of the board are cleared weekly to make way for new postings. Archives are also exceedingly popular, with students reading not only their own but also modules from previous years. This aspect helps students review learning as they go along and when they prepare to write their essays. A substantial archive also has the potential of developing into a useful resource for research into discussion board pedagogy.

Online Seminars as 'Fluid' Discussion Boards

Asynchronous discussion boards are very good for extended thought before posting; their 24/7 accessibility is also advantageous. However, their lack of dynamics and live interaction with others is a disadvantage, which is why we run weekly synchronous online seminars which I think of as 'fluid discussion boards'. Online seminars are not as rich as face to face seminars, insofar as you cannot see and hear students and cannot cover as much material typing as you can talking. Nonetheless, good points for online seminars include possibilities for guest speakers anywhere in the world to sit in on discussions. Students and tutors can similarly participate from wherever they happen to be, so long as there's an internet connection. Unlike campus seminars, it's also more difficult for one person to dominate since everyone can be typing and sending their messages at once. This creates multiple threads of conversation as participants pick out different aspects of a discussion to follow at once.

However, if threads of conversation multiply too much, they lose logic, and online seminars can then be a bit like T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* gone mad. Hence, a pre-agreed structure in these seminars is paramount to their success. For the Contemporary Literature Module discussed above, each seminar is one and a half hours long. The pre-agreed structure is that the first hour covers Agenda questions and responses, concluding with other issues arising. The last half hour then gives the weekly stars a chance to comment on feedback and request further clarification. Throughout each seminar, I keep the students on track and also timekeep to ensure we cover everything during our allotted time. If students want to continue in more detail, they meet afterwards in WebCT's Common Room for online chats.

Discussion Boards are Not Enough

After each seminar I debrief students via individual emails and ask them if they want to send their thoughts to me by email which we then use as the basis for a one-to-one tutorial on the telephone or in WebCT's chatrooms. Personal tutorials are important as matters often arise that were not evident from the discussion boards or online seminars. For example, during a telephone tutorial, I discovered that one student had been brooding on a single comment I had made that he considered negative, although the other 99% of feedback he found helpful. We were able to pursue this and he eventually realised that I had located something in his writing about which he had not been sure himself; he said that he hadn't realised this before our conversation and that if it hadn't taken place, he would have brooded so much that it would have adversely affected his attitude towards the whole course. In a face-to-face seminar, this would probably have been more evident from his body language, but it didn't come across with the WebCT technology.

For these reasons, we also hold an annual non-compulsory residential week. It's not compulsory because we don't want to disadvantage students who live abroad or who are unable to travel. Nonetheless, all of us who do attend agree that the technology is enabling since without it, most wouldn't be able to do an MA; however, it simultaneously brings home how very rich face-to-face seminars can be. Video cameras are not a solution since we don't want to exclude potential students who might not have access to 'higher platform' technology. Moreover, as students point out, one advantage with existing discussion boards is that they consist of writing, rather than talking about writing. For apprentice writers, this can't be all bad.

Case Study: *The Weather in Japan*: a Creative Writing chatroom

Michael Symmons Roberts, Manchester Metropolitan University
Michael has published two novels and teaches at the Writing School of Manchester Metropolitan University where he is Professor of Poetry. His poetry has won several awards and he has also undertaken commissions in music, opera and radio drama.

After years of leading round-the-table workshops at Arvon, poetry festivals, schools and universities, I was rather wary when asked to teach my first online poetry workshop. I had recently joined the staff of Manchester Metropolitan University's (MMU) Writing School, which has a strong tradition of teaching poetry to undergraduates and postgraduates, and was one of the first UK universities to use online teaching to develop distance-learning MA programmes.

In the last five years I have taught online literature courses – including Twentieth Century Poetry and Post-War British Poetry - plus a range of poetry workshops. My MA seminar groups have included young poets straight from the BA programme, and busy mature students in mid-career, some with books of poems already published. I've come to the conclusion that online teaching works. In fact, it works brilliantly. In fact, in many ways it works better than face-to-face teaching. I'd better explain myself…

The MA workshops and seminars run by MMU are hosted by the university as part of its WebCT resources, accessible to all current students with their student number and passcode. Many of the poetry students, when they sign up, have no previous experience of online chatroom seminars, and some have barely sent an email. Most are a bit nervous approaching the first session. Will the technology catch them out? Will they lose their thread? Will they be able to express themselves?

I shared these concerns before I taught my first online seminar. To my relief, and to the relief of each new student cohort, the grammar of online seminars is surprisingly easy to pick up. Here's how it works with, for example, an MA writing workshop.

A day or two before the workshop, the students post their poems on the WebCT discussion board, or (if they choose to do it this way) email them to the cohort via a group email. They are discouraged from adding notes ('*I think the last stanza is the weakest*', '*I want this to sound like Elizabeth Bishop*', '*I heard this conversation on the bus…*' etc), so they get the cleanest possible reading from the workshop. Whether they choose email or bulletin board, this can become (after the workshop) a medium for further discussion of the poems.

At the appointed time, they log into the chatroom, and after the usual small talk the workshop begins. The bread and butter of the workshop is short, clear comments. A sentence or two is usually enough to get the point across. Brevity is not a bad habit for poets. Fuller explanations can be added, if a short explanatory remark comes first – '*give me a minute, I want to say more on this*'. Any remarks should be prefaced with the name or initial of the person being addressed, to avoid the risk of a comment being 'orphaned' by other people's comments appearing first. Although clarity is important, I encourage students not to worry too much about typos. Speed and fluency are more important. If a typo threatens to undermine the meaning of a line, then type a single word correction on a separate line below. If, as a tutor, you wish to prepare longer chunks of text (for example, to introduce a new thread of discussion), then these can prepared in Word and pasted into the chatroom when you need them.

That, in short, is how it works. But why is it better than face-to-face workshops? I think it's better in five ways.

Firstly, the 'Weather in Japan' factor. This case study takes its title from a very fine Michael Longley poem. Like many of Longley's recent poems, it is beautifully brief, tight and lyrical. But the title also conjures something of the wonderful strangeness and richness of these online workshops. Recent MA online cohorts at MMU have included students logging on from Nepal, Germany, Finland, Greece and Spain in different time-zones and very different situations. The student in Nepal had to cope with planned power-cuts, which necessitated the group (willingly) changing the workshop time. But as the political crisis deepened in Nepal, and she sought to address that in her writing, the whole group was challenged by it.

Secondly, for an MA course with a high proportion of part-time and mature students with busy lives, the technology is what makes the course possible. People log on from their laptops in hotels around the world. One student managed to spend three months touring India last year without interrupting her MA course, by taking a laptop and finding a wi-fi connection when she needed to email poems or attend an online seminar.

Thirdly, online workshops lack body language. This makes me think of a line from a recent interview with American poet August Kleinzahler: 'Most teachers of creative writing often go in there and just confirm the students in their self esteem'.[42] It's a polemical point, but he does highlight a danger, particularly in the teaching of poetry, where so many students draw on their own lives as subject-matter, and the line between writer and writing is not always as clear as it should be. Online workshops remove many of the risk factors here: the dominance of certain loud voices or strong personalities, the distractions of body language, clothing, subtle attractions and antagonisms. All these are factors that make self-esteem such a complicated issue in face-to-face workshops. There are, of course, online equivalents to some of these, but they are much easier to handle as a tutor, and far less dominant and distracting for other students.

Fourthly, online seminars are faster and more complex. I was worried at first about threads of discussion breaking, and three or four different strands of conversation interweaving. I thought we might all lose our way, and the seminars would lose focus. But it quickly became clear that people can follow three or four threads of argument. In fact, not only can they follow them, they can contribute to them, the different threads can inform each other, and the whole discussion can proceed apace from multiple angles. After four or five seminars, the speed of these interwoven discussions can be blistering.

Finally, students can concentrate on contributing to the seminar without having to worry about taking notes. The online system automatically (unless you ask it not to) saves a log of every seminar and workshop.

Of course, the technology is not always reliable. The MMU system is very robust and effective, but occasionally (usually due to issues of compatibility between home computer systems and the university software) students may have problems getting into the chatroom, or find themselves inexplicably kicked out of it. But given the complexity of what's going on, these glitches are no surprise. Thankfully, they are usually fixable, and as the technology develops they should become rarer still.

Every now and then, I hear suggestions that – since most home computers now have built in webcams and microphones – these online workshops could turn into video conferences. But this, for me, is based on a misunderstanding. The online workshop as it stands is not a sawn-off version of a real face-to-face workshop, any more than radio is merely TV without pictures. In fact, it is a way of teaching poetry that stresses brevity and clarity of expression, and is conducted solely through the written word. That's hard to beat.

And talking of brevity and clarity of expression, here's Michael Longley's complete poem:

THE WEATHER IN JAPAN
Makes bead curtains of the rain,
Of the mist a paper screen.[43]

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42 August Kleinzahler, in *The Verse Book of Interviews: 27 Poets on Language, Craft and Culture*, (eds.) Brian Henry & Andrew Zawacki (Amherst, MA: Verse Press, 2005), p. 37.

43 Michael Longley, 'THE WEATHER IN JAPAN', in *The Weather in Japan* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000).
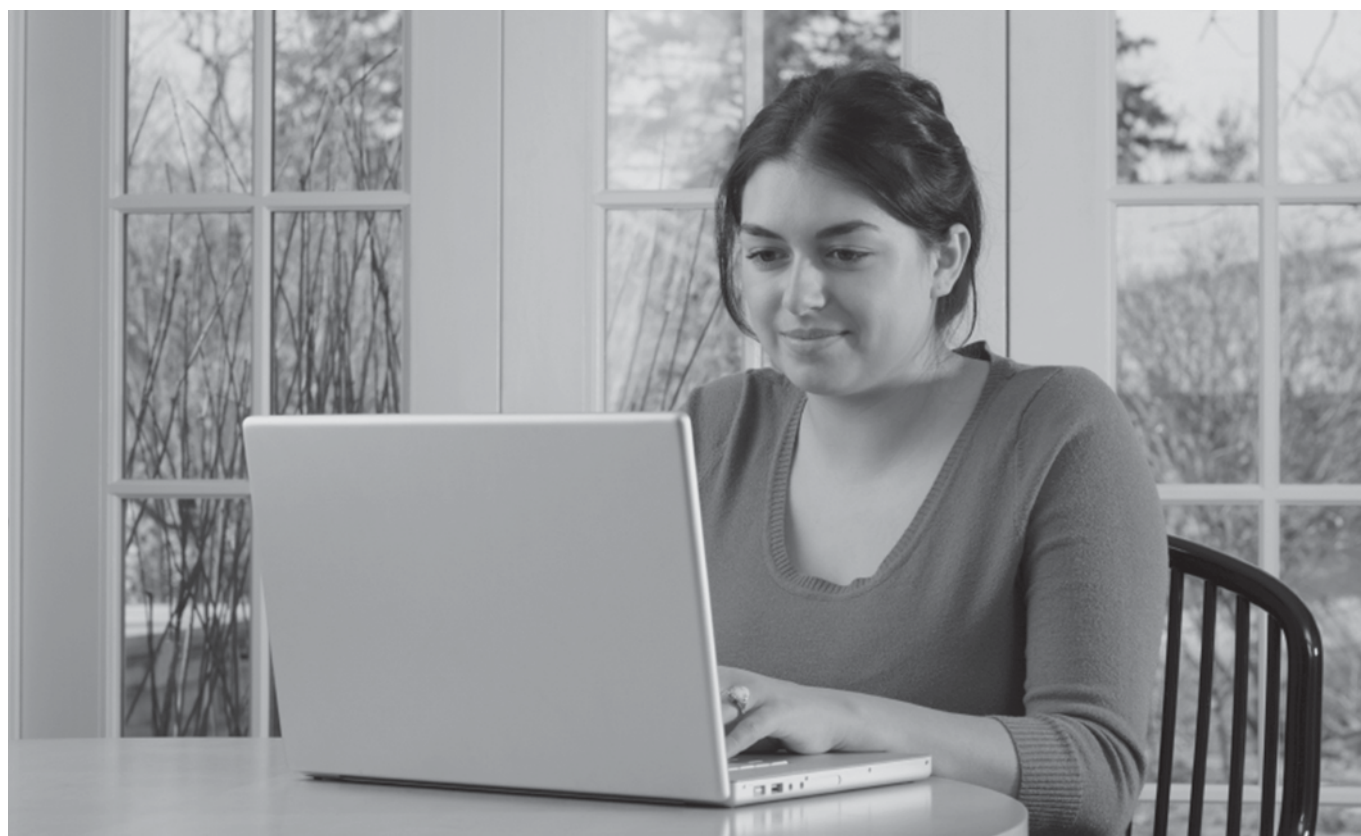
Conclusion

We hope that this Guide represents a 'coming of age' in terms of discussion of the use of VLEs within English studies in the UK. It is no longer possible to claim that VLEs have nothing to offer in terms of teaching in our discipline; numerous examples from colleagues here and also elsewhere round the country confirm otherwise. Undoubtedly you have to want to engage with a VLE in order to explore what might be possible to do with it in relation to your teaching, but we have attempted to provide here as much sharing of knowledge and good practice as we currently have in order to encourage other colleagues to have a go themselves.

Whither the future of VLEs – both generally, and in relation to English studies? This is not an easy question to answer, but we can all be sure that technologies will continue to evolve and develop. It is likely that the use of e-learning will increase within Higher Education, and wider debates are already concerned with how we will all construct our 'digital identities' in the future. Soon the students in our classes will be the 'born digital' generation. Some regard the 'proprietorial' nature of VLEs – the fact that they are in some ways 'closed' systems, usually centrally managed from within our institutions – as a negative feature, compared to the more open and seemingly permeable boundaries of Web 2.0 applications. For example, it's very likely to be less possible for students to customise much of any given VLE topic they log into (say), as opposed to their Facebook page, although increasingly VLEs do allow for a certain degree of personalisation by individual users, and tutors/administrators are able to customise their topics as we have suggested in the Design chapter. But a VLE isn't Facebook, or any other web-based social networking site: it is a space designed to host online learning for a given community. It seems to us right that there are some boundaries around this (the 'walled garden' image is sometimes used to describe VLEs), and there is clearly still a place for the input and expertise of the course tutor in terms of shaping and guiding a VLE topic and what goes on in it. In terms of the kinds of activities discussed in this Guide we hope we have demonstrated that discussion boards can be used very effectively for discursive reflection, argument, critique and close textual reading. As opposed to some of the worst of the spontaneous postings that one sees routinely now on the web, where many websites invite comments and immediate feedback, discussion boards can be, and are, used for much more thoughtful, nuanced work. As noted in our student comments on what they find valuable about using VLEs in English studies, many value the discussion board as precisely a space where they can come when they've thought about a text or idea or issue *that bit more*. It offers a chance for our students to show how their knowledge is developing, as it is developing.

The web is still only a click on a link away when you are within a VLE, which is not very far, and there's room in a VLE for any number of valued web resources and a tutor's favourite texts, essays, articles, books. We hope this Guide has shown that VLEs can be used for a great deal more than some kind of 'dumping ground' for basic course outlines, bibliographies, and so on, useful though those things are to have online. Colleagues in all disciplines need subject-specific examples of good practice in the use of e-learning tools: that is the most effective way of disseminating their potential to academics. The limit on what can be done in terms of the development of online activities within English Studies and Creative Writing lies only in the limits of tutors' imaginations.

Appendix

Report on an Online Survey of Discussion Forums in English Studies

Hilary Weeks, University of Gloucestershire

In Spring 2006, we invited colleagues in English studies around the country to participate in our online questionnaire, 'Creating and Assessing VLE Discussion Forums in English Studies', hosted by the English Subject Centre. Our questionnaire solicited five categories of responses: (1) general matters on VLE use; (2) design of discussion board/forum/group folder activities; (3) assessment and learning outcomes; (4) e-moderating; and (5) how forum activities are embedded into module and course design. Fifty-one people took part. The raw data comprise 49 printed pages. Its results were often unexpected, but always interesting, and led to more questions – whether to assess or not, how the board helped socialise students, and so on. Most of all, we were delighted at the range and variety of experiences our colleagues revealed.

After some preliminary analysis, I divide my remarks roughly into the categories of design, assessment, and moderation, but my analysis isn't confined to the questions in each of the questionnaire's sections: many of the responses to questions in the last section (e) are pertinent to all three of our research areas. Comments have been edited for clarity and brevity brevity. The questionnaire was anonymous so my gendering of subject pronouns is random.

1. General

Nearly half the respondents used BLACKBOARD, not necessarily from choice, of course. Our questionnaire preceded the merger of WebCT and BLACKBOARD, and supposing no change in patterns of VLE use, a total of 63% would now (2006) be using BLACKBOARD, far outstripping the number of people using in-house systems (28%). Moodle (8%, though its popularity has grown since the survey took place) is an open-source system and thus occupies a middle ground between the commercial and in-house VLEs. There are others, including Bodington, used at Oxford, Leeds, and Manchester. All respondents indicated that their institution possessed a VLE of some sort, with a great majority (84%) stating that a discussion forum was available for English courses. About a third used discussion boards (or forums) for all (English) modules they teach, about a quarter for 50% of their modules, with numbers diminishing proportionately (15% used them for just one module). Curiously, those using them on 'most' (three-quarters) of their modules formed the smallest group; people are either whole-hearted or quite conservative about VLE use, with a fairly small ground in the middle. And while only a few people had used VLEs for more than five years (an IT hardcore of 5%), over 63% had been using them for between 2-5 years, and presumably are fairly at ease with their systems.

Of the 11 people who replied that they did not use discussion boards in English teaching, most answered quantitatively that they were willing but hadn't yet got quite to grips with them, which expresses much the same as those who felt unsure about how to use them for their own purposes and those who felt that VLEs were not worth the time and effort (18% each). One senses reluctance rather than opposition from these

quantitative data, since no-one objected in principle to distance learning. Eight people supplied other reasons. One person felt that VLEs didn't offer a 'meaningful learning tool, [with little] constructive or of appropriate quality [being] said on them' when compared to seminars. She also said that 'policing' discussion boards placed an 'additional burden' to already over-loaded staff – as opposed to other objections about unjustified time and effort. Another tutor pointed out that the short modules in Continuing Education created problems for VLE access. In 'Further Comments', respondents expressed nervousness with technology and 'lack of interest/expertise' among staff and students. A couple of people noted upfront that assessment was a potential problem (before they'd been asked to comment on assessment), linking credit to incentive. For one person, the VLE merely filled an administrative need, 'just an additional place' to post notices.

2. Design

The next batch of questions asked participants to describe what kinds of activities and design features they used with VLEs, especially on discussion boards. Quantitatively, over half the respondents used the VLE for textual analysis, as we might expect in English studies; typically, students read a posted or assigned text and then responded to discussion questions. Similarly, tutors are using online forums for other classroom-type activities, including peer assessment and group problem solving (the third and fourth most frequently-used online activities, at 38% and 28% respectively). These sorts of activities resemble conventional seminar work closely, with the added advantage that participants will have to have read the text or extract – in this sense, discussion board activities have the edge over a roomful of people who show up unprepared. We might argue though that such activities necessarily focus on extracts rather than whole texts, or that such a closely defined task might limit the breadth and depth of student response (and this depends on whether the work is being assessed, of which more later). It is perhaps rather surprising that tutors did not exploit the discussion board's possibilities more: for example, only 15% of respondents set up group writing activities, and even fewer (8%) used role play. Only about 21% of respondents set 'open' database activities (requiring students to search the web for appropriate sites), and fewer still went for 'closed' database analysis (8%).

However, tutors value the VLE as a resource bank, and this is the second most popular type of activity (43% of tutors use the VLE thus). One assumes that there is a time component to their choice, since students can go back to topics at their leisure, and the comments bear this out. Tutors mostly use VLEs

- as support to lectures, a place to discuss topics and coursework
- to post questions relating to that week's lecture for students to answer
- to facilitate discussion of set texts
- to set tasks on which students report back
- to offer updates on student work
- to encourage student feedback about the course

Another person mentions 'online conferences' but does not say whether these are asynchronous or real-time events.

When tutors were asked to describe the design features they used when creating and implementing discussion board activities: over 85% set open-ended questions for their students; 36% linked workgroups to the seminar groups, and almost 30% limited the workgroups to pairs or small groups, so that the discussion board becomes an extension of the classroom; finally, 28% linked the workgroups to the class as a whole. In contrast, 21% of respondents have used synchronous or real-time discussion, and it would be interesting to know whether they did so regularly or only as an experiment (real-time sessions take some extra time and effort to set up). The only comment we received on this matter was from a tutor who has set up master-class discussions (live Q & A) between a guest expert and students. More encouragingly, however, tutors were willing to exploit the opportunities of web-based work, even if that potential does not translate quite into designing new activities (and despite some anxiety about IT-proficiency that emerged from comments in section 2.1). Online work does seem to encourage a more integrated approach to research and discussion; 34% linked data gathering to discussion, surely an improvement over classroom rates. Even better, 77% of respondents use weblinks – indicating that most people have figured out how to create hyperlinks and HTML – while 36% used images. Smaller numbers used audio (18%) and video/DVD clips (11%), these low figures perhaps indicating tutors' uncertainty about copyright, or technical problems, where the university's system may be too early or low-powered to support video files. On the pedagogical side, over a quarter of respondents set model postings and replies to help students understand their tasks.

Comments for the design section were a bit sparse. Participants seemed reluctant to provide details, with five respondents out of 13 writing 'none' or 'don't use them' in the space provided for describing design features and/or innovative activities. One person noted that when she replaced a student presentation requirement from the seminar with a discussion board posting, students responded well (better than to the seminar-based task, presumably). The posting, she said, often provided 'a way into a new topic and as a means of sharing individual/small group research outside the classroom'. Another raised the matter of discussion initiated by the students rather than the teacher, a matter usually connected with e-moderating. This informal discussion was part of a creative writing module and thus overlapped somewhat with peer assessment (another stated activity). Neither of these respondents described how they achieved these results, and one gets the impression that while tutors will use existing design features, few people thought about pushing the limits of those features or customising them as required, or devising new pedagogical strategies to take advantage of them. One respondent has found an alternative: ready-made activities courtesy of the website **http://aspirations. english.cam.ac.uk/converse/seminars/bermudas.acds**

3. Assessment and Learning Outcomes

Questions about assessing online began with divergent views about whether or not such work ought to be assessed at all. Almost 49% were not sure, while the other half were mainly in favour (38%). Comments were equally mixed: as in earlier comments, some felt that assessing discussion board activities applied the carrot and stick needed to get 'goal-oriented'

students participating, with one respondent making the distinction between assessing participation ('completion/credit') and the work itself, though she did not say why she felt that the first was a better idea than the second. Similarly, another respondent stated that she planned both assessed and non-assessed activities, thus making the point that not all discussion board work need constitute an assessed online component (a point worth bearing in mind perhaps – do lecturers feel obliged to reward all online student work?). Several participants warned us that assessment needs to be handled carefully, with the criteria 'very clearly set out'; others valued 'informality' (presumably meaning assessment-free) and its 'class building' potential.

We did not ask people *whether* they assessed any of their modules' online components, but we inferred that where people do assess, the weighting is not great; out of 45 respondents, only 5 (11%) indicated that the students needed to pass this component to pass the class. Almost 69% stated that this question was 'not applicable', which suggests that most people simply don't assess. Likewise, the question about assessment criteria was not applicable to 28 out of 45 participants. Those to whom this question did apply indicate that 'enhancement/development of discussion' and 'critical incisiveness/ability' are their main criteria (27%, or 12 people, each). 'Evidence-gathering and selection' comes third (22% or 10), grammar and written expression (16% or 7), with only 2 people rewarding 'collaborative problem-solving skills' directly; most people, then, take this criterion for granted as a necessary part of discussion board use and learning. Interestingly, only 7 people rewarded students for 'successfully completing a certain number of activities', an attitude borne out by earlier responses, where 'evidence of students being really engaged' was more important (88%) than 'everyone taking part' (33%).

Other responses confirmed the pattern of preferring discursive and intellectual quality to quantity. Asked to explain what they most wanted English students to get out of discussion board activities, people overwhelmingly wanted to 'further ideas through discussion and debate' (82%, or 37 out of 45), and secondarily to 'develop skills in independent learning (almost 69%) – compared with the 47% (21) who wanted to develop skills in group-problem solving'. Again, this suggested that the latter was something that either tutors take for granted as part of skills that online users develop, or that could be achieved equally well in the classroom. Of the goals that are more specific to VLE use, promoting student confidence in IT mattered to over half the respondents (28/45), closely followed by expanding student knowledge of electronic resources such as Literature Online (LION) (56%). Only a few named improving grammar and written expression, or citation skills, perhaps oddly in view of the interest in helping students to expand their bibliographic and research skills. Comments included a wish to help students 'feel they're collaborating and part of a learning community – contributing to an ongoing resource'; to 'extend subject knowledge', specifically to use the discussion board as an extension of seminar space. Several people remarked on the social aspects of learning that VLE use could achieve: one person wanted the students to go 'beyond the confines of English, relating it [English studies] to other experience and disciplines – social interaction'; another wanted her students to 'feel able to express uncertainties, taking more chances than they might in face-to-face discussion

or in assignments'. One colleague upbraided us mildly for not including 'enjoyment and interest and engagement!' on our list; being serious-minded people, perhaps we assumed these were inseparable from discussion and debate. Point taken. She added that if the pleasure principle is observed, 'skills, deep learning and independence' will follow.

On the subject of how VLE forums can improve key English skills, over 82% (37 out of 45) chose both knowledge/understanding of texts and English studies-related concepts, and the ability to be self-reflective/reflect critically on others' ideas and arguments. Indeed, English lecturers refused to treat these as separate categories. Rhetorical skills of argument/debate came next (64% or 29) – as one person commented, 'all of the above, but perhaps rhetorical skills most of all: the sense of how to conduct a civilised argument in the context of English'. Next came close reading at 60%. All our categories scored highly, which suggests that lecturers using discussion boards have high expectations of what their students can achieve. A couple of results sorted strangely with each other: for instance, while people rated 'awareness of social and cultural contexts shaping meaning' and 'knowledge and understanding of literary theories' moderately (56% and 49%), only 36% chose 'command of broad range of critical terminology and vocabulary'. It is more important to tutors that their students recognise 'the multi-faceted nature of the discipline' (56%). Again, tutors expected the discussion board to play a social role within the learning context, one colleague emphasising the importance of creating 'a positive, constructive culture on the discussion board'. He also pointed out that 'if a seminar's dull and unproductive, the discussion board will be no solution'.

What makes a discussion board activity successful? We posed this question in the context of assessment, but answers may be equally pertinent to the matters of design and moderation. As we have already noted, evidence of full engagement was most people's top priority (over 88% or 37 out of 42). Evidence of students taking responsibility for their own learning outside the classroom (81%), lively and incisive discussion (79%), followed closely. Majority participation (64%) was more important than total participation (33%), but, as we've said, quality took precedence over quantity when it comes to postings (nearly 62%). Even 'evidence of critical analysis' mattered less than genuine engagement that requires (we'll assume) interest and enjoyment. One respondent appreciated the fact that discussion boards can 'produce the unexpected' and looked for 'signs of spontaneity – changes of mind, second attempts, and partial thoughts' as evidence of the engagement process. (Her comment raises the question of whether we should reward finished product less and thought processes more – could design features be developed around this pedagogical approach?). Other remarks were more prosaic. One colleague would 'settle for many of the class taking part' as an indication of success, and another relied on student evaluation forms when deciding on the success (or otherwise) of an activity.

Colleagues had plenty to say about what discussion board activities could accomplish over, or achieve more effectively than, traditional forms of assessment. However, most of the comments were quite general, sometimes theoretical, focusing mainly on what online discussion itself could promote or achieve.

In this sense, the replies were not very different from those to the previous few questions. About a dozen replies out of the 45 belong to the 'none', 'nothing' and 'not sure' category. Nevertheless, one person stated that discussion boards enabled 'shorter formative assessments [that could] be done asynchronously'; others mentioned 'text manipulation and group communications'; 'giving and receiving feedback [to be assessed later]'; and 'rehearsal for more formal learning experiences such as seminars, essay and exams' (but 'rehearsal' doesn't imply assessment). One participant valued the fact that postings 'allow students time to reflect and produce considered, measured comments – not possible in an exam situation'. Another wrote 'independent study', although once again it's not clear whether she meant that independent study done or posted on the VLE could constitute an assessed component, or that VLE work fostered independence.

A few people admitted candidly that they hadn't thought much about assessing online work, which suggests that for them, VLE work remained a useful adjunct rather than a developed module component. Someone objected to a blanket approach to assessment, arguing that it was impossible to judge its value 'without a proper consideration of just what's being assessed'. Others felt that assessment might be incompatible with the discussion board's freedom and informality: to assess forum activities 'would ruin them as free space for discussion and ideas'. VLE discussion can however 'bring together a wider diversity of experience and allow a level of informality that encourages participation', and in particular, noted one respondent, it can 'allow mature students more involvement' and enfranchise those who are 'happier to post than to speak up in class'. However, they did not say how assessing discussion might further these aims, nor did they make any suggestions about how to fit assessment with activities that promote these aims. Interestingly, no-one made the usual objections that (contrary to what the previous respondent said) an assessed online component disadvantages mature and returning students, or that mandatory, assessed online components create difficulties for those without proper access to a computer. Perhaps these problems no longer exist; perhaps the first one was always a myth.

Some respondents linked the general advantages with potential assessment, and pondered the possibilities. Given that 'students are more likely to participate online than in the classroom', discussion board work 'offered a "trace" of developing discussion, which would be very difficult to access with traditional forms of assessment'. The point is well taken: since online work is asynchronous discussion, discussion board activities can always be regarded as work in progress. We might think more carefully about ways to turn assessment of online work into meaningful continuous assessment. As another participant said, 'anything related to student-centred interactive development of ideas can be pursued effectively through the VLE'. Finally, a couple of people spoke approvingly of the element of 'risk' or 'risk-taking' that discussion board work entails; although they did not say so, this constitutes a learning experience and a sort of preparation for formally assessed work, especially exams.

4. Moderating

We kicked off by asking directly what makes a successful e-moderator, and received 45 out of 51 replies. The most startling answer was 'an approachable electronic presence', which begged the question of what 'presence' might constitute. However, most of the respondents believed that good 'presence' should mean a light touch, and advised moderators to

- maintain a backseat – just offering the odd bit of provocation to get them going (this is an unusually libertarian approach, as we'll see)
- take a hands-off approach but show interest
- facilitate discussion but don't dominate it
- allow students space to engage without feeling constrained by an over-involved moderator
- keep out of discussions as far as possible

The light touch should conceal a firm manage, in the view of many participants. Moderators should

- keep students focused but allow the discussion to take its own path
- be precise – let them know what is expected – but then leave them to it

These answers in fact illustrate the discussion board's dual nature: in the previous section, colleagues praised it as free space that allows students to develop in formal and informal ways and to promote socialisation, yet here the emphasis is on clearly-stated expectations, tasks, and outcomes – discussion board work emerged as a highly structured mode of learning. Typical comments indicated that a moderator should

- define learning outcomes related to e-learning
- set clear and specific (open and closed) tasks/questions, without setting too many questions at once
- give direction (ambiguous)
- know the learning outcome from the activity and discussions in order to give structure and measure success

The moderator's personal enthusiasm was very important to many people, since it set the example for the work to be done as well as the tone. A representative answer was 'enthusiasm and an enjoyment of students – you run it for love, not money'. Few would disagree. One felt that a touch of provocation was part of the stimulation, but more envisaged a kind but firm persona: 'lively, informal approach', 'appropriate tone – friendly, open, challenging', and so on. Moderators must also be motivators, some feel: as one colleague put it, the ideal moderator is 'keen, acts as a facilitator, and motivates and encourages participation'. However, the moderator must be 'committed to the VLE forum itself' as well as her subject. Commitment could take the form of 'logging in and contributing regularly', 'responding on a regular basis' (though without dominating or interfering, as we have noted), and providing 'personal comments – very much appreciated by the students'. One colleague argued that a good e-moderator was a 'weaver who can bring together disparate ideas and get flagging discussions off the ground', but this approach may be too controlling for many. ('Weaving' is another term used by Gilly Salmon, usually applied to student postings rather than the

facilitator's). Other personal qualities related to e-moderating are patience and especially 'flexibility' or 'responsiveness'.

In terms of guardianship, most felt that it was essential that the e-moderator set out ground rules, 'especially in the early stages' and maintain them. This respondent added that online discussion and content should be 'mentioned in other forums [modes of teaching and communication?], so that it was not seen as an isolated or peripheral part of the module' – an example of how e-moderation can spill over into other learning modes. Tutorial presence can and should 'keep students on-task' and even 'intervene, nudging the discussion in an appropriate direction if it's going off-course'. One respondent went further, believing that the e-moderator should set 'strict rules about not posting offending material', but a more typical concern was to enforce self-motivation in students when required. Etiquette can be regarded as part of self-motivation and self-governance. Finally, at least one respondent pointed out that the e-moderator's role and tasks were exactly the same online as in a seminar; and one made the excellent point that having broadband at home (now, of course, standard) was a prerequisite for maintaining any meaningful moderating role.

Our next questions were quantitative. Responses indicated the amount of e-moderation tutors build into discussion board activities, with 14 out of 41 (34%) claiming to be 'active in discussions'. Slightly fewer (11) commented on the postings to whatever extent, and 5 people (12%) monitored only. Eleven people added comments, and the picture that emerged was one of restraint: 'mainly monitor, but sometimes contribute'; 'launch activities, but try to resist commenting', 'occasionally contribute', and so on. One said that her intervention depended whether or not the online component was assessed, and others pointed out that of course it depended on the particular module – creative writing required more intervention than literature modules. Tutors most commonly monitored and/or contributed several times a week (52%, or 17 out of 33), a third did so once a week, but only 15% (5) logged on daily to check progress. These findings concurred broadly with the middle-way approach suggested by most of the comments.

Most conversations about e-moderation revolved around how much of the tutor's time it demanded. Our respondents believed overwhelmingly that becoming an e-moderator increased their workload (78% over the 10% who said it hasn't); 12% believed it made no difference. Of that 78%, almost all agreed that the time went on designing activities and monitoring discussion forums equally. Fewer than 10% mentioned marking as a consumer of their time, perhaps reflecting the small number of people who assessed some or their entire online module component. However, the few comments suggested other incursions into tutors' time – 'managing flaming issues', and 'handling emailed questions, crises, excuses' – though another person said that it cut down on phone calls, even if it kept him in the office for longer. Of the five people who answered 'no' to greater workloads, two indicated that VLE work could sometimes replace conventional classes and so save time, but only one person felt that overall VLE work meant less marking. One person felt that VLE use cut down on seminar preparation too. However, most tutors would probably say that preparing discussion board tasks outweighed any savings on the seminar front.

5. Discussion Forum Activities and Course Design

One tutor who didn't use VLEs stated that this was because she was 'not in charge of module design'; for her, VLE use requires a stake in the course design. This is not always so (for instance, part-time hourly-paid lecturers may well design and contribute online sessions and activities for a module), yet there's no disputing that responsibility and direction for VLE use usually rests with the module leader.

That said, how did tutors incorporate discussion board activities into their modules? Nearly 83% (34 out of 41) used forums to supplement lecture and seminar material, while just under half (49% or 20 people) used forums to prepare students for new lecture and seminar material, presumably in advance. Clearly, then, the VLE remained for most people inseparable from traditional teaching, and only 10% have replaced conventional seminars with a discussion board (22% used them as part of a distance learning package, so the figures depend very much on the institution). Some specific uses for the discussion board included as a revision tool, a feedback mechanism for creative writing, for students to 'ask questions about issues raised in class and to discuss ways of addressing assignment questions' (e.g. advice on requirements) or simply for students to 'discuss things among themselves'.

On the matter of training students to use the discussion board effectively, equal numbers of respondents gave students a training session and demonstrated by example – feedback on individual postings (37% or 15 out of 41). Answers indicated that all tutors used several different means of instruction rather than one single way. For instance, 12 people supplied handouts, 13 used lectures to demonstrate the techniques needed and supplied feedback also, and 14 people did the same in seminar. Surprisingly, quite a few people provided no instruction; maybe we were presumptuous not to include a 'no training given' choice on the questionnaire. Reasons for giving no information ranged from 'the university provides training before the module begins', and 'generic training [suffices]' to 'we throw them in at the deep end and they cope very well'. Some took a middle approach and set up a sample discussion board with technical features, etiquette, etcetera for students to copy, or included instructions on the notice board or in the group folder. A couple of people dispensed training to individuals as needed, and wrote 'instructions for newbies on the VLE itself'.

We asked participants whether they designed discussion board activities with other skills in mind, especially skills or knowledge needed for other coursework, and over 68% (28 out of 41) said they did, against 32% (13) who said no. Many used the activities for formative purposes, particularly if the module was assessed only by written work. A few were more specific:

• discussion boards offer help in critical readings and responses to texts

• they help with research, analysis and articulation of arguments

• they provide a resource centre, including a "how to" page and a page on plagiarism, links to learning resources, bibliography and e-learning tools

One person used set tasks cumulatively, 'encouraging students to be more autonomous as well as identifying topics for their essays'. Another used the discussion board remedially: 'If [a group of] students are struggling, I ask groups to appoint a scribe who'll post answers to questions raised in seminars; thus everyone in the group has a copy of my feedback. It has raised the level of discussion' – but, she added, it is hard work and very time consuming for her.

Many respondents agreed that discussion boards could accomplish much that traditional course design features cannot (78% or 32 out of 41; only 9 people disagreed). When asked to explain, many (again) gave general responses only, such as

• another way of getting the students to speak

• discussion boards allow for more thoughtful responses than in a classroom

• more time for workshop peer-assessment

• develop and enhance student interaction

A couple were more specific: discussion boards allowed hypertext to be used; provided diachronic discussion, and out-of-class group work. The last seems increasingly important as the student body atomises and disperses, as more students fit college life in with the demands of external lives, jobs, and so on; only one person however praised the VLE's power to 'insert the course into their homes and lives', and this remark hints that for good or ill, e-work undoubtedly crept into students' as well as lecturers' homes and lives. Some people also praised the introduction of anonymity into learning, at least up to a point. 'Anonymity, when required, can be helpful', noted one person, 'and the novelty value is there too, but orthodoxy [widespread use] has diminished these aspects'. It can be good for shy or 'anxious' students, of course, though one person remained unconvinced that anonymity helps shy students come out of their shell academically, contrary to what we might have thought. Just as the VLE creates extra (cyber) space, it can create more time, increasing contact between student and teacher.

Finally, we asked people to describe how discussion board activities enhanced their English course or contributed to English studies as a discipline. The responses were so familiar that, as one colleague wrote, 'I'm in danger of repeating myself here. Students are aware [courtesy of the discussion board] of support if and when they need it; they can absorb material at their own pace; they have a non-threatening place to query and discuss ideas'. Other things mentioned were

• transferable skills

• external links

• supplements to seminar teaching

• all students in the class can be heard

• increased knowledge sharing encourages students to use online English resources and thus revitalises their sense of the subject

• the chance to contribute if the student misses the seminar, although we might consider this rather a slippery slope, and would want to attach some conditions to that particular use

A couple of people expressed doubts: 'I think that it gives a whiz-bang effect, still a novelty, but how long will that last?' (similar to the respondent who felt that familiarity with discussion boards had bred weariness). But on the whole, people responded to this question sympathetically. 'In one new course, it has been invaluable in developing student learning outside the classroom;

without it, I don't think students would be such effective learners'. This notion that the classroom walls have expanded and dissolved is part of higher education, and in this questionnaire it was expressed variously and continuously. Innovative design was what is perhaps needed most. 'Students can do a lot more, but maybe not with discussion forums as we now know them' was a final, prophetic remark.

Conclusions

Design interests few respondents; tutors rely on what's already there, and it would be nice to see people developing design features around some of the pedagogical cruxes they mention. If we demand a bold approach to IT from our students, results are good; tutors perhaps need to think of making more design demands on themselves (if there were world enough and time). Tutors are caught between increasing workloads and the need to take some kind of ownership of VLE design in order to exploit them for English studies in the most effective ways. Assessment, too, will often divide the keen VLE user from the mildly interested, and the question of assessment of a course has to be balanced with the level of teaching. Again, it would be nice if colleagues could think more specifically about what assessing discussion boards could achieve; our results indicated that some regard assessment as optional, perhaps unnecessary or undesirable, in the context of online work. E-moderating evoked the most consistent responses, all of which placed student learning first and continued to seek ways to encourage learning and social development, helping students take charge of their own education.

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What the students said...

What does using an online discussion board add to the study of English as you have experienced it at university?

"The convenience is great. It's a chance to interact more with classmates and the tutor (it's good that Rosie can laugh along with us!). Speeds up communication. Gives us a chance to air OUR opinion rather than just repeat what the books say. We can express ourselves in OUR style rather than within the formal template of an essay. The flexibility of the concept is good for learning – with a less formal environment students don't feel so pressured."

"Other modules would also be enhanced by the use of the VLE in this interactive way."

"It's added to my experience of the course because it was something completely new."

"The online forum allowed discussion and debate to carry on after the class had finished and so it encouraged us to develop our knowledge of the topic."

"It makes you feel more part of a class than just an individual. It's very interesting to see others' viewpoints and this can only further your interest in the topic."

"For the shyer students it allows for their points of view to be presented in a less intimidating environment."

"It's fun."

"It provides us with the opportunity to learn from each other."

"It was a good way of interacting with members of the class with whom I might not have done otherwise."

"The discussion board gave everyone the chance to have a voice, so to speak."

"We have been able to dig deeper into the texts and ideas on the course."

"It encourages those who perhaps do not like to speak up in class to have their views discussed elsewhere."

The comments on this page have all been made by Year 3 students who have taken part in Rosie Miles's 'Victorian Vision Online' and/or 'Fin de Siècle Online Experience' discussion board activities at the University of Wolverhampton.

"It makes you feel more part of a class than just an individual. It's very interesting to see others' viewpoints and this can only further your interest in the topic."

Year 3 English Student at the University of Wolverhampton

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