

Enhancing Critical Debate through Web-Based Discussion and Publishing

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DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE

The course aims to encourage in students individual interpretations and responses within the frameworks provided by the prescribed critical reading. The objectives are to study a selection of 20th century North American women writers in depth, within the wide context of North American literary and cultural preoccupations, and with reference to recent critical debates.

The course is based around a seminar programme, taught across the whole year. This comprises nine weeks of team teaching (two tutors) plus a reading week in each of terms 1 & 2 and two weeks in term 3 (30 CATS points), and then revision for exam and feedback on assessed work in term 3. A web site provides an overview of the seminar structure for set texts and assignments, access to a discussion forum, resources and lecture notes, as well as learning support materials and guidance for the course activities and assessment. The IT aspects of the students work equates to roughly 40 student learning hours.

HOW THE COURSE WAS PREVIOUSLY RUN AND ASSOCIATED PROBLEMS

A plenary session preceding large group workshops for 30+ students once a fortnight where the whole group starts work on a set text. The following week, the group is divided into seminar groups of 12 students each, where the discussion is continued, and a concerted effort is made to produce closer readings of the text. Sometimes students offer brief seminar presentations to introduce the discussion, consolidating the discoveries made in the previous week's workshop activities, and introducing findings from secondary sources etc. It was at this stage that the use of email discussion was introduced.

The interdisciplinary backgrounds of the students taking the course meant that it was difficult to support the differing needs and understanding with respect to cultural contexts and critical analysis abilities. In particular, tutorial teaching for such large groups was restricted in the depth of analysis that could be supported by group work and tutor guidance.

Some students are part-time with work and other commitments so that time-tabling face-to-face sessions was increasingly difficult.

There are fewer large seminar rooms and so booking teaching space was also a problem.

DETAILS OF THE IT INTERVENTION AND HOW IT AIMED TO ENHANCE THE LEARNING AND COURSE ACTIVITIES

The use of email discussion was introduced (based on majordomo list system provided by central IT Services). This has the advantage of not triggering a great demand for training, since most students already use email. The students subscribe to the list and return a print out to the tutor of the confirmation message sent by Majordomo. This enables the tutor to check they are confident to send and receive messages.

The use of email-based discussion aims to encourage independent learning and group collaboration and to democratise the learning process without precluding the provision of lecturer input and support.

A permanent record of the email list contributions was provided on the web site by implementing a MonHonarc archiving system. This aims to make the purpose of the module as transparent as possible without limiting student responses to the texts studied.

A student web publishing area has been implemented using the TELRI tool (based on a CGI script developed by the Project). The students can submit their non-assessed work, view the work of others

and comment and discuss the critical analysis approaches taken and the ideas generated. This is currently being evaluated.

SUBMISSION OF STUDENT WORK BY WEB PUBLISHING

The screenshot shows a Netscape browser window with the following content:

- View submissions**
 - [All submissions](#) [1]
 - By type:
 - [Comments](#) [1]
 - [Submit new work](#)
 - [Home](#)
- Submit your piece**

Warning: do not resize this window while you are filling out this form, if you do you may lose the contents and have to re-enter the details again. Make sure this window is big enough before you start!

1. What type of work are you submitting?

Primary texts

 - Analysis and interpretation of the text
 - Discussion of themes in text and cultural context
 - Personal responses, including creative writing

Critical texts

 - Review of individual article or essay
 - Book report
 - Comments and opinions

2. Title for your submission piece

[Empty text input field]

3. Full reference of your source material?

[Empty text input field]

OTHER TEACHING METHODS USED TO SUPPORT ACTIVITY

The course included a taught plenary session (informal lecture) with large group workshops every two weeks and small group tutorials every other week in between.

Other technologies used to support student activities included a web site developed in-house to support the seminar programme following set texts. This adds a further dimension in supporting student learning and avoids the need for formal lectures. Internet links to further reading and supporting materials (some provided by the students) are continuously incorporated.

INTENDED CAPABILITIES TO BE DEVELOPED

- Ability to be original, creative and innovative
- Ability to deal with complexity
- Ability to reflect on working processes
- Ability to form justified discipline-based judgements

METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

- Summative assessment through essays
- Non-assessed, obligatory creative or critical writing work
- Formative assessment from incorporating participation in email discussions as an option for the

non-assessed work.

There is a choice of assessment/examination patterns: 100% assessed, 100% examined or combined. Students can take this partially or 100% examined, which is necessary for some degree programmes to keep within the 50% examined rule, e.g. English and Cultural Studies.

PROBLEMS IN SETTING UP THE COURSE OR TECHNOLOGY AND HOW THESE WERE SOLVED

The email list archive system was a little temperamental and fell over at times; we lost some messages. IT Services were very helpful in tweaking the system. Motivation to solve the problem with the system was aided by the request from other courses with email lists for archiving. The system is now much more robust. An email to the list owner is now generated automatically if a difficulty with archiving was encountered.

The students took a while to use the web site to send and retrieve messages; they were used to using an email application. With the web publishing implementation, the web site provides a far more integrated learning environment. The students are becoming familiar with going to the web site for all their online activities, i.e. retrieving resources, engaging in discussions and publishing their work.

EXTENT OF DEVELOPMENT OF INTENDED OUTCOMES

Students had more freedom and opportunity to experiment with their own ideas than the previous teaching method could allow. Students' abilities in structuring their arguments and expressing reflective reasoning and their ideas were greatly enhanced. The students felt more confident to take risks in expressing their ideas and felt they developed a more in-depth view on the critical analysis process than in the face-to-face seminar programme would otherwise have allowed.

UNINTENDED BENEFITS OR COSTS

It took a long time to implement a working system for the email list archiving. The use of WebBoard may provide a more robust and sophisticated means for discussion messaging and archiving and allow the tutor to manage topics and themes in a more structured way.

The student contributions to the email discussion and their published work provide an excellent resource for following cohorts of students on the module. There is a need to moderate these and putting them up on the web site is quite time-consuming, but well worth the effort. Making the high quality work (marked where possible) available provides the students with a sense of purpose and understanding of the assessment criteria.

Students used the email discussion list to add or elaborate further on a remark made in the seminar. The mix of different degree courses represented on the module allowed students to share their specific skills and knowledge with other members of the group.

The students commented that the increased time for seminar level discussions meant they could take more time to formulate ideas and check they sounded plausible before sending a message, whereas in a seminar, they might hesitate to participate in the discussion or find it difficult to speak at all.

COST-EFFECTIVENESS ANALYSIS

Learning quality is greatly increased and the tutor was able to cope more easily with the larger numbers the module has attracted without the need to run parallel groups. The overall implementation time involved was high, but will be reduced in subsequent runs of the course. The approach will also be used in other modules taught by the lecturer and in modules taught by others in the department with similar learning objectives. As such, the cost-effectiveness gains will be highly significant.

The email discussion list was easy to establish and helps to provide continuity from the fortnightly larger groups run along the same lines as the previous year to the smaller, more 'conventional' seminar groups, which take place every other week.

Students feel encouraged to participate in discussions more fully and as students share notes on critical works and offer their thoughts about the primary texts and related matters, an environment of collaborative learning is established. This appears to foster a sense of identification with the

module, which would otherwise be difficult to achieve given the broad mix of degrees programmes represented by students on the module.

The approach is already managing to compensate for the increased group size of the face-to-face seminars. The same approach should work well with higher numbers of students, although there will be a need to split up the online groups into manageable sizes in order to ensure a good level of participation from all students.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS PLANNED FOR THIS OR OTHER COURSES

The web site will be expanded and examples of previous year's student work will be made available through work done with the TELRI Project.

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To discuss any issues raised by this article please contact CAP tel: 024 7652 4766 email: cap@warwick.ac.uk