

# **Oberon – Historiography and skills**

## **Project Report**

### ***Brief Description***

The Oberon project is an online elearning course which enables history students to acquire and demonstrate skills essential for the study of history. The course will enable them to practice and reiterate such skills through applying them to a series of structured learning exercises.

The course is modular and is designed for students to undertake substantially at their own pace with a number of milestones which allow for reflection and feedback.

Throughout the students are required to keep and maintain a course portfolio which contains work undertaken within each of the discrete course units as well as their reflection upon the learning they have undertaken during the course as a whole.

This constitutes the evidence of course completion and it is intended that this also comprise a discussion document for the review of academic progress with the student's individual personal tutor or designated tutor in history.

The course consists of units each available in a web based form that is adaptable to the needs of each individual institution. At Brookes this course is being mounted on the Web-Ct learning environment which has been selected with its fostering of independent learning in mind. The system has an easy to use template to enable the course to be manipulated in line with the course structure (e.g. bulletin boards, shared discussions etc..)

### ***Outline of Progress***

The course has been devised, discussed and written during the period September 2002 until May 2003. During this time the grant holders were engaged upon research, investigation, writing and editing of each of the course units. They were also involved in the production, scanning and editing of photographic material to be included in the project and assisted in the construction of relevant artwork where appropriate.

Throughout the construction of the course in depth consultation and collaboration has been a cornerstone of the project. This has taken in expertise not simply from the History Department at Oxford Brookes University, but also experts in the field in other university history departments.

A priority has also been consultation with pedagogic experts in our own Oxford Centre for Staff Learning and Development and with our existing cohort of History students. In a recent survey carried out amongst First Year Students 95% agreed that 'Skills courses were an important element' of student development.'

Since March 2003 the process of encoding and placing these units upon the Web-CT web based learning environment has been in progress.

## ***Outline of Units***

### **Course Introduction**

#### **Unit One – Personal Narratives**

The opening exercise gives students direct insight into the creative act of writing history. This is achieved through a process of construction and critique of individual personal histories which students exchange and rewrite. This demonstrates how natural and instinctive the writing of history actually is and persuades them to think about the process of writing, editing and rewriting accounts of historical events and analyses.

#### **Unit Two – Hollywood History**

This analyses the issue of truth in history and the discovery of the ‘facts’ of history. Using film as a medium this unit investigates the issue of historical reconstruction and authenticity. How important the issue of truth in history has been problematised in this unit to explore the relative values of history as (respectively) entertainment and informed analysis.

#### **Unit Three – Primary sources**

This unit confronts students with primary sources and persuades them that sources must be used alongside other information. Questions are not so much asked of the sources themselves but students are persuaded to think what other information they need to know to make sense of the sources and use them to their best effect. Ultimately students are warned in this unit that sources do not ‘speak for themselves’.

#### **Unit Four – Techniques of Historians**

This unit emphasizes how questions are the lifeblood of historical enquiry and the generation of questions is fundamental to the construction and writing of history. Students use the skills of question forming and interrogation upon secondary sources which are linked to the types of material they encounter on undergraduate studies. By the end of this unit students should be confident and competent in generating and using research questions to aid their study of history.

#### **Unit Five – Communicating History**

This unit identifies the tools and techniques used by historians when studying and evaluating primary and secondary sources. From this students are persuaded to investigate the relationship between history and its audiences and how the subject can be communicated in an intelligent, informed and exciting way. This unit explores the changing forms and meanings of history over the many thousands of years that it has been in existence. Oral, written, rational and postmodern approaches are all explored though this unit.

#### **Unit Six – Historiography**

This unit explores how historians construct and write history, it investigates the numerous ideological and theoretical perspectives, which are regularly influenced by their knowledge and enthusiasm for other disciplines. They are persuaded that all history

contains this ideological slant and similar assumptions. Students are made aware of this and this exercise introduces students to some of the more common ideological perspectives that they will encounter throughout their studies.

### **Unit Seven – Historical Writing**

This unit focuses upon the importance of the tool of writing used by historians to communicate the history that they write. The way historians use these tools is determined by the bias, prejudice, standpoint and perspective historians adopt. The form and purpose of different types of historical writing is emphasised and students then engage upon an exercise in which they recognise and explore such types.

### **Unit Eight – Counterfactual History**

This is intended to make students think through issues of causality and agency – and to consider the effects, consequences and implications of a specific historical event. Is history more – or less – Im/personal? Un/avoidable? Un/predictable? And precisely how far history exists as various kinds of ‘story’ are central questions tackled in this unit.

### **Unit Nine – Famous Historical Figures**

This unit is concerned with demonstrating to students the fundamentally important exercise of critical judgement. Students are encouraged to think about how historians use their judgement all the time (which events/people/processes/theories are important and which are not). They are then invited to engage in this process of selection and to exercise judgement in the ensuing exercise.

### **Conclusion and Reflection**

This sections allows students to pull together their learning experience from the modules and to reflect critically upon the

### ***Testing Regime***

Piloting and testing of the projects is ongoing but we anticipate the course to be available for fullscale operation in the near future.

The Brookes History Department has also validated the course as a basic stage one module compulsory for all history students under our new semesterised programme from September 2004.

### ***Final Report on Testing the Course***

The course team piloted sections of the course with a number of First/Second and Third year students. We aimed for a mixed population of single and combined honours students. Each was assigned two course units to explore and to comment upon ease of use, educational value and time required to complete assignment. Eight students undertook evaluation and we received seven replies. Some of the students were enthusiastic about the learning experience and others were more cautious and felt that the tasks took some getting used to. We became convinced that this was primarily a product of such students being used to other teaching a learning strategies and they needed to get

used to the idea that in this course they would not be attending lectures or seminars **as well** as the online component.

All errors, glitches and oversights pointed out by the students were amended before the course was made ready to go live for delivery to our new intake of stage one students. The course has been validated for delivery during this coming year as **U67500 Aims Methods and Techniques of Historians** and students will commence using it on October 15th

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