'HISTORY AROUND YOU' ON-LINE SEMINARS AND DISCUSSIONS: REPORT AND EVALUATION

Introduction

This paper reports on how on-line seminars and discussions were introduced into the teaching of *History Around You*, an industrial archaeology module offered as part the history undergraduate programme at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan). The first section provides context by giving a brief description of the module, along with its role in the programme and the way it is assessed. The following section considers how the seminars and discussions were planned, bearing in mind the constraints that on-line approaches impose, but also responding to the advantages they offer, especially in terms of flexible learning. The third section reflects on the experience of implementing the seminars and discussions, analysing the key issues arising from a teaching point of view. The final section reports on the observations offered by participating students, drawing mainly on written evaluations they were asked to provide. The conclusion draws out key considerations arising from the experience, arguing that, with careful preparation and implementation, on-line seminars and discussions can bring considerable advantage in enriching students' learning experiences.

The *History Around You* module

Second-level history provision at UCLan distinguishes between survey and skills-orientated modules. The former are primarily designed to extend students' historical knowledge and understanding with regard to particular types and periods of history, especially in historiographical terms. The latter focus on enhancing students' subject-specific and transferable skills, involving them directly in historical investigation using varying types of primary evidence. The distinction between the two types of module is essentially one of degree. Studying historiographical issues is seen to involve students in evaluating the evidential and methodological bases on which interpretations are made, whilst engaging them in research activity using primary sources is seen to lack purpose unless issues featuring in the secondary literature are addressed. Both types of module provide greater depth of study than is achieved at level, whilst preparing the way for more specialised study, which incorporates the extensive use of primary evidence, at level 3.

  History Around You is a skills-orientated module divided into five sections. They are organised sequentially, moving from general to specific considerations. The first section deals in outline form with the nature and course of industrialisation in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its purpose being to provide background detail that will

aid understanding of why, and to what extent, the developments covered in subsequent sections took place. The second also provides contextual inputs, this time in relation to the impact that industrialisation had on the built environment, especially in relation to the formation of industrial colonies and the development of commercial and transport facilities. The remaining sections comprise case studies, chosen both because they provide widespread opportunities for fieldwork, but also because they enable important historiographical issues to be explored. They deal with factory development and the growth of factory settlements; domestic workshop design and the formation of domestic workers' colonies, especially in textile weaving; and the nature and extent of road improvements made during the Industrial Revolution period. The module does not attempt to cover a broad range of issues that are of concern to industrial archaeologists, an approach that would be more appropriate in providing a level-two survey module. Rather the approach and coverage are determined by the need to provide full opportunity for in-depth fieldwork investigation and hence the development of skills associated with research activity using primary evidence.

Research activity of this type requires students both to demonstrate their understanding of the key historiographical themes covered in the module and their ability to use primary evidence to inform these themes. Accordingly, the module has two assessment elements:

1. an essay of c.3,000 words (counting for 40 per cent of the assessment) based on secondary reading and dealing with the impact of industrialisation on the built environment;

2. a site survey of c.4,000 words (counting for 60 per cent of the assessment) based on the interpretation of physical remains, the results of which are used to shed light on historiographical issues.

Planning issues
In planning the on-seminars and discussions, several major considerations had to be taken into account. They were:

1. How many seminars should be offered?
The standard time available for seminars on UCLan second-level history modules is twelve hours. The standard could be exceeded, but only at the risk of diminishing inputs required elsewhere. Moreover, the delivery of the module requires a good deal of time to be made available for face-to-face tutorials concerning project work. Since on-line seminars can only

be effectively undertaken with small groups of students and since ten students had enrolled for the module, it seemed best to offer three, one-hour seminars on-line, each of which would be repeated. And to benefit from the learning flexibility offered by on-line provision, it was decided to offer the seminars at different times of the day, including late afternoon/early evening slots, and on different days of the week.

2. Should on-line discussions also be incorporated?
That students might well benefit from further opportunities for communicating with one another, and from doing so on a flexible basis, seemed compelling reasons for including on-line discussions. However, that the discussions would be provided in addition to the seminars, and that they might run over extended periods, limited the number that could be attempted. Two seemed manageable.

3. At what point should the seminars and discussions be incorporated into the teaching?
In order to approach both the seminars and discussions from an informed standpoint, students would plainly need time to work through some of the on-line materials. It seemed appropriate, therefore, to provide the first input some weeks into the semester, with the remainder being fairly evenly spaced out thereafter. The programme that emerged was discussion 1 in week 4; seminar 1 in week 6; seminar 2 in week 8; discussion 2 in week 10; and seminar 3 in week 12.

3. What issues should the seminars and discussions address?
Possibilities related to both the content of the on-line module; to the main sources of evidence and the approaches covered; and to issues arising in the preparation of students' projects. To accommodate each of these elements, the following programme was devised:

- Discussion 1 - From reading undertaken so far, do you think industrialisation had a profound or a limited impact on the built environment?
- Seminar 1 - Discuss the value and limitations of sources used in studying the impact of industrialisation on the built environment.
- Seminar 2 - Examine the nature of, and reasons for, variation in accommodation standards in factory villages and handloom weavers' colonies.
- Discussion 2 - Problems arising in researching and preparing fieldwork projects.
- Seminar 3 - Consider the nature of, and reasons for, the road improvements that took place during the Industrial Revolution period.

4. How much direction and intervention would be needed on the part of the tutor?
These issues plainly have to be addressed in planning face-to-face as well as on-line seminars. Without experience of running the latter, however, anxiety arose about trying to exercise too much control and, therefore, risking stifling student contributions. Intervention would plainly be needed to prevent the discussions loosing focus, as well as to provide encouragement, correct misconceptions, offer prompts and answer questions. Even so, the decision was taken to adopt the practice used with face-to-face seminars, aiming to allow students as much scope as possible to have control of the proceedings.

5. How much guidance would students need before they began the on-line discussions?
Since on-line history discussions were new to each of the students, it was felt that some guidance might be usefully given, especially with regard to the approaches that might be adopted. Accordingly, a sheet was prepared for each seminar, an example of which comprises the appendix to this report.

Implementation issues
(a) Discussion threads
- The first discussion thread aimed to encourage students to offer an interpretation of historical change on the basis of the reading they had undertaken. The expectation was that they would write no more than a few sentences, but that the idea of offering and defending an interpretation would spill over into their essay work.
All the responses argued for industrialisation having had a profound impact on the built environment. As would be expected, the length and quality of the responses varied, the better ones offering more considered and nuanced comment. The responses came in over a ten-day period, a request for more of them being made half way through. The students were content to offer comment rather than to debate with one another.

  The exercise had value in helping to introduce students to on-line communications and getting them involved in a manner that did not prove too demanding. Perhaps the exercise could have been more ambitious in scope, with a clearer articulation of responding to one another and offering qualified comment. And more might have been done to highlight the best features of their comments in order to advise and encourage them in their essay preparation. The essays did generally argue a case, though several needed a clearer articulation in the introduction of the line that the discussion would take.

- The second discussion did not prove successful, with only one student choosing to respond on-line. A possible explanation was that the students felt secure enough in preparing their projects because they were able to ask questions of the tutor as need arose, either in face-to-face tutorials or via e-mail. Equally, enough may not have been done to explain the benefits that could arise.

(b) On-line seminars
Several considerations arise from undertaking the seminars on which reflection may be usefully made. They are:

- All the students were prepared to participate, albeit, as would be expected, to varying degrees and with varying levels of sophistication. The small numbers involved probably facilitated participation, as did the keenness and high ability of the students. Encouragingly, and in accord with a major advantage claimed for on-line discussions, one student who tended to be reticent in face-to-face seminars was amongst the most frequent contributors on-line. However, another potential benefit did not materialise. Although they were invited to do, and the tutor remained on-line, students did want to continue to discuss beyond the set times.

- The overall quality of discussion was good and was certainly on a par with that arising in face-to-face discussions. Perhaps students might have been encouraged to respond to each other more frequently, though some students were quite willing to ask questions of the tutor when they needed guidance. A point to reflect on in this context was the extent to which tutor intervention should take place. Of course, responses have to be made with some frequency to encourage students and these can only be given in written form. There is also the potential problem of intervening too soon whilst waiting for a response to be typed. Probably the best way forward here is to encourage and practice brevity, exercising tolerance with regard to spelling and grammar.

- Although students occasionally wandered from the point, and instances arose when more that one line of discussion emerged, restoring direction did not prove especially difficult. However, such occurrences raise the question of how tightly virtual seminars – or, for that matter, real seminars - should be structured. In the case of the sources seminar, for instance, a start was made by reminding students that, in assessing the impact of industrialisation on the built environment, discussion would focus on the value and limitations of the sources so far examined. They were then asked to start the

discussion, the aim being to give them the opportunity to establish the agenda. Maps and physical evidence were quickly identified and discussion took place on both in order to build on the suggestions. However, taking each source in turn might have given a clearer focus to the discussion.

- Because responses had to be typed, concern arose about the amount of material that could be covered in the seminars. In the case of the seminar dealing with accommodation standards, for example, only a small amount of time was left to discuss the tension between living and working space in handloom weavers' cottages. And the summary of key points arising in the discussion was somewhat squeezed. Whilst achieving depth rather than breadth of discussion may be seen as the more important objective in seminar work, the question of how much material to attempt to cover in virtual as opposed to real seminars certainly requires careful thought.

- A minor, unanticipated advantage to arise was that the time spent on-line both prior to, and after, the set seminar times could be used to arrange tutorial times and briefly discuss other matters. How far adding on-line tutorial to on-line seminar time should be implemented thus becomes a matter to consider.

The student perspective

General feedback was obtained from the students using the standard UCLan module evaluation form and from written and oral comments they made dealing specifically within the on-line discussion elements.

High general levels of satisfaction were recorded and some perceptive comments were obtained which help to clarify students' attitudes towards on-line provision. These can be summarised as:

- Regarding the *flexibility* offered by on-line learning, the control students are given over when they accessed the materials was greatly appreciated. One student observed that the seminars were very good because they can be done in pyjamas! Another noted that, with the availability of on-line materials, lectures did not have to be missed when pressure of deadlines arose.

- The issue of *isolated learning* also arose. One student remarked that the seminars helped to overcome the isolation that characterises on-line teaching. She noted that

tutorials and on-line discussions were also made available, which helped to overcome the feeling of isolation and she took advantage of them. However, she also remarked that the seminars were valuable in reminding her that she 'wasn't the only student doing the module, and that others were thinking about similar issues and having similar problems and successes'. The crucial point to emerge from these observations is that whilst both real and virtual contact with the module tutor is available and appreciated, providing opportunities for contact between students is seen as being important.

- On *seminar technique*, especially regarding the nature and extent of student intervention, some reassuring comments were made. One student remarked that when 'we were all a bit shy the first time, there were lots of prompts from the "instructor" and this got things flowing'. She continued: 'Subsequent seminars were increasingly chatty. I noticed that you were good at keeping the discussion focused. With less direction the seminars could potentially be all over the place'.

- Some highly instructive comment was received concerning *student responses*, shedding additional light on why all the students made contributions. One student observed that, with on-line seminars, 'you can't just turn up and sit in a corner as you could in a real seminar'. Making a similar point, another student stated that she felt she should contribute because she was on her own 'instead of being in a large seminar group where I could hide at the back and people would answer for me!'. The same student felt it was a lot easier for her to contribute 'because it wasn't face to face contact so I didn't feel self conscious'.

Students did encounter some problems in responding, however. In one case, late arrival in the chat room meant that one student had difficulty in picking up the line of discussion. A clearer summary of the point that the discussion had reached would have helped. Making a more general comment, another student found that it was often quite difficult 'to get a flow in the discussion' because the conversation had moved on before a response could be articulated.

Conclusion

For the most part, the students were highly positive about taking part in on-line discussion, especially the seminars. Several suggested that more might be offered, a matter which requires careful consideration. One seminar relating to the general material on industrialisation and to each of the three case studies might be possible, but much depends on how many enrol for the module. The limited number of students that can be accommodated in synchronous discussion makes on-line seminars relatively expensive in terms of staff time, presenting a major difficulty when large numbers of students are involved.

Perhaps the most positive dimension to emerge from the experience of running the seminars concerns the responsiveness of the students. Their willingness to contribute was encouraging and the reasons they gave for doing so were highly revealing. Of particular interest in this context is the notion that some students can feel less inhibited in contributing to seminars on-line rather than face-to-face. How far on-line seminars can therefore be seen as a solution to involving students more fully in seminar discussions remains undetermined, but is certainly an issue that is worthy of further investigation.

One final point may be made. An unexpected benefit to arise form undertaking on-line discussions was that it made the 'instructor' think more generally about the ways in which he conducts seminars, real as well as virtual. And what emerges most strongly from this reflection is the need to plan and implement seminars with the student perspective firmly in mind, not only making sure that they know what is required of them, but also creating the circumstances in which they feel able and willing to contribute. In meeting both these objectives, guided on-line seminars seem to have much to commend.

Geoff Timmins, University of Central Lancashire   July, 2004

HAY On-line seminar
Accommodation standards in handloom weavers' colonies and factory villages

Dates: Thursday, 4th December, 12.15-1.00 pm **or** 4.15-5.00 pm.

Theme:
Consider the nature of, and reasons for, the variation in accommodation standards that would have arisen during the Industrial Revolution period in relation to housing provided in factory villages and handloom weavers' colonies.

Take the examples of housing you have looked at in HAY Sections 3 & 4 as the basis of your comments, but feel free to use other examples as well. You might also wish to bring in the views of historians from the reading you have undertaken.

Approach:
As before, I will start us off in Chatroom 1, taking factory village accommodation standards first. Try to raise criteria by which you might judge accommodation standards, including facilities, types of house, heating provision and so on. Remember to respond to each other, as you were doing last time and as you would do in a face-to-face seminar, both to agree and disagree. Again, ask if you are uncertain, either on line or by making a note to ask me privately later on if you prefer. The important thing is to be sure you understand one way or another.

Preparation:
As a minimum, you should read through the relevant parts of HAY sections 3 & 4. But wider reading from the booklists would help. For the rest, prepare yourselves!