Dissertation Preparation

Using Virtual Learning Environments to support Undergraduate Dissertations

Mark Roodhouse

Rationale

The dissertation is a familiar feature of undergraduate degree programmes in history and for many students it represents one of the high points of their academic career. The opportunity to pursue an independent but guided study into a topic of their choosing, whether it is a free choice or develops out of a third-year special subject, enthuses some students to go on to produce their best work. For others it is a trial as they face an unfamiliar task with limited guidance that varies in quality and quantity from dissertation advisor to advisor.

Whatever their attitude, all students need support when conducting a research project but what they need and when they need it varies as research is rarely a straight-forward linear process. This makes it hard for academics to provide timely and relevant help. Some issues such as how to identify a feasible topic or manage time are common to all research projects while others are project-specific that require guidance from an academic who knows the field. As projects tend to span several terms or semesters and can involve working away from a student's home institution with limited access to face-to-face advice, taking the blended learning approach seems sensible.

Online resources allow students to access some help and advice immediately, reducing the number of emails or meetings with advisors that deal with minor matters, freeing up time for discussion of more substantive issues. In 2008 I designed and built a virtual learning environment (VLE) for the Department of History at the University of York to do this, supporting the learning of more than 212 second-year undergraduates as they embarked on their dissertations.

Description of the Practice

To improve learning support for second-year students beginning their dissertation projects I set out to build a VLE that linked together the department's existing support. This consisted of:
- a series of seven one-hour dissertation lectures during the spring term of the second year that addressed the issue of finding a suitable topic as well as how to locate and use primary and secondary sources, culminating in the submission of a form proposing a topic and outlining potential sources;
- a 20-credit Dissertation Preparation module during the summer term of the second year that combined three individual 30-minute tutorials with three two-hour workshops providing generic research skills training, resulting in the submission of a passable research proposal; and
- a series of individual meetings with dissertation advisors during the third year that ended with the submission of the dissertation at the beginning of the summer term in the third year.

The dissertation is compulsory for single honours students and optional for students on several of York's joint honours degrees. It is heavily weighted in Finals, accounting for three of fourteen exam units. In 2008 the department needed to support 212 students with their dissertations. Within reason the choice of topic is left to the student, although they are advised to consult staff beforehand.

The process of finding a topic takes place during the spring term of the second year with the department laying on a series of dissertation lectures. The lectures, delivered by a range of staff, cover the following topics:

- choosing a dissertation topic;
- using the library resources;
- finding and using archives;
- sources for medieval history;
- sources for early modern history;
- sources for modern history; and
- project management.

At the end of these lectures, students submit a form outlining their chosen topic and naming a dissertation advisor.

During the summer term students meet with their advisor on three occasions and attend three dissertation workshops led by another member of staff. This is the 20-credit pass/fail Dissertation Preparation module. To pass the module, students need to submit a research proposal by the end of term that meets with their advisor's approval. All the procedural work they do in their tutorials and for each workshop leads to this.

The following timetable helps to explain the relationship between the tutorial and workshop elements of Diss Prep, as it is known at York.

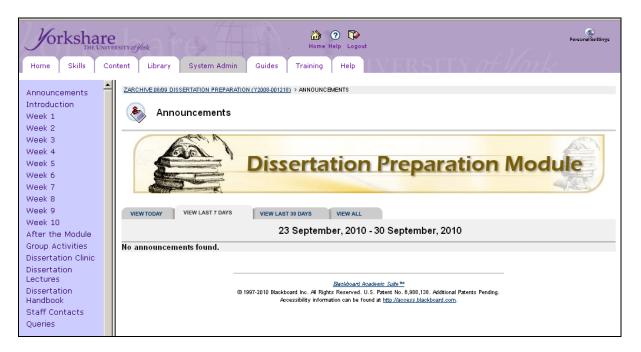| Wk 2	• **First meeting with advisor** to confirm topic and report progress during the vacation.
Wk 3	• **Workshop 1** – discussion of how to place a research project in its historical and historiographical context.
Wk 5	• **Workshop 2** – discussion of how to locate, use and present original sources • **Second meeting with advisor** to discuss **annotated bibliography**.
Wk 7	• **Workshop 3** – discussion of how to write an informative and coherent research proposal.
Wk 10	• **Third meeting with advisor** to discuss and sign off the **research proposal**.

Having completed Diss Prep satisfactorily, students leave York for the summer vacation in June. This is the period in which most conduct the bulk of their research. On their return in October, all students meet with their advisor to discuss progress, keeping in regular contact until they submit a draft for comment early in the spring term. This draft is discussed in detail at the final advisory meeting later that term. Students revise this draft in the light of this feedback, submitting the final draft early in the summer term.

The Diss Prep VLE brought all these elements together in one place for the first time and was available to all students from the moment they began work on their dissertation until they submitted the final version at the end of their third year. The VLE, built using Blackboard software, had several distinctive features:

- a repository for notes, handouts and workbooks from the dissertation lectures for students to refer back to as they designed and conducted their research project;
- a section on writing the dissertation that included examples of prize-winning dissertations to help students during their third year;
- a 'dissertation clinic' with a virtual 'consulting room' that used Blackboard's wiki tool to help students diagnose and treat common research problems that could arise at any time;
- a staff-only wiki, the 'teaching guide', that provided hints and tips for staff leading the Dissertation Preparation workshops during the summer term;
- online submission and circulation of a written task before each workshop using the blog tool to facilitate discussion between students researching diverse topics; and,
- a medieval, early modern and modern examples of each written task for the Dissertation Preparation module to help students with these unfamiliar tasks and provide them with reassurance by showing them how a vague idea could turn into a firm project.

A detailed plan for VLE developers is included as an appendix to this case study, but these and other features are described below.

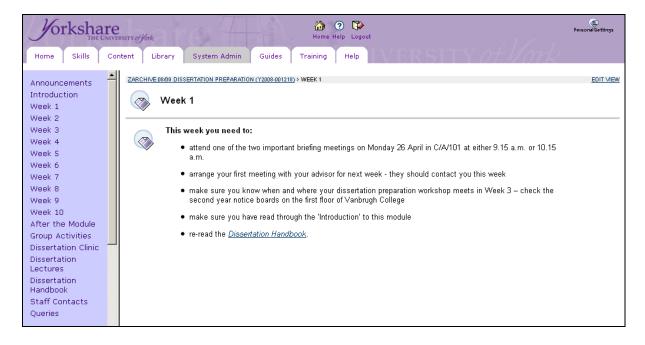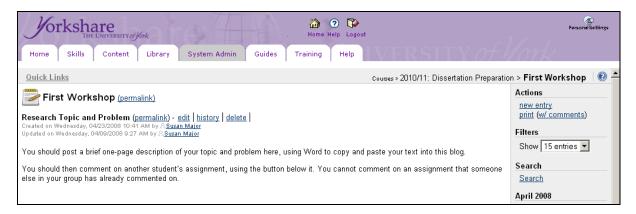**Figure 1** *Front page showing Course Menu and Announcements*

As with many VLEs, the **Announcements** page, a vital tool for rapidly communicating with all 212 students, served as the front page (**Figure 1**). Using the **Course Menu** on the left hand side of the screen, users could find:

- an **Introduction** that provided an overview of the Diss Prep module;
- access week by week instructions (see **Week 1** above) that included examples of written work and a link to the workshop blogs for posting procedural work;
- obtain information about presenting their research findings in **After the Module**;
- go to the workshop blogs directly via **Group Activities**;
- seek help and advice about common dissertation problems by visiting the **Dissertation Clinic**;
- read handouts, notes and workbooks from the spring term **Dissertation Lectures**;
- download a copies of the **Dissertation Handbook**;
- find **Staff Contacts**; and
- get answers to common **Queries**.

To help students to appreciate what they needed to do week by week, each weekly section began with a task list (**Figure 2**). This was followed by more detailed instructions if needed. In the week before each written task was due the students could read a medieval, early modern or modern example of that task. To reassure students that their vague ideas could be turned into a detailed and feasible project, the examples related to the same projects. Students could then see how these projects shaped up over the course of the term.

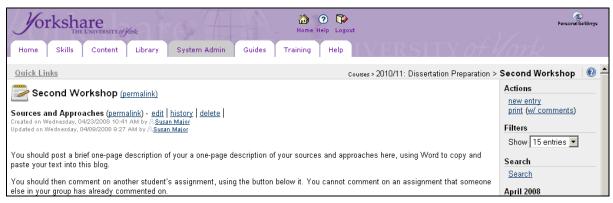**Figure 2** *Instructions for Week 1*

Figure 3 *Workshop blogs*

Students post procedural tasks for the workshops online using blogs. These can be accessed via the week by week pages or the **Group Activities** page. Each blog, which is monitored by a workshop leader to check all students complete the procedural work before the group meets, has a short blog post at the top with instructions for students (**Figure 3**).

A staff-only blog providing hints and tips for workshop leaders is available on the **Introduction** page (**Figure 4**). This includes summaries of student feedback from previous years to ensure staff new to the module are fully briefed before they enter the seminar room.
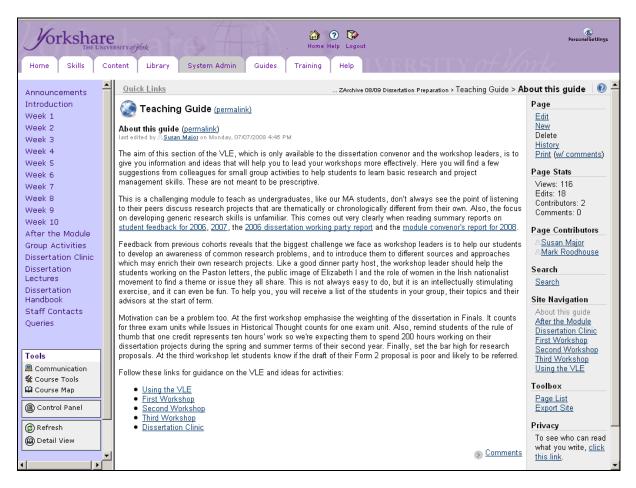

Figure 4 *Teaching Guide front page*

The Teaching Guide was an important innovation but the most distinctive feature of the VLE is the **Dissertation Clinic** which provides students with important advice whenever they need it. This means that students can clearly explain the issues they are encountering when they meet with staff, saving everyone time and allowing staff to provide targeted help.

Students seeking help arrive at the entrance to the **Dissertation Clinic** before clicking on the wiki tool to have a consultation with the Dissertation Doctor.
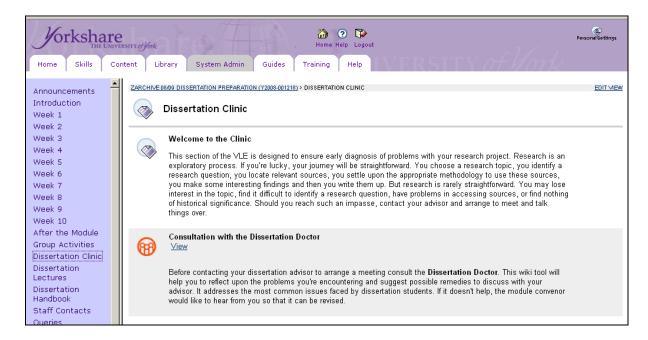

Figure 5 *Entrance to the Dissertation Clinic*

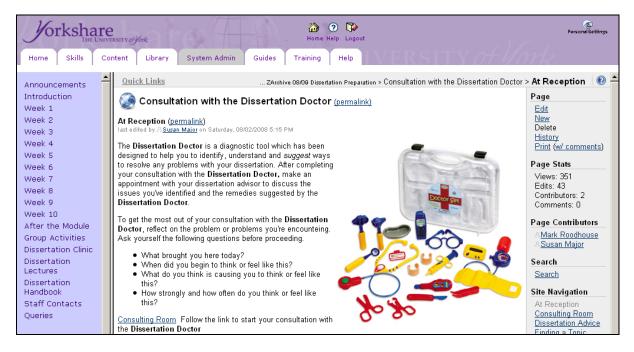Patients enter Reception before clicking through to the Consulting Room.

Figure 6 *Dissertation Clinic Reception*

In the Dissertation Doctor's Consulting Room patients are asked to select a statement that best describes how they feel about their project.
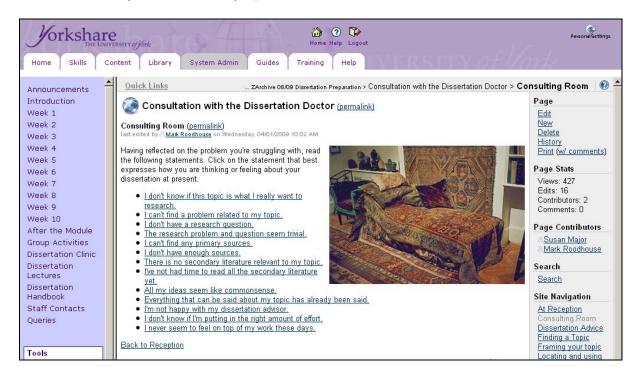

Figure 7 *Dissertation Clinic Consulting Room*

Clicking on any of the statements takes the patient to relevant advice from the Dissertation Doctor. The advice is a distillation of points made by colleagues and study skills books.
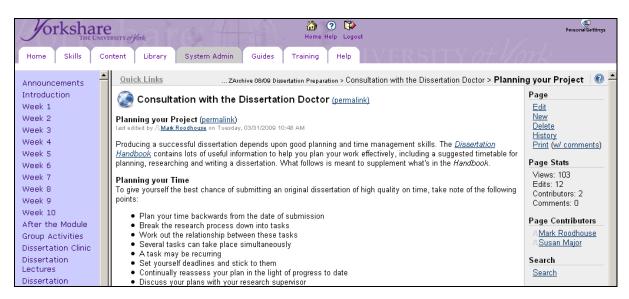

Figure 8 *Sample advice from the Dissertation Doctor*

Implementation

Did you encounter any surprises? Were there any obstacles or difficulties, and if so, how did you address them?

The most time consuming aspect of the project was inventing three research topics to illustrate the written work that the students undertake as part of the Diss Prep. Woven throughout the VLE, these case studies are one of the most successful aspects of the VLE, helping students complete one-off written tasks and giving workshop leaders a clearer sense of what to expect of their students.

Finding examples of good dissertations was much easier by comparison. Recent graduates supplied digital versions of their prize-winning dissertations enthusiastically while *History Today* articles based on RHS/*History Today* prize-winning dissertations were easy to link to. These help students appreciate the scope of a dissertation, give them something to aspire to, and show how they might come up with a pithy and imaginative title.

Another challenge was working out how to use the software to deliver my vision of a 'Dissertation Clinic' that allowed students to diagnose and treat common ailments. I intended to create a section akin to the common faults section at the back of many manuals that allows you to diagnose a problem from its symptoms and tells you how to solve it. I wanted something more dynamic than a FAQs page that would engage students so settled on the idea of a wiki. I used the conceit of a clinic and a consulting room to make it work.

Online submission of written tasks before the workshops was also a challenge as I wanted all students to read one another's work. Setting up group blogs allowed them to post their task for each seminar. To ensure that everyone read the work of at least one other person in the seminar, I required students to comment on a peer's post. Students couldn't comment on a post that someone else had already commented on so that everyone in the group received one comment. This was monitored by workshop leaders who chivied those who did not post work or pass comment.

Impact

What feedback did you get? What skills were developed? What about changes to attitudes and practices? Please include any other reflection and evaluation.

The site is a success with students and colleagues, but tracing its impact on the student experience and student performance is difficult. There hasn't been a noticeable leap in student performance since 2009 when the first cohort to use the VLE graduated. Although the proportion of students achieving good upper seconds and firsts for their dissertations increased in 2009 and 2010, this is a continuation of a trend first noticed in 2006. The range of marks is still large but the numbers of dissertations in the long tail has fallen. The quality seems to have improved, something external examiners have commented upon in their reports.

Gauging the direct impact of the VLE might've been easier if I had conducted a detailed survey of student attitudes towards the VLE since its creation. Time pressure prevented me from doing so, but this should be an integral part of similar projects. Of course, only staff can compare the student

experience and their experience of teaching a module before and after the introduction of a VLE. Staff feedback is often invaluable on a circus-taught module such as Diss Prep module.

If there is one thing this project taught me, it is that a VLE is never finished – it is always a work in progress. The site continues to evolve in response to student and staff feedback. I've recently added advice for students wanting to study non-British history to the Dissertation Clinic while the Teaching Guide is updated to share the best ideas of the workshop leaders. In the near future I plan to use Blackboard's test manager tool to create online quizzes that help students to assess where they are with their project and consolidate their research skills.

Further information, including any website links

- See John F. Lyons, *Teaching History Online* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2009) for an excellent introduction to online teaching methods in support of traditional lecture-based and seminar-based modules.
- The module description for York's Dissertation Preparation module can be found on the departmental website at http://www.york.ac.uk/history/

Appendix: Dissertation Preparation VLE plan

Section title	CT	Text	Notes
Announcements	M		
	CI	(As required)	
Introduction	M		
	CI	Module aims and objectives	
	CI	Structure	
	CI	Teaching Programme	
	CI	Assessment	
	CI	This module and the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment)	
	CI	Exploring the Dissertation Preparation Site	
	CI	Test your computer	
Week 1	M		
	CI	This week you need to	
Week 2	M		
	CI	This week you need to	
	CI	Describing your research topic and problem	
	CI	Posting your Research Topic and Problem	Link to Group activities
Week 3	M		
	CI	This week you need to	
	CI	Commenting on descriptions of research topic and problem	Link to Group activities
	CI	First Dissertation Workshop on Research Topic and Problem	
Week 4	M		
	CI	This week you need to	
	CI	Drawing up a Bibliography	
	CI	Submitting the Bibliography	
	CI	Describing Sources and Approaches	
	CI	Posting the Description of Sources and Approaches	Link to Group activities

Section title	CT	Text	Notes
Week 5	M		
	CI	This week you need to	
	CI	Commenting on descriptions of Sources and Approaches	Link to Group activities
	CI	Second Dissertation Workshop on Sources and Approaches	
Week 6	M		
	CI	This week you need to	
	CI	Writing your Research Proposal	
	CI	Posting your Research Proposal	Link to Group activities
Week 7	M		
	CI	This week you need to	
	CI	Commenting on a Research Proposal	Link to Group activities
	CI	Third Dissertation Workshop on the Research Proposal	
Week 8	M		
	CI	This week you need to	
Week 9	M		
	CI	This week you need to	
	CI	Submitting the Research Proposal	
Week 10	M		
	CI	This week you need to	
	CI	Form 2 Signing-off Meeting	
After the Module	M		
	CI	Over the next 10 months you need to:	
	CI	Writing your dissertation	
Group Activities	M		
	CI	About group activities	
	CI	About group activities	Viewable in Edit view
	CI	First Workshop blog	Viewable in Edit view by selecting a discussion group folder

Section title	CT	Text	Notes
	CI	Second Workshop blog	Viewable in Edit view by selecting a discussion group folder
	CI	Third Workshop blog	Viewable in Edit view by selecting a discussion group folder
Dissertation Clinic	M		
	CI	Welcome to the Clinic	
	CI	Consultation with the Dissertation Doctor	Wiki tool
Spring Term Lectures	M		
	CI	Lecture notes	
Dissertation Handbook	M		
	CI	Handbooks and guidance	
Staff contacts	M		
	CI	Staff Information	
Queries	M		
	CI	Technical problems	
	CI	Module convenor	
	CI	What is a blog, and how do you use one?	