

# Getting History Students Going with a VLE

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## How a good start and regular tasks can foster collaboration, consolidate learning, and change student working patterns.

Blended learning, which combines online and traditional teaching and learning activities, is often advocated by educationalists and this briefing paper provides some practical examples of how that approach might be adopted by historians in higher education.

The history courses described here were taught face-to-face, with a mix of lectures, seminar discussions and visits to historical buildings, libraries and museums. New resources had to demonstrate their usefulness by adding to a learning experience which was already rich and diverse. Research in the subject area of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Edinburgh showed that using a Virtual Learning Environment [VLE] could enhance the traditional experience by:

- ❖ Giving students access to good quality web resources
- ❖ Giving students practice using history skills
- ❖ Improving preparation for face-to-face seminars

The project demonstrated that two areas were crucial in the successful use of the VLE. Firstly, a thorough introduction to the tools and resources available. Secondly, the introduction of regular tasks to be completed online. The case studies below detail experiences in developing resources to meet these needs.

## Getting a Good Start: The Treasure Hunt Aims

- ❖ To develop specific study skills for independent research.
- ❖ To familiarise students with the good-quality web resources available.

## The process

1. A series of web-pages was created to be used in the first week of the course. Class time was set aside for a session in a computer lab with support from computing staff and historians.
2. Students were given written instructions for accessing their VLE and using a discussion forum. They posted a test message in which they introduced themselves. Once they were familiar with the VLE they were directed to the treasure hunt page.
3. Students looked at the tailor-made study skills pages which focused on reading texts, images and maps. Links to LTSN (now Higher Education Academy) and advice on evaluating material on the web were also provided.
4. The treasure hunt then moved to a series of fun questions which asked students to look at web-sites relevant to their course and navigate around them.

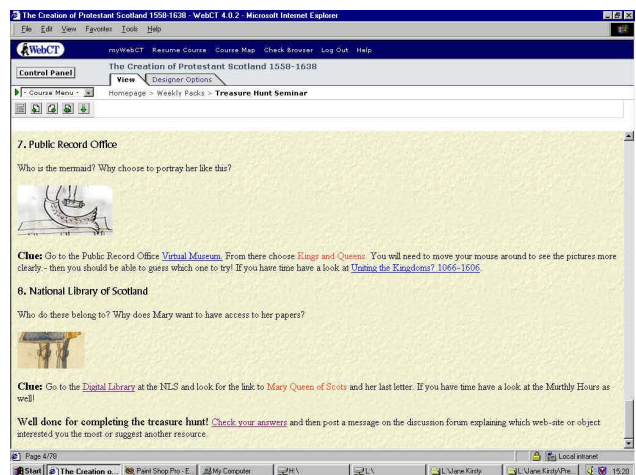


Fig. 1 Treasure hunt questions [For e.g. Whose knees are shown in the picture?]

The web-resources included repositories for primary and secondary texts as well as illustrations and useful tools to help with course work.

5. Students checked their answers by referring to an answers page and discussed them with the class at the end of the session. They were also asked to post a comment to the discussion forum.

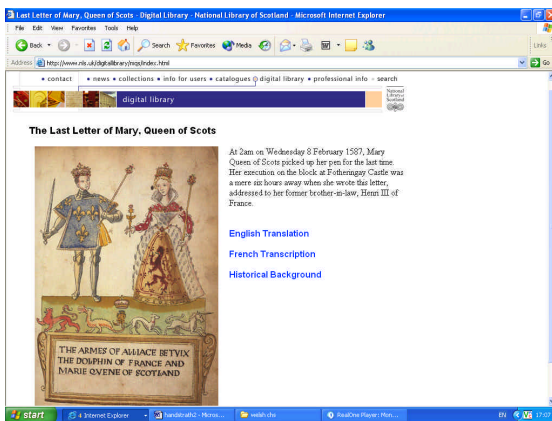


Fig 2. Link followed for question 8 to the National Library of Scotland website.

## Evaluation

- ❖ Initial feedback noted the need for real treasure - some chocolate was provided!
- ❖ Students liked being introduced to resources in a session when technical and subject specific advice were on hand.
- ❖ They were interested in the "real" objects that they were able to examine over the web.
- ❖ They enjoyed the different approach.
- ❖ Students reported returning to the websites later and using them for their own research.

## Regular Tasks: using a discussion forum

### Aims

- ❖ To promote thorough preparation for seminars.
- ❖ To give students practice analysing historical evidence.
- ❖ To encourage collaborative study and research.

### The process

1. Every week a pack of primary sources was divided so that each student had their own text or image.
2. In their own time students researched their piece of evidence using the skills they had learned through the treasure hunt.
3. They then produced a paragraph of comment [or 'gobbet'] which was posted to the discussion forum on the VLE.
4. All the comments were posted 24 hours before the face to-face seminar and a hard copy of the comments was available during the seminar.
5. During the discussion the lecturer reinforced good points made by students and corrected any errors.
6. The comments were retained on the VLE as a resource for revision for the evidence-based exam questions.

## Evaluation

- ❖ Students reported spending more time on their history course as a result of the weekly tasks.
- ❖ Seminar preparation was more thorough because students felt a sense of obligation to contribute to the forum.
- ❖ Students said that using the discussion forum consolidated learning and created a resource for revision.
- ❖ The quality of face-to-face discussion in class improved because ground work had been completed prior to the seminar.
- ❖ Unexpectedly, students focused their reading and preparation on their own weekly task, the piece of primary evidence, at the expense of the general reading. As a result the team devised specific tasks based on the general readings.
- ❖ The practice gained when using the forum improved the quality of the answers given to the evidence-based exam questions.

## Conclusion

The team concluded that the class time devoted to getting started on the VLE was essential. The treasure hunt session improved both technical and history skills and instilled confidence, providing a crucial platform from which students could begin the weekly tasks. It also gave students an awareness of the exciting possibilities and the pitfalls of using web material. As a result students were able to use good quality web resources independently.

The weekly tasks completed using the VLE were fully integrated into the running of the courses, enhancing the face-to-face seminars and honing the skills assessed in the final exam. The discipline of contributing regularly to the VLE helped students to consolidate their learning on the weekly themes and to focus their study for the course. The amount of time spent on reading and research by students on these courses increased. The comments created each week allowed students to collaborate by sharing the outcomes of their research and to build a resource for revision. Students and staff noticed the improvement in seminar discussion and the growing confidence with which they tackled the evidence questions in their final exam. The blend of traditional and online learning activities proved to be an opportunity to support, stretch and stimulate undergraduates studying history at an advanced level.

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