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CASE-STUDY

USING A VLE DISCUSSION BOARD WITH FINAL-YEAR HISTORY UNDERGRADUATES

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1. BACKGROUND

Bath Spa University uses a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Reading lists, coursebooks, coursework questions and announcements are routinely placed on the VLE. As part of the third-year history module, 'Women, Culture and Society in Eighteenth Century England,' a 'third hour' was set aside for student learning. Across the university, one of the three hours per week normally designated for teaching and learning on third-year modules was set aside for tutor-supported, independent learning by students. The 'third hour' replaced a weekly lecture on the 'Women, Culture and Society' module. Members of the History department wanted to turn the reduction of traditional class contact hours into a new opportunity for blended learning, and a discussion board was set up on the VLE.

The online discussion board was open to all students studying the module, and moderated by the module tutor. The tutor set the topic of discussion in advance, and posted 'live' responses for one hour on the day before the seminar. The discussion board remained open indefinitely for students' posts.

2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- to provide a source of information and learning to replace the lectures;
- to make learning more interactive than in traditional classes;
- to focus on enquiry-based learning;
- to improve students' transferable skills, e.g., e-literacy, communication;
- to provide an opportunity for distance learning.

3. PREVIOUS STUDIES

Previous studies of using VLEs, blended learning and discussion boards stress, in particular, the importance of structure and accessibility for the students. J. Dawson, K. Murray and J. Paterson concluded that a VLE was most likely to be successfully used if it were introduced to the students in a systematic and thorough way at the start, and followed up by regular tasks to be completed online ['Getting History Students Going with a VLE,' HEA Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology, Briefing Paper, May 2005, p.1]. S. Cameron suggested various ways of encouraging engagement in online discussions. These included: allowing students to determine the agenda; setting model answers or questions in order to discourage 'essay-style' posts; beginning with an emotive subject; and integrating the discussion with face-to-face seminars. In order to maintain engagement, the moderator had to ensure all posts were acknowledged quickly; allocating responsibility for discussion topics to individual students; subdividing tasks into teams of students and asking clarifying questions. [S. Cameron, 'Achieving Online Discussion,' HEA Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology, Briefing paper, pp.1-3].

A sense of 'ownership' of discussion, and the motivation of peer pressure were therefore key elements in previous studies. Another important factor was to ensure that students could see the value of the exercise, by making it relevant to their assessments. G. Benfield emphasised:

> The most active and effective online discussions are highly purposeful and task oriented. If students do not see an immediate educational and/or practical value in the exercise, then they will not be inclined to do it. Busy students will not offer up valuable time to post their thoughts and suggestions to other students for philanthropic reasons. Discussions should focus on a task, and they should involve a 'product'. No matter how interesting a

discussion topic may appear to be, students will seldom take the time and trouble to participate in an online discussion because of its inherent interest.

['Designing and managing effective online discussions,' Oxford Brookes University Teaching and Learning Briefing Papers, 2002, p.3].

4. TUTOR FEEDBACK

Positive elements of the discussion board for student learning

The discussion board raised issues and topics to be covered in the forthcoming seminar. This helped students to settle into each seminar very quickly, as they already knew something of the topic, and had raised questions to be debated. The board also highlighted a range of online sources available, which could be easily accessed through links. This appears to be increasingly important as more primary sources and secondary works are digitised. It also helped students to find online catalogues for archival resources for their research projects.

The most successful discussions were a result of a clear structure, with a beginning (the task), middle (discussion), and end (expansion of points to raise wider issues to be discussed in the seminar). The discussion had to begin with visual material to be discussed before the students tackled a specific question or outcome. The visual material had to be clear, striking, and work on many different levels, with no right answer. The best visual material could be interpreted with different levels of prior knowledge.

Negative elements of the discussion board for student learning

What both the tutor and the participants found difficult to discuss was an open-ended question with no focus. This resulted in too many 'strands' being opened and the discussion having no structure or outcome. Even on set tasks, the discussion occasionally drifted, and it became difficult for the moderator to bring students back to the original point. Without a clear structure, the moderator found it time-consuming to reply to every post, and to keep the discussion on track, and connected in 'real time'. Other problems included:

- Large amount of text to read, both in suggested websites for discussion and in individual posts. These took too long to digest during the 'live hour', and slowed down the response rate.
- Some participants produced 'textbook' type posts which, although informative, interrupted the flow of discussion, and perhaps put off other participants from posting more basic replies.
- Some points were left undiscussed or ignored by participants. This made some participants feel that they were posting into a void.
- Invitations by the tutor to the students to go to a museum or library to search for their own sources, and report back on their findings, met with no response.

There were also technical issues. The VLE did provide a permanent record of what had occurred; the discussion board was better than a 'MSN messenger' or chatroom type of communication. However, not all students had access to the 'live hour', because of lack of internet access. Refreshing the discussion page every few minutes was cumbersome and slow for most students, making it easy to lose track of each comment and the flow of the discussion. Not all websites cited are accessible for students with disabilities, and the discussion board itself may have been difficult to read. The discussion board was too text-based: images could not be posted on the discussion, only in link-form. There was no facility for other forms of interaction, e.g. group website, creation of images.

5. STUDENT RESPONSES
Student take-up

There were about eight users during the 'live' hour and about three or four more at other times, out of total group of twentyone.[1] The most vocal students in the seminar were also the most active contributors to the VLE discussion. There was some evidence of 'silent' readers, although not to any significant extent. Despite repeated publicity about the discussion board, some remained uninterested and did not participate.

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[1] See graph 1 in appendix.

The take-up decreased significantly from the middle of the semester. This was in part because of the mid-semester break, which interrupted the routine, and made students unsure whether the discussion board would continue after the break. Coursework deadlines were, however, the major reason given by students for their declining participation. As it was unassessed and not compulsory, the discussion board was seen as peripheral, and not a productive use of time for their coursework.

Student feedback

At the end of the module, the students were divided into focus groups to provide feedback on the online hour. They were asked to write responses to three questions:

1. How did the online hour improve (a) your historical knowledge?
   (b) your overall learning?
2. How did the online hour not work for you?
3. What would you do if you were in charge of setting up the online hour?

The responses were varied, and generally accorded with what the tutor expected they would write. For question 1, one group mentioned that the discussion gave *"ideas that you hadn't thought of"*, but another group said it did not. Another briefly stated it forced them to use the whole VLE system more; another appreciated the range of sources *"to dip into in relation to the assignments"*. Informally, students also expressed their appreciation of the discussion board's flexibility, giving opportunity for distance learning. Some were at work/school/childcare during the 'live hour', but did read and contribute outside this time. Throughout the semester the tutor received positive comments about being able to read all the posts at a later date.

Responses to question 2 were animated. The content of posts to the discussion was one issue:
"people replying too many times – hard to keep up"

"people giving too long and complicated replies makes people who want to contribute a short post feel intimidated as if they don't know anything – so people remain silent."

"people asking more questions than being answered – complicating topics."

There was confusion about the aims and objectives of the discussion:
"it was not really defined – very confusing!"
"should not be a 'discussion' – it should be people's opinions/chat"

The timing of the 'live' hour was also an issue, as was the technology involved:
"focus on IT literate – assumption of home access to internet" "discussions can be exclusive."
"Would prefer a traditional lecture"
"When deadlines are to be met people did not join the discussion board."

All appreciated the discussion topic being posted well in advance. Some argued that the 'live' hour was not amenable to most: *"specified [live] time – didn't fit in with everyone's timetable"*. Some students said that they would prefer a longer-term (5 days or week) discussion, which could be added to at any time, though it should be noted that this was possible. Others, however, preferred some sort of instant messenger/chat-style discussion.

Responses to question 3 were the most varied, and some groups disagreed over their suggestions for improvement:

i. Some groups stressed informality and lack of compulsion: *"keep it unassessed"*, *"more a chat-based format"*.

ii. Immediacy of comprehension and response was a key factor for some, though how this was to be done was contested. One group complained: *"not such long sources/documents too look at – too time-consuming"*, whereas another suggested a much more intensive and structured format would have been better: *"have four rooms, 4 groups set a task, discuss it, feed it back in the seminar. This enables*

groups to research in small groups and then feedback to the entire class."

iii. The lack of a lecture was a grievance for some, but the discussion board was still viewed as a useful additional resource. One group suggested keeping the lecture, but having the discussion board in tandem with the lecture: *"between [lecture and seminar] for people with views and questions that can't wait for seminar"*. Another group suggested *"If all the subjects are up on the board initially then everyone can participate when they want to and share sources. Put up webpages, journals, and ideas."* This also included the suggestion that an online bibliography would be useful, especially if it invited students to post book/website tips and reviews.

6. COMMENT ON FINDINGS

The discussion board works well as an introduction to the forthcoming seminar, raising issues and initial questions about the topic. Take-up is good at the start of the module, although it has not proved an enabler for students who are non-vocal in the seminar to express their views. The level of discussion is, on the whole, high, and productive learning is taking place. Participation dipped significantly, however, as the semester progressed and coursework deadlines approached.

The VLE is not a replacement for the amount of discussion or information that could be gained in a face-to-face seminar or lecture, because of the time-delay involved and the reluctance of many to post. On the other hand, students appreciate the permanent record of the whole discussion (which they may not be able to write down in a seminar) and the flexibility of time and place. The online medium is good for highlighting electronic primary sources directly, and providing high-quality images in the context of their remote gallery or museum. Large amounts of text or long websites to discuss do not work well as they often lack focus or spontaneity of response.

To ensure consistent participation, the students need to be convinced that it is a valuable use of time and of relevance to their coursework. This can be done through:

- more interesting, immediate and varied tasks that do not require too much prior knowledge or reading;
- a permanent section on the discussion board or VLE so that students can post book reviews or links to digitised archives;
- a discussion that is less text-based, perhaps utilising some kind of collaborative website that could be organised and edited by students. This may not replace the medium of the discussion board, only supplement it. This could be done in two ways: by allowing facility for images to be pasted into discussion (similar to Facebook or MySpace), and by creating a group website that can be added to and edited by users with mixture of images and text;
- less emphasis on enquiry-based learning, and more of a 'question-and-answer' session with the tutor in the 'live hour'?

It is essential, however, that the incentives for students to participate in online discussion and collaboration retain some element of academic debate.

7. REFERENCES

- S. Cameron, 'Achieving Online Discussion,' (Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology, Briefing paper), http://hca.ltsn.ac.uk/

- J. Dawson, K. Murray & J. Paterson, 'Getting History Students Going with a VLE' (Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology, Briefing paper), May 2005.

- Greg Benfield, 'Designing and managing effective online discussions' (Oxford Brookes University Teaching and Learning Briefing Papers), 2002.

- Z L. Berge, 'The Role of the Instructor / Facilitator', Group Topic Workshop: Techniques for Online Discussion. www.phys.unsw.edu.au/ITET/literature.html

- E Muilenburg, Z L Berge, 'A Framework for Designing Questions for Online Learning', http://emoderators.com/moderators/muilenburg.html

8. APPENDICES

A. Specific websites used as discussion points in the module

Successful:

- **portraits** and 'conversation pieces' - from www.nationalgallery.org.uk used to discuss contemporary perceptions of women;

- **caricatures** – 'Marriage a la Mode' and 'Harlot's Progress' by William Hogarth –http://hogarth.chez-alice.fr/gallery01.htm used to discuss marriage settlements – and James Gillray, ''The Fashionable Mama' used to discuss consumerism and perceptions of childhood.

- **Databases** that are quick and easy for students to search with immediate results: www.bathnes.gov.uk/BathNES/lifeandleisure/leisure/localarchives/georgian/SearchGuided.htm used to search *Bath Chronicle* for employment advertisements in discussion of different types of work available for women – some useful source material discovered by the students themselves, together with some element of statistical analysis – i.e. aggregating most common types of jobs advertised.
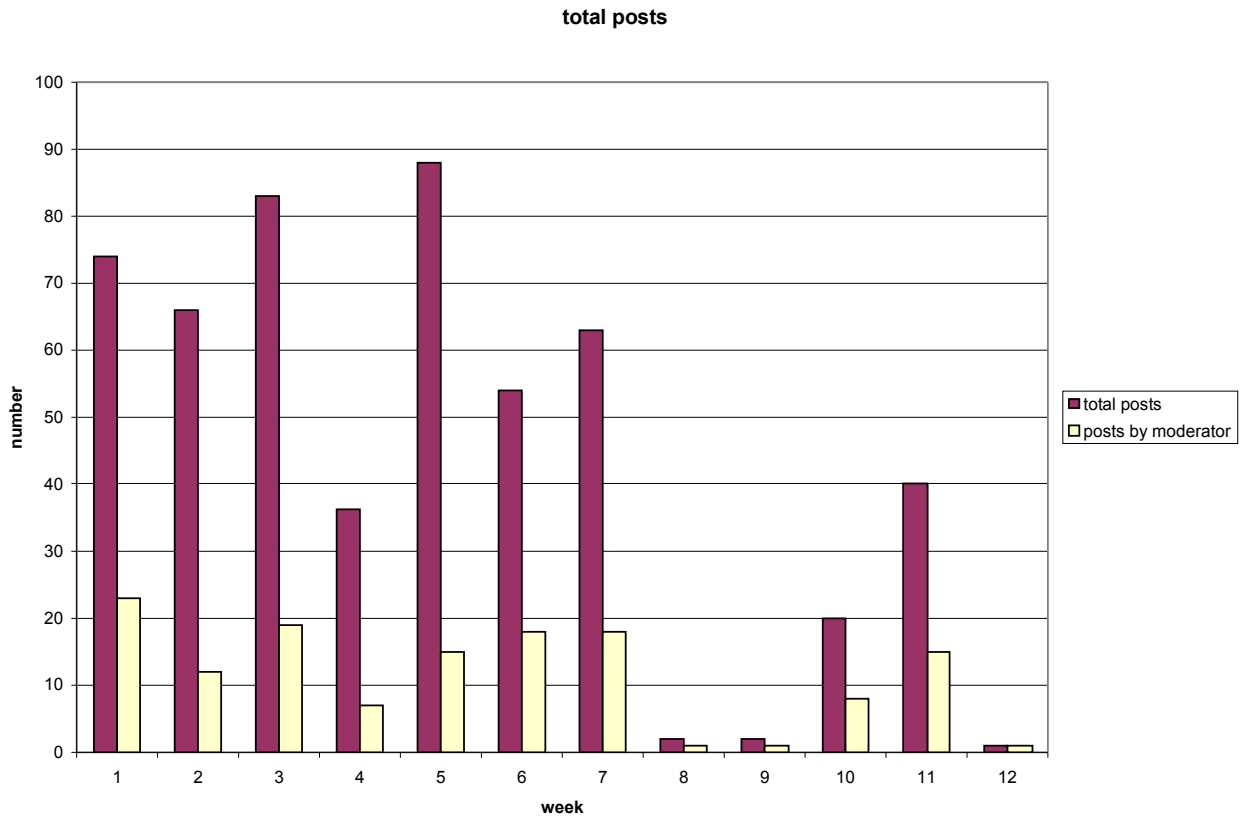
Less successful:

- www.oxforddnb.com – entries were found to be too long to respond to immediately in the 'live' discussion; though useful for reading through the week

B. Student Take-up

week	total posts	posts by moderator	total student users	student users % of all doing the module
1	74	23	14	67
2	66	12	13	62
3	83	19	11	52
4	36	7	11	52
5	88	15	10	48
6	54	18	7	33
7	63	18	6	29
8	2	1	1	5
9	2	1	1	5
10	20	8	5	24
11	40	15	3	14
12	1	1	0	0

total student users
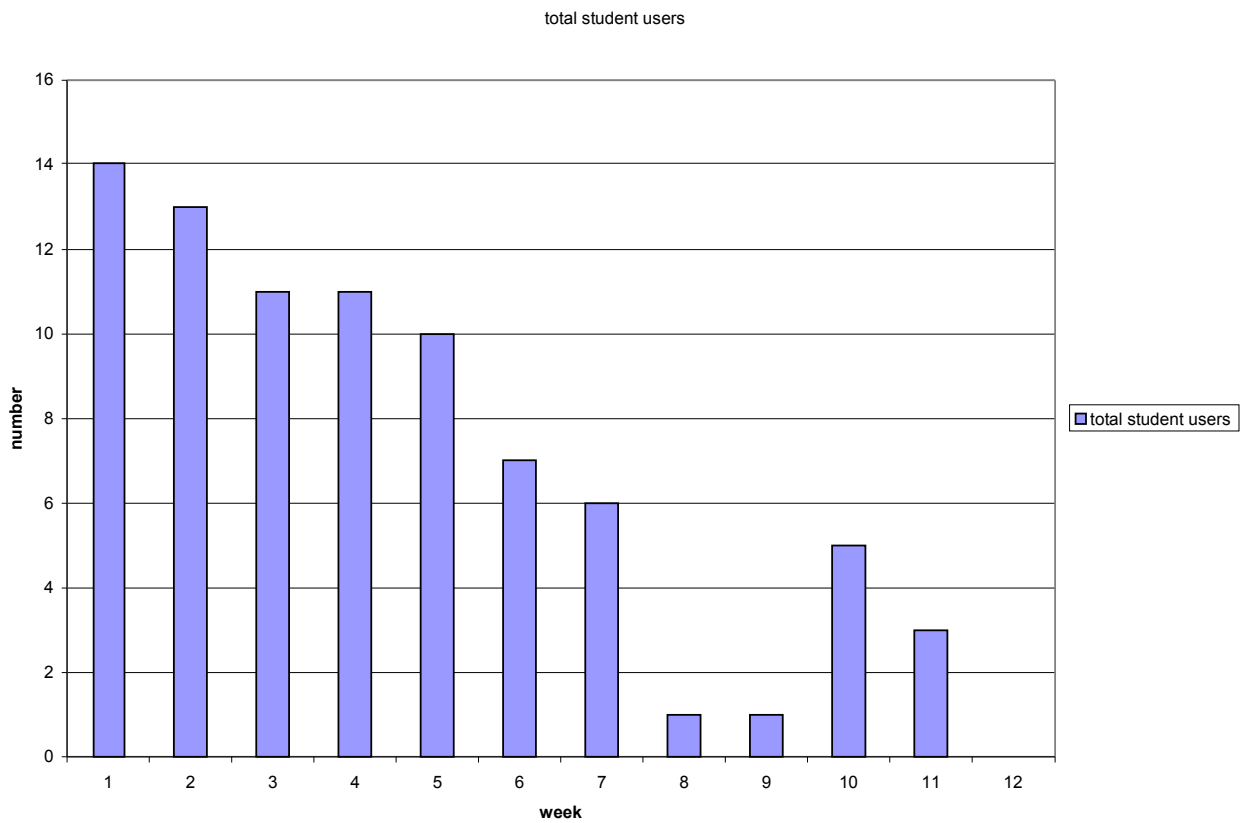
Graph 1: total student users

total posts

Graph 2: total posts on the discussion board

Notes:

Week 4 included a day of industrial action, though the topic was still posted on the board in advance.

Week 8 was the first week back after the mid-semester break.

C. Topics of discussion

1. Discuss what kinds of sources you might look at in order to prove or disprove your initial ideas about women in the eighteenth century. Debate their merits and demerits.

2. Go to www.nationalgallery.org.uk
Find and look at these paintings:
'Mrs and Mrs Andrews' by Thomas Gainsborough, c.1750
'The Milbanke and Melbourne Families' by George Stubbs, c.1769
'Mr and Mrs Thomas Coltman' by Joseph Wright, c.1770
Discuss: what are 'conversation pieces' and how do they portray women?

3. Look at the biographies of these women on Oxford Dictionary of National Biography - www.oxforddnb.com
Maria Byerley (1787-1843)
Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849)
Elizabeth Byrom (1722-1801)
Catherine Macaulay (1731-1791)
feel free to look up other women's biographies.
Discuss the question:
How were these women educated and to what extent did their education influence their subsequent lives/careers?

4. Go to either
www.nationalgallery.org.uk or www.artoftheprint.com
and find William Hogarth, Marriage a la Mode series of prints.
What was Hogarth attempting to say about courtship and marriage and was he right?

5. Go to http://hogarth.chez-alice.fr/gallery01.htm
Discuss what Hogarth is trying to show in his series 'Harlot's Progress'.

6. Have a search through this website of Bath newspapers and see what you find for women, charity and the economy.
www.bathnes.gov.uk/BathNES/lifeandleisure/leisure/localarchives/georgian/Search Guided.htm
This also might be useful for crime in week 10.
Think about the question: **Were women increasingly economically disadvantaged in the eighteenth century?**

7. If you've time over the week, then go and visit the new exhibition on 'Bath and fashion' at the Costume museum. www.museumofcostume.co.uk
Otherwise, have a look at the Gillray caricature 'Fashionable Mamma' in documents and discuss the questions:
Was consumerism in the eighteenth century driven by women?
You might also want to refer to Lorna Weatherill's article on the reading list.

8. **Have a look at the portrait of Fanny Abington in the documents, with accompanying text, and discuss how we can use it as a source.**

9. Look at the caricatures of Georgiana in this week's documents. Explain them. The topic of discussion after we've explained the caricatures will be: **how did women gain influence in politics?**

10 **How useful is Old Bailey Online for eighteenth century women's history? What are its pros and cons?**

http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/

11 Go to ECCO. **Search for religious pamphlets written by women and discuss the range - what denominations, topics, purposes?**

Also, write down some useful secondary books you have read about women and religion in the eighteenth century.

12. **Discuss improvements you'd make to this discussion board.**

Extract from discussion:

Week 2:

Go to www.nationalgallery.org.uk Find and look at these paintings:

'Mrs and Mrs Andrews' by Thomas Gainsborough, c.1750

'The Milbanke and Melbourne Families' by George Stubbs, c.1769

'Mr and Mrs Thomas Coltman' by Joseph Wright, c.1770

Discuss: what are 'conversation pieces' and how do they portray women?

User 1:

Mr and Mrs Andrews appear to be the only couple engaged in conversation due to the portrayal of their inclined heads. However, it would appear that conversation pieces do not have to portray conversation but a small group of family and or friends. All three of the paintings give an impression that women were peceived as the weaker sex, having to either ride in a carriage, on a horse, or sit - the men are portrayed as hardy. Of the three paintings, I would say that Mr and Mrs Coltman were definately not *a la campagne*, but very much in their sitting room - I arrive at this opinion in that Mrs C's attire appear to be the height of fashion (noteably the blue dress) and not suitable for an amble through the countryside miles from her house. I get the feeling that Mrs C is very much an ornament for her husband, and that a tension exists between them (perhaps this is me being too analytical, looking at the thunder clouds in the backgroud!) In contrast though the storm clouds do not give the same impression when examining Mr & Mrs A - their relationship appears comfortable, but not necessarily the side saddle postion of Mrs A - another indication as to how women should be seen in public and perceived frailty of their bodies.

I came across a site detailing Coventry Patmore's poem 'The Angel in the house', which to me is a good example of the seperate spheres notion. I'm not sure whether this period is included in our module. What does anyone else think?

http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu.english/melani/cs6/angel.html

User 2:

The women in these paintings have no need to walk or work, they are portrayed as having been fortunate to have made a marrital alliance with men who appear to have been successful landowning or property owning folk! The Milbanke/Melbourne painting is interesting as it could be seen that the purpose of this painting, which is declared to celebrate the union of two families, shows the lady present being passed from father to husband-from one man to another, which in itself could be seen as perhaps emphasising the male dominance at this time. Lady Melbourne is pushed to one side in her painting, however Mrs Coltman seems to have the full attention of her husband-they are leaning towards each other, suggesting that they were a contented couple, although i can see where [user 1] is coming from-her husband seems cabable of viewing her as an object. Shown on a beautiful horse, in a beautiful dress (a bright one if i may add!) this lady seems to be the focus of the painting as opposed to Mrs Melbourne. The ideas of masculinity and feminity are keenly felt in the three paintings. The men are in strapping poses and radiate confidence (especially in the Melbourne and Ciltman) paintings . To add- the weather doesnt change in england much does it? stormy in all paintings

User 3:

I agree with this, there does seem to be a contrast between Mr and Mrs Coltman and Mr and Mrs Andrews. Mrs Coltman is the only female in all three pictures to appear above her husband - they appear content in conversation and I particulary like that she has a whip in her hand!!!! Mrs Andrews

appears more sullen and is almost portrayed as part of her husbands impressive property - Her portrait was not even completed, leaving space on her lap for a child?? Meaning what?? Women were not complete without children??

User 1:

If you refer to Vickery p.399 and look at Wilberforce's comments 'formerly there seemed to be nothing useful in which they [women] could naturally be busy' this might explain the room left in this portrait for a child. It's difficult not to impose contemporary values when a women reads this... or am I being too much the feminist

User 4:

I've seen the gainsborough picture of Mr and Mrs Andrews called the English Idyll an looking at it I wonder if it can relate to the private/public sphere argument dicussed last week.

Moderator:

Yes - how do the paintings relate to what we learned about public/private spheres?

User 5:

Women are for public display as property in the private world of visitors to the household (or is that public!).

User 1:

I would agree with this. Vickery's article suggests that provincial elitism revolved around personal associations. In my opinion, these portraits were to a certain degree a display of wealth, also cultural homogineity away from the London set whose values were decried umongst the rising middle classes.

User 5:

So the question is should we try to interpret such paintings by trying to fit them into the theory of 'public/private spheres'. When visitors came to the home were they entering into the private sphere or by accepting visitors did the private world of the home become public?

User 1:

By accepting visitors, this behaviour can be seen as complying with the public sphere - I think?

User 6:

I think Habermas thought of the public sphere as an arena of discussion for the burgeoning middle classes. These discussions took place in the press, in coffee houses and in salons (particularly in Paris), the last of which were in the homes of the well-to-do (such as the Rolands). The public sphere is contrasted against the private sphere of commerce and domesticity.

So the home could be a location for public sphere discussions, when the 'chattering classes' gathered there to discuss Locke, Newton, Rousseau and the like.