A Model for On-line Courses in Humanities

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Introduction

The aims of this short presentation are to describe the possibilities of implementing an On-line Course in the field of Humanities and to go through some points for reflection on the optimised use of On-line Communication facilities for the purpose of distance teaching and learning. It summarises some of the activities of the 'What is Europe?' Remake Project: Socrates Institutional Contract group building on the CEFES project.

Context

Before learners are 'invited' onto an on-line course it is important that the 'administrative' context is well defined. Questions of assessment criteria, timetables and deadlines, conferencing aims and objectives all play a vital role in the way the learning environment is used and in the way it becomes effective as a teaching and learning tool. Learners should not experience problems with logging on, with what to read next, with who to send an assignment to, with how many marks it is worth to make a contribution to an on-line discussion or with how long an on-line contribution should be.

Communication

Teachers should be aware that there is a difference in teaching on-line; they do not only teach and assess but they must also guide learners on their own learning path and they have to perform a variety of 'on-line' academic and administrative roles to guarantee the success of the course. While the underlying objectives of these new 'on-line' roles is the same as their 'face-to-face' counterparts, some of the new roles may need adapting to; communication skills vary in accordance to these roles.

The on-line environment allows new forms of academic work to develop:

- for teachers to work together on a co-operative basis;
- for teachers to learn how to build an academic team to serve a community of learners;
- for teachers to prepare materials and resources in a learner-oriented approach;
- for teachers to help learners manage their own studies instead of teachers being the sole experts in the management of knowledge.

Learners too, will need to adapt:

- learners will profit from a variety of contributions from their peers as well as from a more effective study of the subject matter;
- learners will work together on a co-operative basis.

Flexibility

Flexibility is the key to the provision of an on-line course. Flexibility in terms of:

- the technical facilities to deliver the course;
- the resources and their provision and usage;
- learner assessment.

The on-line environment, with its variety of technical possibilities, opens a very flexible working platform for both teachers and learners to engage in a more interactive and dynamic way of working together.

The On-line Environment

Using Communications and Information Technology (C&IT) and modes of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC): Email, Computer Conferencing systems like FirstClass, MUDs and MOOs and the Web, it is now possible to create a 'virtual' classroom on every learners' computer workstation. In an on-line environment the learners will have control of their time of study. C&IT makes it possible to join in a CMC 'seminar' with fellow learners whenever it is convenient for the individual and also offers virtual access to resources far from the learner.

C&IT and modes of CMC - Email, Conferencing, Web site

Simple electronic mail affords personal communication between one person and another, between a teacher and a learner or between one learner and another learner. Email is becoming a favoured form of communication.

Computer Conferencing systems allow users to read and reply to messages that have been sent in to a central host computer by other registered users. Users connect to the conference to read through the stored messages whenever they wish. Messages sent to Computer Conferencing systems are archived thus providing a re-readable resource as well as a useful source for assessment or evaluation. Computer Conferencing systems thus provide a simple pedagogic medium from which more complex structures may be developed. They offer Email-type facilities to enable communication between teachers, between learners, and between teachers and learners on a 'one-to-one' and a 'one to many' institutional and international basis. Because it does not demand real time, synchronous communication a Computer Conferencing system offers the time flexibility - the asynchronicity - required for satisfactory student participation. Discussions between users are no longer limited to synchronous contact (done at the same time), they can be had by learners and teachers separated by time and space.

MUDs & MOOs provide primarily synchronous 'many-to-many' communication facilities. They provide for real-time conversations between people who are connected to a computer host system at the same time. MUDs & MOOs communication takes place in a stored, virtual environment of descriptive text that is connected to and can be 'moved' around using the commands built into the system (Haynes and Holmevik, 1998).

The newer versions of many C&IT systems blur the boundaries and differences between the facilities described above and new developments allow video images to be 'streamed' and viewed. Computer Communication will soon be visual as well as textual. However, these more advanced systems, although attractive and more exciting, run a risk of complication that requires higher levels of technical support and development and raises the equipment specification to unacceptable levels.

A Course Web site, which could either be independent of or incorporated into a FirstClass Conference system, would give access for all participants to web-based teaching and learning, and to resources, a Course Conference would give access to communication between participants.

Single or Multiple Institution model

Although an on-line course could be offered as effectively by a single institution as by a multiple institution partnership, the benefits to the learners of interactions with learners at other institutions who are following the same course of study, possibly in different European countries, should not be underestimated.

Courses run using the multiple institution model would probably choose English as the common language to build the learning community whereas courses run in a single institution would use the mother tongue to present the course. The choice of language would have a major influence on the course delivered, especially in the field of cultural studies, which are very 'mother tongue' based.

The setting up of and maintenance of a Computer Conference and / or Web site would be the responsibility of the institution following the Single Institution model and would normally fall to their computer support unit. Where multiple institutions decided to collaborate and offer a course following the Multiple Institution model then 'central' sites would provide the Computer Conferencing and the Web site facilities to which the others would connect.

If the course is to be implemented on the Multiple Institution model, there is an added demand for flexibility. Each institution involved will have its own academic tradition in terms of content approach and development, academic level and degree, student assignment and assessment. Offering a Multiple Institution on-line course would raise the possibility (necessity) of 'standardising' teaching & learning procedures and methods across more than one institution. On the one hand, the on-line context offers the possibility for teachers and learners to develop new forms of academic co-operation and development, on the other hand there is opportunity for the difference and otherness, which play vital roles in the academic understanding of the subject matter, to be influential.

Technical Platform

The computing equipment to which learners participating on a Web based or Computer Conferencing based course would need access to should be capable of connecting to the Internet and the Web.

Teaching

A training programme for teachers should be initiated to provide them with the skills they will need to run an effective on-line, possibly trans-national course. This would ensure that the tutors understand their different roles and also, if on a multiple institution course, enable them to meet each other in a virtual sense prior to the course. Such a training programme should include familiarisation with the media that the course they will be working on makes use of. If the course is, for example, to be presented via a FirstClass conference they should practice sending various messages both to individuals and to a group, they should practice various ways of shaping a reply, of threading messages, of using the history function and they should compose their Résumés. If it is to be a web-based course they should set up their own web home page.

Teachers will have to play the administrative, organisational roles of setting things up and 'setting the rules of engagement'. Learners need to know what and when they should be doing things, they need to know of any pre-reading requisites and how they are to be assessed. On-line teachers have to welcome and encourage, to referee or to be the 'arbiter of taste', often they must chair or stimulate discussions and they may have to control the flow and pace of the discussion.

Occasionally they will have to edit or censure communication. On-line teachers (as the representative of the accrediting organisation) must also play the academic roles, they set the standards and they assess. Depending on the level of the course, on-line teachers may decide if any of these roles could be devolved to learners who may benefit from having to control that part of their own learning. Goodfellow discusses these concerns as they manifested themselves on an on-line web and conference based MA course running at the UK Open University (Goodfellow, 1999).

The role of the teacher differs between moderating a planned seminar to discuss a certain set of themes and readings, and teaching a whole course. Teacher intervention varies depending on the pedagogic situation in which the teacher and learners meet. Teaching an on-line class will involve doing all of the things with and for learners that have to be done in teaching traditional classes but they will have to be done in a way that may be distanced from the learners by both place and time. New 'online' problems will inevitably arise, the solution for which can only be sorted out with some advice from the existing literature on the subject, but above all from the experience of teaching on-line. (Tolley discusses the CEFES online training seminars organised to train the teachers on the CEFES project in (Tolley, 2000).)

Workload

Setting up an on-line conference in the format of a seminar is a very positive means of teaching and learning, but a considerable workload is involved both for teachers and learners. Apart from all the individual work implied for each learner and teacher there is an additional workload in dealing with a whole group that is working together on the same topics and readings but also 'working apart', each with their own perspective on the course and each afforded by the Conferencing system with the ability to make their point. Because communication can be asynchronous, not time and place restricted, participants have an equal opportunity to make their 'voice' heard. For each student there are new resources and information exchanges to be managed. Chambers discusses heuristics to assess learner workload in traditional Distance Education, print-based, courses (Chambers, 1994), new metrics must be developed to allow for on-line work. Should the time allowed to connect to, download and read an on-line discussion of 1500 words be the same as for a printed text book article of 1500 words? If the online course is set on a trans-national basis, further questions of linguistic ability and of cultural and academic diversity will affect workload, for both learners and teachers.

Assignments

Assignments are a standard part of any course of accredited study and serve as a way of evaluating how well the learners have attained the aims of the course.

FITness

Presenting the course via an on-line environment allows aims to be specified in addition to those reflecting the normal academic aims of the course. These additional aims should look towards the eventual incorporation of the learners into an on-line working environment, one that they are increasingly liable to experience outside their educational institution. 'FITness' (or the level of Fluency with Information Technology) is the term adopted by the American Committee on Information Technology Literacy to refer to the 'level of competency' in the use of Information Technology (CITL, 1999). Aims designed to increase the students' level of FITness can be specified for on-line courses. This level of Fluency with IT should be assessed as well as the level of attainment of the normal (academic) course aims.

Three types of assignment should exist:

1. Traditional assignments. Although the actual assignment could be communicated to the learners via the on-line media, traditional assignments are of the normal sort, setting questions or projects

relating to the course readings and texts that learners respond to in a standard fashion with essays or term papers.

On-line assignments. These should make use of the on-line nature of the course and assess both:

2. the use of on-line, course related academic resources

3. the student's FITness.

FITness assignments could include:

- Evidence of on-line involvement: Email activity, activity in the conference, evidence of computer mediated communication with others.
- Using European Search Engines
- Learning enough HTML to create a personal web page

Resources

Course based resources

Created or adapted for the course and reflecting the specific concerns of the teachers or the institutions and the needs of the learners. Consideration should be given to providing these course based resources on a CD-ROM. This would provide a re-usable library of resources long after the Web site or the conference has been 'switched off'. Presenting course resources in this way will have the added financial implication of moving all printing and storage costs away from the course designers to the participating learners.

Web based resources

Learners on web-based course would have access to an unprecedented amount of information offered by millions of pages on the web. The need for 'disciplined' information retrieval and critical reading skills (as well as an honest adherence to the rules concerning plagiarism) would be paramount.

Management of resources

The key resources on which the on-line course is based should be provided on-line. If copyright restrictions forbid the on-line storage of a resource a detailed on-line reading list of printed publications must be provided. A course web site should also provide a set of managed links to web resources (including links to on-line Newspapers and journals to provide up-to-date resources that can be referred to as the course progresses).

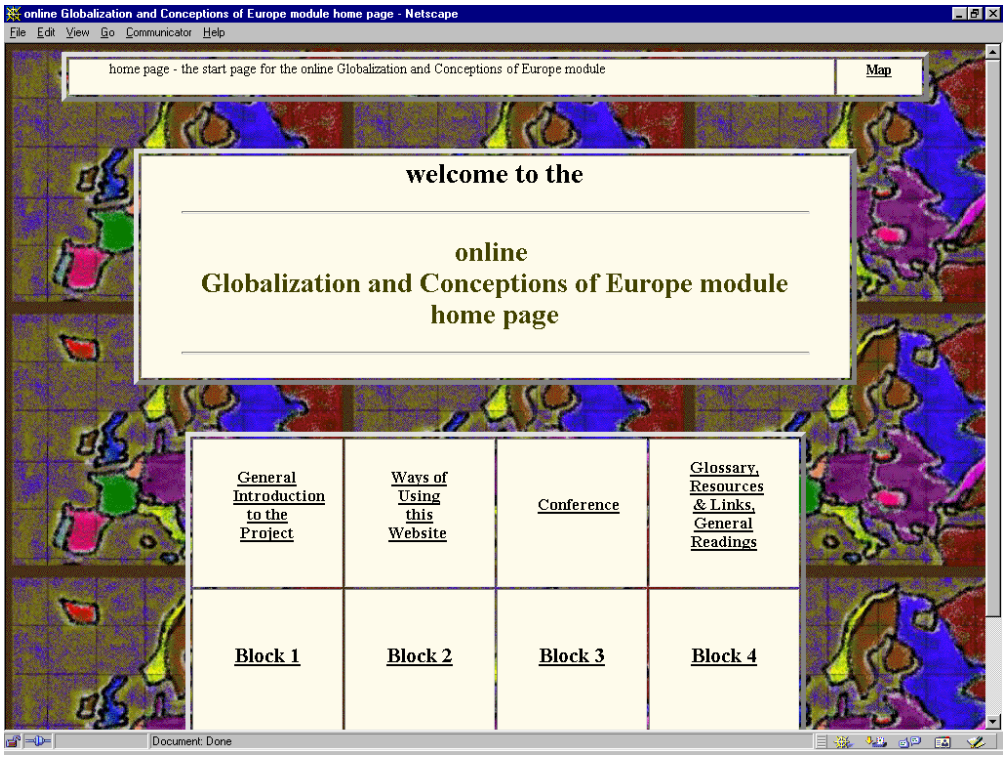
The resources should be categorised to provide information about the 'level' of use of the resource. Metadata describing the resource should include the level of use (e.g.: 1st year undergraduate, MA etc) as well as subject details. A schema for such metadata should be agreed between collaborating institutions before provision of the resources is finalised. Search facilities should be built into any course web site that could search the metadata for the most suitable resources for a particular presentation of the course.

Related to this, a dynamic glossary of terms and concepts, updated after each learning and teaching phase, would provide a useful tool to help learners and motivate them to participate.

Web site

Members of the Socrates Institutional Contract group created a model Web site based on a Sample Study Guide and an Outline for a European Course Module that other members of the group had generated.

The Home Page:



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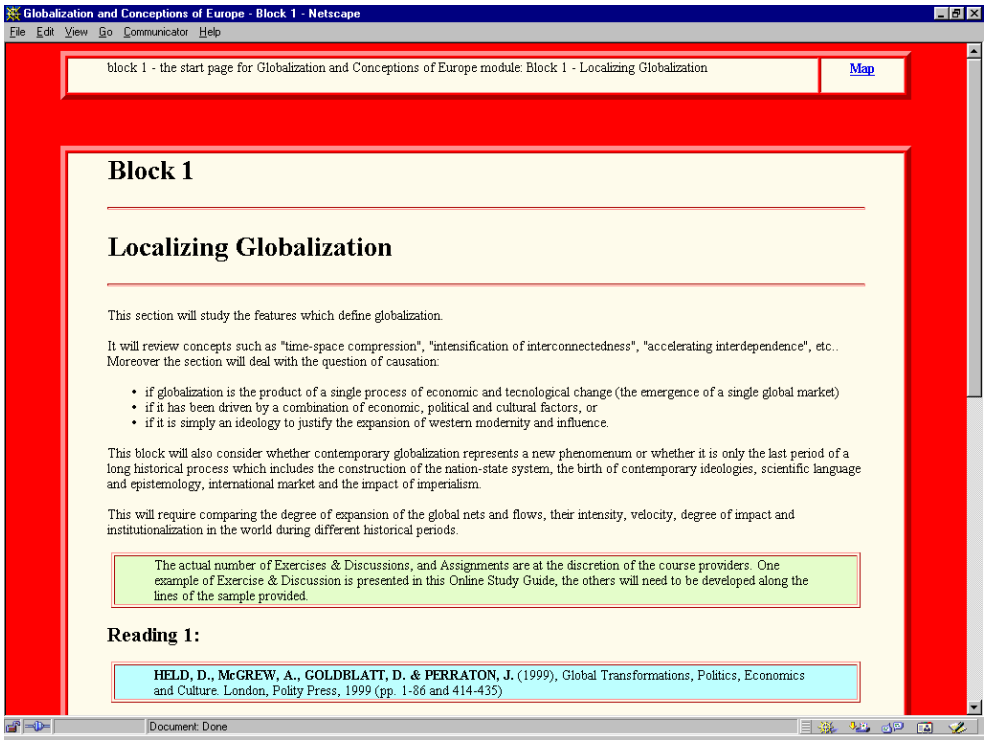

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