IT, Theatre and Research-Based Learning

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In a previous issue of Interactions (**Vol. 3 No. 2 – summer term 1999**), Chris Pegler and Sally Rushworth from the Warwick Business School discussed the opportunities and problems involved in integrating IT-based learning into the Warwick Distance Learning MBA. The main challenge here was how to introduce new, technology-based approaches to learning without compromising the known quality and excellence of a course delivered using traditional methodologies.

The challenge is quite different in designing a new course ab initio. In such a case, one can afford to wrestle with pedagogic first principles and to integrate the learning possibilities offered by IT into the very centre of the course design. This is the challenge I faced (along with my colleague, Professor Christopher Baugh at Kent) in designing a new *MA in Performance Space and IT Modelling*, to be introduced in October 2001. The whole programme, which will be taught jointly by the University of Kent and the University of Warwick, will be delivered using web-based techniques.

My starting point in approaching this challenge (the pedagogic first principle) was the desire to stimulate research-based, active learning in my students. Too much traditional learning experienced at university is passive. Lectures, by definition, invite students to engage in passive appropriation of a topic. It is very difficult for a tutor, in a lecture presentation, to engage interactively with a group of 50 or more students in such a way as to stimulate active learning. Generally, tutors and students settle for a model of passive student appropriation of taught material, delivered by the tutor. Even seminar groups can encourage passive learning, as the silent majority shelter behind the willingness of the few to launch into speech. Attempts to counteract this, by engaging in the classic Socratic method of question (from the tutor) and response (by the student), can result in embarrassing dead-ends. The quiet student does not enjoy occupying the centre of the stage and can often retreat even further into passive resistance to the topic. In complete contrast, the experience of IT-based activity hitherto (such as chat rooms and email exchanges) suggests that even the shy and the socially reticent can and do acquire a voice. Seated behind a protective computer screen, individuals shed their inhibitions and can adopt quite different persona, and often do so with the facility of a trained actor. If one can harness that kind of open exchange of views in a learning situation, then clearly one can move from passive to active learning.

In the early stages of planning the new MA, I was fortunate to be able to draw on the advice and expertise of colleagues engaged in the **TELRI project,** managed by the Centre for Academic Practice. We decided to use an undergraduate course in Theatre Studies as a pilot project for our new MA. We chose a third-year course centred around the topic of Ancient Theatre on the Modern Stage (ATOMS) and, with the help of a grant from the University's RTDF fund, developed an IT-based approach to the teaching of this course. Staff from TELRI provided appropriate software and a user interface that enabled the students and the tutor to interact effectively with each other. Clear aims and objectives were set for the project. The tutor, Dr Hugh Denard, reported regularly on progress with the course and, during the year, he and the students gave presentations on their work to staff involved in planning the MA with Kent (as well as to the Faculty of Arts Graduate Studies Committee). At the end of the session, staff from TELRI wrote up the pilot project as one of their case studies 1.

The aims of this pilot project, which TELRI took over as the aims for its intervention were to explore:

- what hardware and software would be required to deliver distance-taught modules in Theatre Studies
- how best to structure a course so that it may be delivered on a distance-taught basis
- how student presentations can exploit IT techniques

- how best to facilitate contact between students and tutors using IT techniques.

TELRI established a web page for the course with an integrated email package, as well as student feedback pages. The tutor released module units and assignments every fortnight. Students completed their assignments and then published them (using Netscape Communicator) on their personal web pages. Student web pages were then viewed and commented on by all other members of the group and by the tutor. In addition, each student completed a major research project each term. In his report on the project, the tutor, Dr Hugh Denard, described the main outcome as:

> a highly interactive and collaborative guided research environment, which allows participants scope to investigate their own interests and to draw upon their different areas of expertise while ensuring that they also engage with core concepts in the field. They acquire a wider perspective upon the topic by seeing several different responses to the same assignment, and their powers of reflection upon their own critical practices is enhanced by subjecting the work of their peers to such reflection.

Another outcome, which emerged during the year, was the need to supplement on-line discussion with live tutorial sessions for training, feedback and what Dr Denard identified as the need 'to prevent a de-motivating depersonalisation of the learning process from emerging'. In other words, IT is no substitute for real human interaction.

The insights gained from this pilot project have informed our planning of the new MA in Performance Space and IT Modelling. Students will be able to enrol for the course at either Kent or Warwick. Two of the four modules will be delivered from Kent and two from Warwick. In each module, students will undertake a varying number of screen-based assignments. These will take the form of research-driven 'tasks'. One or more of these will be selected for assessment and, in two of the four modules, one may be selected for further development into the main course assignment for the module. The open feedback shared by staff and all students on the course is intended to develop a climate of debate and critical discussion. Indeed, part of the course assessment will be based on the quality of each student's contribution to on-line discussion and debate. Each module will include an extensive on-line bibliography, supplemented by a visual database, and a list of related web sites. This basic methodology will be supplemented by 2-3 video conference links per term, fortnightly tutorial support, and a termly meeting of the entire MA group with all tutors at one of the two universities. The course will conclude with a major research project in which students will have the opportunity build a computer model of a historical theatre building or design a model of a performance space. A dissertation will accompany and elucidate the work undertaken on the model.

As part of our detailed planning, we have established clearly defined learning outcomes. At the end of the programme, students will have:

- acquired research study, and research management skills appropriate to the field of study
- undertaken a study of the history of places of performance and the evidence for their reconstruction
- undertaken an exploration of the space of performance within contemporary scenography and its practice
- applied practical computing skills to explore their potential within theatre study and performance
- undertaken an extended research project and found appropriate ways of making its outcomes accessible.

The challenge now facing the tutors on this course is to plan their work so that they move away from the notion of course content or material to be 'delivered' to the students and instead design assignments that will encourage research-based or active learning on the part of the students. Dr

Denard's experience on the pilot project suggests that this design process is very time-consuming indeed. It involves a significant shift of perspective on the part of tutors. Their task is no longer to deliver their own research-based conclusions to students, which leads to what TELRI has called 'adoptive learning'. Instead they have to design a course structure that stimulates what TELRI has called 'adaptive learning', viz. 'adaptive learning using higher order thinking is a development process, which is personally undertaken by each student'.2

The commitment of time and energy involved in this planning and collaborative learning process suggests that IT-based learning should not be seen as a cheap or easy substitute for traditional teaching methods. Instead it should be viewed as a cutting-edge enhancement of students' learning opportunities in research-based institutions.

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