History and E-Learning: Sharing Good Practice

Report by Cary MacMahon

On Friday 10 February 2006 at the Institute of Historical Research, the History Section of the Subject Centre in partnership with the Royal Historical Society, held a very successful day devoted to discussing e-learning in history teaching at the tertiary level.

Papers were presented by Sonja Cameron and Cary MacMahon (Subject Centre) illustrating the preliminary results of the Subject Centre's survey into e-learning in history, classics and archaeology, and the pedagogical lessons which might be learnt by historians from educational research into e-learning. In the afternoon, four 'case studies' describing the use of e-resources for teaching in history were presented.

Graham Rogers (Edgehill College) shared with us the manner in which he 'got into' e-teaching – through necessity and for pragmatic reasons – and also his pedagogical approach when making use of e-resources in his teaching. The use currently being made of interactive smartboards in her teaching was described by Jo Fox (Durham University), and the potentialities of the technology were apparent to all the participants. Bobby Anderson (Bath Spa University) and Steve Poole (University of the West of England) then discussed their utilisation of virtual learning environments in teaching. Bobby commented on how the core module she taught had been enriched by providing materials to students online, and Steve concentrated on the manner in which the reflective logs he had provided could benefit student learning.

The discussions during the day were lively, and although the attendees were, by and large, e-learning enthusiasts, it was obvious that there were many questions which as a discipline we still need to ask when implementing e-learning in our teaching. The rhetoric of the "transformative power of e-learning", a target for many institutions' teaching and learning policies, was subjected to scrutiny, with the view expressed that exactly what constituted "a transformation in learning" had not been sufficiently defined. There was broad agreement that the adoption of e-learning had occasioned a reflection on the basic pedagogy underpinning courses, and that it was important to be explicit about this, because innovation required thought. Mention was also made of the manner in which students who had chosen to study history at university might consider too heavy a technological focus to be a move away from the 'proper study' of history. In short, students do not choose to do history at university in order to learn IT skills, but in order to be historians. There was optimism, however, that a more holistic and dynamic future learning environment could be achieved by triangulating e-learning, research and teaching, with e-learning considered to be the driver.

Assessment of e-learning, or assessment of learning by means of e-resources, were topics brought up repeatedly during the day's discussions. Assessment was described as a "high stress point" in terms both of professional practice and the student learning experience, and e-learning was felt to have provided a lever and an opportunity for a re-examination of assessment within institutions. It was commented that, if the assessment process remained the same, then potentially e-learning could be seen as merely different media utilised in pursuit of the same goals – or alternatively, that traditional assessment processes were a bad way in which to measure the success or failure of e-learning.

However, changing the assessment process could be, we were reminded, "fraught" and "tricky". Students were strategic and instrumental learners, and particularly with the introduction of tuition fees any new assessment regime which abandoned the traditional essay format risked opposition from students who were unsure of what constituted the new standard. Although there was, therefore, broad agreement that the essay remained at the core of any assessment regime, there was enthusiasm expressed for the opportunities provided by e-resources in terms of formative assessment, and for the potential e-resources represented in finding new ways to get students to write essays.

Concerns over the time taken, and the time saved, through the use of e-resources were mentioned by a number of participants. All the presenters acknowledged that e-teaching – whether this be in terms of digitisation, the pedagogical structuring of an e-course, or the building of a website - did involve a considerable amount of time. The moderation of online discussion groups was pinpointed as being particularly time-intensive. On the other hand, it was commented that an e-resource can be live before it is fully finished, and then only requires "tweaking" each year. Advice was offered that it was perhaps best to start with something simple, for example the user-friendly interactive whiteboards which lend themselves to structuring and for which the materials may already be in existence, rather than from the outset opt for a full-blown VLE or website.

Enthusiasm was also expressed by participants for the creation of an on-going 'network' of e-enthusiasts in history in order to continue the discussions begun at the IHR, and we are currently investigating ways in which best to facilitate this.

Further Details

For further details of the day, or if you wish to make any comments, please contact Cary MacMahon (c.macmahon@arts.gla.ac.uk) or Sonja Cameron (s.cameron@arts.gla.ac.uk).