Creating a Learning Community: 
the Canterbury Tales VLE

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This level 1, single semester module, Introduction to Middle English, was taught across 11 weeks at the University of Manchester in 2003/04 and 2005 as an optional course unit. This Virtual Learning Environment was designed by me and Anita Gill (Learning Technologist), who also provided hands-on support during its duration. It is delivered through WebCT, our institution’s software package. It is assessed by an individually graded portfolio based on a collaborative group project submitted in December at the end of teaching (worth 50%). In addition to this formative piece of work, a ‘seen’ examination is pre-released in Week 9 of teaching to provide opportunity for research and the exchange of ideas or resources within the cohort; students were not permitted to consult staff during this time.

Background / Context

The context of this course unit was especially complex. It grew out of an existing and popular module at a time of increasing class size; within the space of three years seminars and tutorials of between 5 and 10 more than doubled so that 20-25 became the norm. In response, those of us with keen interest in teaching and learning renewed our efforts to explore more effective and appealing classroom scenarios and to enhance student experience. At the same time, inherited structures of course provision hampered some elements of my reinvigoration of this unit of study. It was to remain as a Level 1, first semester option or seeming free choice, part of a ‘choose one from the following three’ package repeated at Level II of our now completely refreshed BA English and American Studies programmes. Open to students both within and outside the department, its misleading title, Introduction to Middle English, formed part of a general ‘showcase’ for various literary periods, but the module studied only a selection of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales from the perspective of literature to raise questions both about Chaucer’s conflicted place in Medieval Studies and approaches to it. For example, many linguists and Erasmus or exchange students were attracted to an ‘English’ it never actually confronted. Despite, or perhaps because of, this unique position the course regularly recruited over 200 students, typically a disparate collection of specialists in English Studies, though few had studied Chaucer at post-16 level, plus joint honours students and those from a variety of other disciplines.
Two grants aided the design of the course. The first of these, in 2002/03, was a semester long Faculty Teaching Sabbatical during which I investigated approaches to teaching and learning, particularly those that integrated some element of e-learning into a course. The second (2003/04) was a university-sourced Distributed Learning Award of £8,000. This facilitated the creation of the VLE and paid for both a Learning Technologist (Anita Gill) and a postgraduate peer mentor (Erinn Campbell), both of whom were heavily involved with students on the trial run. As part of the conditions of this award, at least one group project had to be electronically based; in practice, two produced web pages and one initiated an annotated database of useful web-based resources for Chaucer Studies. More generally, I had been experimenting with styles of virtual discussion forums since 2001.

As well as the broad aims of an introductory literature course of the type offered to all first year undergraduates at Manchester University at that time, my intentions were specific:

- To create a learning community facilitated by active, student-centred teaching and learning
- To foster skills of collaboration, sharing and dialogue
- To promote investment in learning and to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning and that of others (through the group project)
- To promote reflection on the learning experience
- To foster skills of independent research

**Activities / Practice**

This 11 week course is delivered via a weekly 1 hour class and 1 hour lecture which alternates with group project research time every other week. Several components come together to form the basis of course content. The choice of Tales is intentionally both diverse and ‘out of order’ in that we begin with a short accessible poem (Sir Thopas) and ended with the complex Knight’s Tale. Tutors are free to organise classes and provoke discussion as they wish; I use small group and workshop forums to focus on questions raised by me, and, later, by the class. This discussion is intended to feed into the final ‘seen’ paper examination which combines a traditional closed book examination format with investigation and independent research to test understanding and exploration of a variety of issues raised during our reading. This approach is also encouraged through the use of open or broad sweep questions intended to take ‘freshers’ away from topics tied to specific texts as is usual at A level. Similarly, lectures open up theoretical approaches to Chaucer’s work and/or take up strategic and sometimes extreme positions to provoke debate in and out of the classroom. This aspect is especially appreciated by students who repeatedly used survey forms to demand lectures every week – in keeping I think with a top-down approach to learning and consequently resisted. The lecture provision is usually a highly successful aspect of the module eliciting comments such as ‘really engaging’, ‘fun, informative and well-structured: makes you think’, ‘entertaining and thought-provoking’, ‘very different to anything I’ve had before’ and ‘makes you look at aspects I hadn’t considered in a really interesting way.’
Debate is extended outside the classroom both in the group project component of the course unit and the virtual discussion board. Here, contributions are non-compulsory and non-assessed though postings may be offered as evidence of research and/or reflection in the portfolio students submit at the end of teaching. Its style too is deliberately informal and overt surveillance or tutor intervention kept to a minimum. Participation in an open forum is always a thorny issue, not least because in the absence of any formal requirement to post discussion tends to be dominated by a few. Yet, student survey returns indicate that many more ‘lurk’, reading the messages and comments of others without actively contributing: ‘I love browsing through the messages people have sent without the pressure of assessment’ ‘it really helps to hear the opinions of others and pick up useful advice’….and, paradoxically perhaps, ‘[it’s] really useful because it makes more people get involved in discussions.’ Equally, analysis of postings across several years indicates the following types of activities:

- ongoing debate and challenges to ideas
- willingness to question and explore
- shared advice such as tips on reading or useful books and web sites
- a sense of affirmation and community
- some close reading and engagement with text

The most innovative part of the course is undoubtedly the group project. Here students collaborate to research and follow-through an area of interest. That activity then feeds into the individually assessed portfolio through which students achieve part of their final grade. Students form groups entirely freely on the basis of interest and/or friendship. One hour is timetabled every other week (alternating with lectures) during which students meet; they supplement this outside class time as they choose. They may also consult with me and/or other tutors at designated times or by email at any time. Students may also take advantage of a WebCT communication facility whereby they can form ‘electronic’ groups and message each other in a private, virtual space.

Initially, the group project was a free choice with numerous suggestions posted on WebCT and ongoing support provided by a postgraduate peer mentor, plus the Learning Technologist with whom I devised the module. Students could work in any medium – print, film or video, dramatic or role play, auditory, electronic – to produce formal writing, scripts, tapes, web pages, creative work or any combination of the two. Many students enjoyed this freedom; just as many did not. Some commented on its ‘confusing’ nature and ‘vague outline…a product of the freedom we were given but maybe it would be worth sacrificing some of that in order to make the aims of the course clearer.’ Some found it ‘a bit daunting at first’ and ‘difficult to find focus due to lack of specification.’ Others felt it was ‘a good way to meet people on my course’ but ‘very stressful.’

As a result, I had seriously to rethink the project’s outcomes and streamline its possibilities. The course now specifies:
For your group project, choose ONE of the following:

- A post-16/undergraduate study guide on ONE Chaucer tale of your choice
- A creative response to a selection of Chaucer tales in any form (prose, poetry, drama script)
- You have been commissioned to produce material for a non-specialist or post-16/undergraduate audience on the theme of Chaucer in the Contemporary World. Your material may take any form (written, web pages, radio or TV script, video or CDRom format). What will you include and why?

Each activity is coupled with non-prescriptive suggestions about how the project might be tackled plus ideas on the direction individual research might take. For example, the creative writing option included the following to highlight possibilities and flexibility; not everyone in the group needs to write creatively since other kinds of research feed into the project as a whole:

Some suggestions: you might ‘write back’ to a tale by telling it from the viewpoint of one of its characters or from that of another pilgrim in the dramatic frame of the Canterbury Tales….; add dramatic links in keeping with the style of the Tales; finish off an incomplete tale or change its ending;…tell the second ‘missing’ tale of a chosen speaker….; translate a tale into modern English or adapt its form or genre.. TOP TIP: include research on other popular modern adaptations…; or on the sources/analogues to the tale (where the story came from and how others adapt it)…; critical responses to the tale to help you decide on an approach or its ‘flavour’…; consideration of its form and/or genre (if you change it, say why)…; consideration of how to present your collection in the light of what you discover about medieval reading practices (as a book? a folder? illuminated manuscript? annotated in the margins?)

In addition, those opting for this response are required to complete a commentary outlining the thinking behind their choices.

Course content, administrative information and all supporting advice or material is delivered through WebCT which also has links to useful web sites, a reading list and a webography compiled and annotated by students. Theoretically, this enables 24/7 access, on or off campus. Reaction has been largely positive despite some ingrained resistance to technology. Students comment that ‘IT skills are increasingly important in almost all areas of work…and WebCT is one way of improving them’ and that ‘Everything needed for the course is easily accessible through WebCT.’ An important handful complained about computer provision arguing that electronic communication privileges those with their own PC and works against those who prefer hard copy or print. One or two insisted that ‘WebCT is the invention of Satan.’ Most found it easy to use and welcomed the additional face-to-face contact in class, lectures and office hours; clearly, a VLE works more effectively when, as one student puts it, it is ‘not relied on too heavily as the only means of communication.’
Assessment

As well as the summative formal examination, students are also required to show evidence of collaborative work-in-progress, collated at the end of teaching and submitted as an individually assessed portfolio. The material for the portfolio, worth 50%, is based upon the group project and collected throughout the course in a manoeuvre intended to encourage students to engage and reflect upon their own learning as a continuous, often open-ended or incomplete process. Consequently, students do not offer a finished product such as a traditional assignment but a package showing evidence of their individual contribution to the project (such as an exploration of analogues to a tale or of a particular theme, a close reading of a selected passage and so on); evidence of the group project as a whole (ie printing off of everyone’s work); an annotated and formally referenced reading list; a reflective piece of writing that considers the entire project, the place of their own research within it, perhaps a consideration of the dynamics of the group and its workings, and ideas about future research angles and/or aspects they might have approached differently. My emphasis upon the portfolio as process, plus its final assessment of individual contribution, ensures that no-one is penalised for the failure of others to invest in the project or its incompleteness, potentially more dangerous in a first year, first semester course when students switch programmes of study or leave. Similarly, the risks inherent in unproductive or less successful lines of enquiry are minimized when other possibilities are explored through the process of reflection upon the learning experience.

To begin with, requirements for assessment were over-complex. Students were to offer material evidence of a range of specified skills evidenced by a formal piece of writing, annotated bibliography, participation in extended debate on the online discussion forum, evidence of postings on the discussion board, the production of web pages or images or a short CD and so on. Further information and ideas were offered on WebCT. At this point the portfolio was worth only 30% of the final grade. Yet students submitted lengthy folders full of sometimes unorganised material, testament both to anxiety over their marks and, I think, involvement with a feature of the course described by a significant number as ‘really fun’ and ‘[it] has to stay!’. The overwhelming nature of the group project/portfolio nevertheless was a clear source of frustration to staff forced to handle bulky folders without a set word limit or requirement to edit material. Instructions were much simplified in the second run-through of the course with students assessed as follows:

to produce an edited and organised portfolio that provides evidence of individual research and reflection, complete with accurate citations and references; individual contribution not to exceed 1500 words.

Conclusions

As I have suggested throughout this case study, careful evaluation of any learning environment is essential. Thanks to student and staff feedback I was able to modify and streamline the Chaucer VLE for its second and subsequent runs to offer a far more positive experience, certainly for students. Undoubtedly, there is a
heavy cost in setting up this type of learning experience, both initially and as the course progresses. I consider this worth it since the resource can be adapted and added to in future years, while the use of peer mentors to support projects and/or manage the discussion board could effectively utilise previous students of the course to further strengthen the notion of learning as a community. I now feel, though, that I did not make best use of some of WebCT’s features. In response to demands for more lectures for example, I would now provide timed release of lecture notes/supplementary material; timed release of critical extracts with questions to consider, perhaps in preparation for class; extra contextualising material. Similarly, after extensive consideration of how to encourage participation without compulsion, I would revise management of the virtual discussion forum in order to hand over complete responsibility to students after some initial, early tutor input.

Staff response has been varied. Many like WebCT’s efficiency and all agree the more restricted choice of the group project is a vast improvement. Some remain surprised by the high level of student motivation; for me, this is a marker of their successful investment in learning. A couple found their new role as facilitator and guide, rather than authoritative teacher, problematic at first, indicating, perhaps, the need for more training and development in this area. One attempted to direct students into groups by class list instead of allowing free choice across the year group and assisting only when necessary. The single most worrying factor though has to be lack of ownership of the course by staff required to teach upon it. It was seen very much as my innovation, as evidenced by the alacrity with which it disappeared during my prolonged absence from university at a time when it was successfully up and running and liked by students. Maybe no-one was keen to take responsibility for its relatively costly work load. Some also remain anxious about its implications for teaching styles. Equally, my absence coincided with a drive to homogenise all courses in line with a large and newly created School.

In short, then, the use of this VLE, always cited as exemplary outside my own institution, is a huge success for students but not without its problems for staff and Faculty structures. Many aspects of its use transfer easily to other subject areas but demand commitment from all involved: departmental and technological structures (including training) need to be in place and, in order to for everyone to feel a sense of ownership, it is perhaps best created collaboratively.