

The design of online activities in English Studies: resource overview

Collection: Online teaching

Learning outcomes

- To have an enhanced sensitivity to the design of good online learning activities leading to the ability to design and objectively evaluate online activities.
- To be able to situate online activities in an overall curriculum design
- To start thinking about the range of online tools that might be employed in an activity to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Overview

This resource explores how we structure online learning activities and the way we present them for our students.

Many lecturers' early encounters with Virtual Learning Environments involve using them to ease the administrative burden that managing a course can entail. VLE's have proved extremely effective at providing a one-stop-shop for course materials including handbooks, reading lists, assessment criteria, templates for various departmental requirements etc.

From these beginnings may often come the desire to upload course documentation in a way that aligns with the structured flow of the course/module itself. Most VLE's allow course material to be divided up into folders containing weekly or thematic packages of materials, links etc for students to access. Some universities now set this degree of engagement with the VLE as a minimum requirement for all courses in their Learning & Teaching strategy or e-learning policy.



1 | This resource is part of a set of professional development resources for Higher Education English (including English Literature, English Language & Creative Writing) called 'The Pool'. The resources were developed by the English Subject Centre in 2011 as part of a JISC/HEA Open Educational Resources (OER) Project.

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The problem with the uploading of lecture slides, seminar handouts or lists of links is that they represent a one-dimensional view of learning, one that is based around a 'content-delivery' type model. One useful way to start using VLEs more constructively is to create interaction within the materials you upload - design learning activities that encourage your students to actually engage with the content you are uploading or even engage in the creation of the content themselves.

Two examples

Seminar Preparation

Seminar 1: Theories of Postmodernism

Reading

- Jean-François Lyotard, "What is Postmodernism?" from *The Postmodern Condition*;
- Fredric Jameson; from *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*;
- Jurgen Habermas, from *Modernity - An Incomplete Project*.

Preparation

For week 1, read the above critical extracts (available in my pigeonhole in the English concourse). As you are reading these essays, to try to work out what they are saying about postmodernism: what is it? is it a "good" or "bad" thing? how does it work?

Other than this prepared reading, I would like you to send me one line of your favourite poem (or a favourite line of poetry, even if you don't like the poem) by Monday 29 January, that is, before the first seminar.

A screengrab of a pre-seminar activity from an undergraduate module on Postmodern fictions from Aberystwyth University

Online Task B

Browse the '[hundred highlights](#)' of the collection of books held by the Royal Library of the Netherlands. Anything here catch your eye? Why?

Post a message on 'Online Task B' message board describing two different items you found on the 'Hundred Highlights' website and explaining why you found them interesting. Do these seem to relate to what you discussed in class? If so, how? If not, why not?

A screengrab of a pre-seminar activity from an undergraduate module on Authors, Books and Readers in Early Modern England from Bath Spa University

Considerations

- What exactly do you want to achieve? Always start with the pedagogy first...technology is not a panacea..it will not solve your problems!



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- Are you replicating face-to-face work...if so why bother? How does doing this activity online enhance the learning experience?
- Can you move online aspects of face-to-face work that don't really benefit from you being there to allow you more space to exploit the contact with your students?
- Are your students digitally literate? How much scaffolding will be needed when you design activities online?

These kinds of interactive exercises can be completed before, during or after face-to-face teaching. They may be short and quick and involve interaction on a discussion forum (explored in more detail in another activity within this theme in The Pool: [Online discussion in English Studies](#)). They may also involve setting up and using VLE tools like wikis or blogs to discuss or critique a text or they might involve setting up a group project or engagement with a digital archive.

[Learning design](#) itself is the practice of planning, sequencing and managing learning activities, usually using ICT-based tools to support both design and delivery. It is a young and emerging sub-discipline of e-learning.

Effective design of online discussion tasks

In a section from the English Subject Centre's [Good Practice Guide to Online Discussion in English Studies](#) Benjamin Colbert, University of Wolverhampton, explores what constitutes effective design of online discussion tasks.

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 (overemphasis on data can lead to students cutting and pasting material from sources into their postings rather than reflecting on their reading).



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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 VLE web page or downloadable separately 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. (For more information about creating accessible documentation please refer to the [JISC TechDis Accessibility Essentials series](http://www.jisctechdis.ac.uk/techdis/keyinitiatives/organisationaleffectiveness/enablingtechnology/accessibility_essentials) (http://www.jisctechdis.ac.uk/techdis/keyinitiatives/organisationaleffectiveness/enablingtechnology/accessibility_essentials))
- 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).



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- 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).

Links & References

- [The Design Studio](http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/12458422/Welcome-to-the-Design-Studio) - The Design Studio is a dynamic web-based toolkit which draws together a range of existing and developing resources around curriculum design and delivery and the role technology plays in supporting these processes and practices.
http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/12458422/Welcome-to-the-Design-Studio

Activities within this resource

- Evaluating online activities in English studies: group activity
- Evaluating online activities in English studies: individual activity

Resources in the Online teaching Collection

- Online teaching: introduction to the collection
- What are VLE's good for?: resource overview
 - What is a VLE and why use it?: group activity
 - What is a VLE and why use it?: individual activity
- **The design of online activities in English Studies: resource overview (*you are here)**
 - Evaluating online activities in English Studies: group activity
 - Evaluating online activities in English Studies: individual activity
- Designing learning with new media: resource overview
 - Exploring new media and its potential in teaching: group activity
 - Exploring new media and its potential in teaching: individual activity
 - Designing an online activity in English Studies: group activity
 - Designing an online activity in English Studies: individual activity
- Teaching with digital archives: resource overview



- Teaching with digital archives: group activity
 - Teaching with digital archives: individual activity
- Online discussion in English Studies: resource overview
 - Should online discussion be assessed?: group activity
 - Should online discussion be assessed?: individual activity
- Workshopping online: resource overview
 - Designing an online Creative Writing workshop: group activity
 - Designing an online Creative Writing workshop: individual activity



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