

Final Report

LTSN Teaching Development Grant

Project Title: 'Sharing History Essays on the Web'

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Introduction:

Students write essays and tutors mark and return them. There seems no place in the loop for other students to share in the collective process of producing essays. Yet peer scrutiny and review is, potentially, an important aid to essay writing and self development: introduced in the right fashion, and in a supportive environment, peer review can encourage class co-operation, and enable students to reflect on their own performance as they assess the writing of others. In addition, readily accessible essays covering aspects of the course add to knowledge and are a useful revision aid; and a group of selected and anonymous essays handed down from one student cohort to the next serves to illustrate facets of essay writing and style, and the diverse ways of tackling essay topics.

The experience of using web essays and peer review in a third-year History course, *Hollywood: the Dream Factory* was highly beneficial. The quality of the essays was good and students responded well to peer review. Nevertheless, those thinking of introducing a similar system need first to think through some pedagogic and logistical issues.

Aims

- To explore the pedagogic opportunities for using the web as a platform for uploading, sharing, and archiving history essays
- In a third year History course, *Hollywood: the Dream Factory*, enable students to author simple web pages and upload their essays in WebCT.
- Devise student materials for the tasks of web authoring, uploading to WebCT, and peer review.
- Make course materials available to the academic community.

Hollywood the Dream Factory, 2002-3

The project was implemented in, *Hollywood*, a third-year History course with twenty five students from a variety of majors including History, Media, English and Humanities. Part of the assessment for the course was the production of a 2,500 word multimedia essay (40 % of overall assessment). In addition to being attractively produced, the essay should contain graphics, possibly associated hypertext pages with additional supporting material, and links to relevant web sites. Students' multimedia essays were uploaded to WebCT – the University's virtual learning environment (VLE) -- enabling the class to view all essays. With the essays accessible, the process of peer review could begin.

Implementing the Project

Showing students how to produce and review multimedia essays was time consuming and protracted. (Doc. 1 outlines the whole process.) Late in the first semester I taught two two-hour web authoring workshops in the computer laboratory (Doc. 2). We covered such basics skills as creating and saving pages, inserting graphics and hyperlinks, and the principles of file management. I was much aided by Shirley Ambrose, a colleague in the University's e-support office, whose on-line FrontPage tutorial provided both reinforcement to my teaching and introduced more demanding tasks. In the second semester, a third workshop in the laboratory covered uploading in WebCT (Doc. 3). At the same time, students devised their own multimedia essay titles and set about researching and writing. (The teaching programme

for both semesters can be found in the *Hollywood* web site at: <http://www.gre.ac.uk/~da07/5-Hollywood/index.html>)

Students completed a draft essay by mid March. They were encouraged to follow the guidelines found in the essay checklist (Docs 4 and 5). With the essays uploaded and displayed in WebCT, students chose, or were allocated, to review another essay using the peer assessed draft extended essay form (Doc. 6). The form is in two parts: the first is completed by the reviewer who is invited to give a percentage grade -- referring back where necessary to the essay checklist, to state the overall argument found in the essay, and suggest improvements. Grading was intended to encourage the reviewer to weigh up all the features of the essay and come to some firm conclusion, but the mark arrived at formed no part of course assessment. By articulating the essay's arguments I hoped to encourage students' engagement with the ideas of their peers and reflect upon the nature of their own writing. Had they, for example, in their own essay enunciated a clear thesis? Face-to-face feedback was given in class and students were free to amend their multimedia essays as they judged fit. The loop was completed with the reviewed student commenting on the quality of the assessment given. Draft essays, reviews and final essays were all handed in by the deadline. Students were graded by me using a marking template, which students had already seen (Doc. 7).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Students achieved a high level of involvement in the multimedia essay. Many produced really good essays that were well devised, attractively presented and which drew effectively upon the graphic and hypertext capabilities of the web. (Contact me if you would like to view the multimedia essays in WebCT.)

Student response to the peer review was uniformly positive. There no expression of misgivings -- something often noted by those introducing the system -- although some students chose not to engage in the process, presumably because it was not an assessed task. Those who did, recognised the obvious potential for improving their essay before final submission, while a tiny minority saw peer review as enhancing their own self awareness. All took the task seriously, and many spotted essay weaknesses and made helpful suggestions for improvement.

Of all elements of the course the mechanics of authoring and uploading the multimedia essay stimulated most response in the end of course questionnaire. The web essay polarised opinion and almost all students had a view for or against. By a slight margin, there were more negative comments. Those who disliked the activity pointed to a lack of confidence in their own computer skills, insufficient workshop time, and absence of technical support in the labs. Those who commented favourably saw it as a new skill, and were (touchingly) proud of their achievement in posting an essay to the web.

Anyone thinking of introducing web essays needs to consider seriously a number of factors. The time taken to teach web skills and WebCT techniques cuts into the available time to teach the subject. If ICT skills are required to complete assessed coursework, then adequate space within the teaching programme needs creating. Where students possess intermediate computer skills, training can take less time. But what surprised me about my group of students was their poor grasp of such basic techniques as file management, even among students who had completed a compulsory ICT course in year one. They simply forgot a good deal of what they had been taught. The level of institutional support is also important: students rightly complained that the computer laboratory staff could not give advice on WebCT as they were not familiar with the system.

Additionally, some students never got the hang of WebCT and I was forever engaged in email exchanges with frustrated students who spent hours trying to make their essays appear in WebCT. It has to be said, the fault was mostly with the students who often changed folder structures and file names thus destroying links.

Nevertheless, I intend to continue using web essays, wherever appropriate. Multimedia essays are qualitatively different from their paper alternatives. In addition, web authoring is a

skill many students will find useful in later life. But I am not sure I will use WebCT for uploading essays. VLE are, by definition, primarily found in educational establishments and the rather quirky techniques my students need to learn will not be called upon in later career, unless they teach in higher education. If anyone knows a simple and effective way of uploading student pages to a tutor's web site I would be interested to hear from them. In future, I will get my students to hand in their html files on disk, or as email attachments, and I will upload using File Transfer Protocol (FTP).

Documents:

Doc. 1 "Multimedia Web Essay"

http://www.gre.ac.uk/~da07/5-Hollywood/multimedia_essays/introduction.htm

Doc. 2 "Creating a Multimedia Web Essay"

http://www.gre.ac.uk/~da07/5-Hollywood/multimedia_essays/multimedia_essay.htm

Doc. 3 "Uploading to WebCT"

http://www.gre.ac.uk/~da07/5-Hollywood/multimedia_essays/WebCT.htm

Doc. 4 "Peer Review"

http://www.gre.ac.uk/~da07/5-Hollywood/multimedia_essays/peer_review.htm

Doc. 5 "Extended Essay Checklist"

http://www.gre.ac.uk/~da07/5-Hollywood/multimedia_essays/extended_essay_checklist.htm

Doc. 6 "Peer Assessed Draft Extended Essay Form"

http://www.gre.ac.uk/~da07/5-Hollywood/multimedia_essays/peer_assessed_draft_essay_form.htm

Doc. 7 "Marking Template"

[essay_marking_template.doc](http://www.gre.ac.uk/~da07/5-Hollywood/multimedia_essays/essay_marking_template.doc)