

Building Critical & Analytical Skills into e-Learning Supported Curricula

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In Modern Languages circles, learning technologies have long been associated with the image of a swinging pendulum: initial enthusiasm (usually by a few, very active, converts) for a new technical advance is often followed by disillusionment and rejection (when the novelty wears off, and miracle benefits fail to materialize). Eventually, however, the pendulum will come back to the centre: some momentum will have been lost, but a balanced view of what the new medium can offer will be established. E-learning is still new enough to be exciting - and both the technology and its labels are changing fast enough to keep us curious and keen - yet there is now enough 'history' in the field for us to start to see some of the pendulum's motion.

The Department of Italian at Warwick started experimenting with e-learning in the late 1980s (thanks to Dr Noemi Messora), and over the years both the nature of the technology and its role in the curriculum have changed substantially. We have moved from CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), used as a stand-alone support for class-based and independent language learning, to widespread use of ICT in both language and cultural modules. In terms of technology, this has meant a marked shift from highly specialized, tailor-made software packages - some of which we still use, while most quickly faded into oblivion - to flexible multi-use platforms or generic software which can be adapted to multiple educational uses. This is a shift that has been identified by many as one of the main characteristics of recent developments in e-learning across subject disciplines. See in particular Steve Erhmann's comment on 'worldware' in an article offered in Interactions issue 8. At the same time, in educational terms, e-learning has been transformed from a 'bolt-on' external (and to an extent extraneous) resource to an integral part of the way in which modules (and sometimes courses) are both designed and delivered.

The process has been gradual, but can be described as characterized by three phases. Each different phase (and the related technology) has had a different impact on the curriculum.

The initial introduction of tailor-made CALL packages for learners of Italian was characterized by a high level of specialization of the software and by the need to use different tools with different users. This required a lot of training (and a lot of enthusiasm on the part of tutors). Additionally, this kind of software favoured a view of language as a set of distinct items and structures to be learnt and practised in isolation. CALL software (especially at an early stage) tended therefore to reinforce a mechanistic view of language learning and, within the subject area, it reinforced the traditional curriculum divisions between 'language modules' (seen as skills-based and more amenable to technological input) and 'content modules' (deemed to involve less mechanical, knowledge-based learning and usually more resistant to technology). While CALL did become an integral element in the delivery of some language modules, it did not substantially change the way in which we thought about course design as a whole. The new resources were mostly seen as beneficial in freeing up class time usually occupied by menial tasks such as language drills. Yet it must be noted that the massive savings in terms of teaching staff time that some had hoped for never materialized.

A second phase in the inclusion of e-learning in our teaching practices started with involvement in the TELRI project. It was based on the idea of exploiting web-based technology, and web publishing in particular, in order to foster new skills and attitudes in students. Our experiment centred on the development of translation skills, using a tool developed by TELRI to facilitate student web publishing. This allows us to introduce online-supported group work, the use of Internet resources and the concept of multiple drafting, in order to overcome established habits, which tend to see translation as a 'grammar and vocabulary' activity. While the experiment was initially designed as an additional, rather than an integral element of a translation module, the impact of the technology has modified both students' and lecturers' expectations. This has resulted in changes in classroom practice (for instance with the introduction of further group work and the organization of class activities around the concept of multiple drafting) and assessment methods.

While both of the developments mentioned so far are still part of the way we teach, two further forms of e-learning have become increasingly frequent in our department over the last five years, in what can be described as a single, third phase of development.

In 2001, the two Departments of Italian at the Universities of Warwick and Birmingham were allocated funding under the HEFCE-sponsored 'Collaboration Programme for Modern Languages in Higher Education', co-ordinated by the University Council for Modern Languages and the Subject Centre for Languages Linguistics and Area Studies, to develop a joint MA programme in Italian Studies: Culture and Communication. From day one, the project was made possible by the use of an e-learning environment (in our case WebCT) and was designed with mixed-mode delivery in mind. This is not a distance learning course - rather, the availability of web-based technology has made it possible to pool staff and other resources from two neighbouring universities, allowing us to concentrate contact time (one afternoon, in either of the two institutions) and to maximize the benefits of class-based sessions through the delivery of materials and the setting of individual tasks. For the first time, we are designing a whole course from the outset with e-learning as an integral component of the curriculum. Although the process is not yet complete, some effects are already evident. Different colleagues have approached the task with different degrees of expertise or enthusiasm, yet it is clear that the presence of the e-learning technology has determined an increase in the level of co-operation between staff, as well as changes in the nature of that co-operation. In some modules there is already evidence of further effects on the curriculum: instead of the traditional split between lecture and seminar, what is emerging in these cases is a process based on a complex sequence of teacher-centred delivery, learner-centred reading tasks and individual research, reflective tasks, collective discussion.

Another, almost immediate effect of the introduction of web-based delivery in the MA programme has been to encourage some members of the teaching team to experiment with similar technology at undergraduate level. Over the last couple of years, a number of our BA modules have started to exploit shareware (such as that offered at www.nicenet.org, or, more recently, Warwick's own SiteBuilder) in order to deliver lecture notes and other course information, and to stimulate the exchange of materials and ideas among students. At a wider level, the most macroscopic change of the last few years is the widespread use of multi-purpose web-based resources for the delivery and administration of modules: we are almost automatically using email to stay in contact with students; web sites and electronic publications are more and more frequently to be seen on reading lists; and so on.

The impact of this kind of integration of technology within HE learning is easy to underestimate. In fact changes in mode of delivery are far from neutral both in terms of contents and methods. A suitable example is the increasingly evident need to rethink the way in which we define notions of 'research' and 'originality' at undergraduate level, and the way in which we familiarize students with those concepts. Web-based resources - and the presence of increasingly effective search engines - are changing the way in which students access sources as well as the nature and range of what is available to them. In negative terms, this causes increased problems with plagiarism - but the changes are deeper and go further. The ease with which a plethora of materials can be accessed (or at least identified and located) via the Internet can convince a student that 'researching' a topic simply means finding enough material on it (and pasting it together). Additionally, the variety of resources available and their range in standard mean that we need to find (and teach) new criteria to discriminate between what is relevant, reliable, up-to-date, and what is not. Established screening mechanisms through which the academic world had in the past applied quality control are no longer reliable once we move from traditional publishing to the free environment of the web - and the same is true of many of the discriminating criteria we have absorbed over the years. The question of what is up-to-date is a typical example of this: we cannot apply it to web pages with the simple ease with which we are used to checking the publication date of a book or the latest issue of a specialist journal.

If we accept that one of the goals of Higher Education is the socialization of students into a new (academic, subject-specific, sometimes also professional) community, then part of what constitutes today's notion of academic literacies must include the ability to negotiate the new environments made available by technological advance. (I am borrowing the notions of academic

socialization and academic literacies from the analysis of academic writing proposed by Mary R. Lea and Brian V. Street (2000). This requires new (or renewed) critical and analytical skills, which we need to build into the new (or renewed) curriculum. In practice, the issue cannot be ignored, since even confining ourselves to strictly 'traditional' teaching methods does not guarantee that our students will stay away from new resources. The explicit inclusion of e-learning elements in course and module design makes this need immediately evident, and also offers us the necessary tools to start thinking about possible solutions.

The process is in no way complete, but it is already showing that e-learning is neither a pathological growth on the (otherwise healthy) body of 'traditional' teaching and learning, nor a miracle cure, a panacea capable of solving all problems, from staff shortages to the need for constant, dynamic re-thinking about how and what we teach, or how and what our students learn. The more organic the growth of e-learning, the more integral, conscious and critical the use we make of it within our curriculum design and delivery practices, the healthier should be the body of teaching and learning we are able to offer in the next few years.

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