OBL4HE: students' use of online learning resources and preferences for design and content

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Introduction

This is a brief report summarising results of small-scale research carried out in February 2012 to investigate Reading University students' current use of online learning resources and preferences regarding their design and content. In the OBL4HE project plan it comes under work package 5 no. 22 (design of resources based on stakeholder feedback) and work package 9 no. 35 (gather data concerning baseline key resource usage in target departments). For a summary of findings please see the 'discussion' and 'conclusion' sections at the end of the report.

Aims

- Establish which online resources students currently use in their courses generally
- Establish which online resources students have used during courses based at the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) or on other museum-based courses
- Identify factors which would make it likely that students would use OERs
- Gather feedback on provisional ideas for OERs

Methodology

Nine students filled in a questionnaire (see appendix 1), designed to elicit responses to the questions prompted by the research aims. The questionnaire was piloted with one student, after which it was modified slightly; answers to that questionnaire have been included in the results. A discussion group was held with five of the students to obtain further comments, (one student was interviewed earlier since she could not attend the discussion group). Questions used in the discussion group are listed after the questionnaire.

Sample

Students had all taken or were taking MERL-based modules, either Object Analysis and Museum Interpretation, Analysing Museum Displays, or both. This sample was chosen because the principal place for embedding the OERs will be in the Curatorship and Collections Management module of the new joint honours Museum Studies and Archaeology BA (starting in October 2013). This module is based on and has the same tasks as Object Analysis and Museum Interpretation. Students should therefore be able to comment on the likely usefulness of the resources. Students were mainly studying Archaeology; however there are students from other disciplines since students from a range of disciplines can take the joint honours and as OERs the resources will need to have cross-disciplinary appeal.

Number of students	Year of study	Course	MERL modules taken
Questionnaire and discussion group			
2	First	BA Graphic Communication and Typography	Analysing Museum Displays
2	Second	BA Archaeology	Analysing Museum Displays and Object Analysis and Museum Interpretation
2	Third	BA Archaeology	
Questionnaire			
1	Third	BA Ancient History	Both modules
1	Third	BA Archaeology and History of Art	Object Analysis and Museum Interpretation

| 1 | Second | BA Archaeology and History | Both modules |

Figure 1 *(above)***: Course and MERL modules taken by sample, and their year of study**

Results

Name of resource	Number of students who use it (n = 9)	Reasons for use All 1 student unless otherwise stated
Blackboard	9	Lecture notes/handouts (8 students) Course information (8) Use blog/discussion board (2) Submit assignments Revise work Print cover sheets Module assessment forms Make appointments with tutor
Library and museum databases	9	Finding books (6) Research for assignments (3) Information on objects or topics (3)
Web-based teaching and learning exercises linked to courses	Yes: 5 No: 4	Links to journals (2) Online tests TV programmes and videos Assessed wiki (as part of student's certificate course, prior to BA)

Figure 2 *(above)***: Online resources used by the students in their studies generally (not MERL modules)**

Name of resource	Number of students who use it	Reasons for use
Blackboard	Yes: 8 No: 1	Lecture notes/handouts (7) Course information (2) External links (2)
Museum databases	Yes: 6 No: 3	Researching objects for presentations/essays (6) It was confusing because I missed the introduction to it (1) No, but I will use it for the upcoming essay (1) I will use it if I know how (1)
Other websites connected with researching objects	Yes: 6 No: 3	Researching object background (6)

		Catalogue searches (1)

Figure 3 *(above)***: Online resources used by the students in their studies at MERL or other Reading University museums**

Suggested resources	Students' views on usefulness (1 = not useful, 2 = useful, 3 = very useful). Maximum = 27
A worksheet quiz to introduce students to the museum catalogues and databases	Number: 22 It should be serious not entertaining If it is voluntary it is unlikely all students will make use of it-only those very interested in the course It needs to incorporate 'hands-on'; not just paper-based It would help students to become familiar with the database (5 students) A quiz will get people thinking and discussing more as opposed to an information sheet Apart from the introductory talk there is nothing to help learn how to use these resources. Will be particularly useful for other students not taking the Museum modules.
A bank of recordings of MERL and other University museum staff speaking about their daily work	Number: 23 This could be good for essays and quoting, in particular for those who may be too shy to ask for opinions in person If it linked with the projects and assignments It would be a good way to gain an insight into museum work if it is a career they are considering (4 students) Would help in knowing who to contact with questions I selected to record oral lectures/seminars and the ability to reprise them proved invaluable when planning assignments and revising for exams When learning museum theory it is hard to gain a real understanding of day-to-day work at a museum
A bank of recordings of MERL and other University museum staff speaking about topics related to course tasks (e.g. display design, object cataloguing)	Number: 24.5 Only useful if teacher has not gone over such things already or does not have the time to go over such a wide variety of topics Students can refresh their memories from class-theoretically I can see work grades improving from access to this additional information Would provide first-hand experience Know what you should be doing/what is expected from the assignments (2 students) The recordings should be transcribed to help us keep up with what is being said

	Someone with experience in these areas is always good for background study Would guide us in the right direction when searching for resources or related information
An introduction to useful web-based Museum resources available elsewhere (e.g. databases of objects in other museums, websites exploring topics related to those on museum-based courses)	Number: 24 Presume this would also provide hyperlinks to other webpages-if so, embedded explanations on how to navigate the targeted website would be really useful Useful for looking outside the information the University provides and indicating possible directions of research The more places students have to look the more material they have and the more informed they become It would allow students to find similar objects and collections to artefacts in MERL or to a task Would increase the amount of resources available Depends on how complex gaining such information is. If it is simple perhaps a list or handout would suffice For research purposes this would be great (2 students)
Digitised objects and object files (i.e. images of objects and electronic copies of associated documents available online)	Number: 23 There are already a lot of images and information available on the Museum database Useful for remote access (5 students) Useful for assignments There is a danger that this might make things too easy and stifle the need for greater personal research and the need to engage with the paper archive Some students are part-time or have to travel or want to work in the evenings-out of hours access to documents are a fantastic idea!

Figure 4 *(above)***: Students' responses to ideas for online resources**

	1 = essential 2 = important but not essential 3 = not important (maximum = 27)
I can see their relevance to course tasks	26
The tutor recommends them	25
They are easy to use	24
They are attractive	15
They use innovative technology	13
Other	It's very important they are easy to find and

	updated regularly No copyright restrictions on use of images

Figure 5 *(above)***: Importance of different aspects of online resources to students**

Discussion group comments

What are the pros and cons of online resources?

Pros
Online is good for accessibility.
You don't have to keep returning to MERL; it would have been nice to reassess the object but you don't want to ask people to get it out again.
On a database, you have other objects to compare it with.
It's nice to have it in one place-there's no hold on it.
You can search easily.
I don't feel I have to work less hard online; you still have to put a piece of work together, and come up with your own content.

Cons
If it's a lecture, you can question them. They might make interesting deviations into their own experience.
It's easier to ask someone to repeat than to go through a whole recording.
I've had a couple of friends' connections fail.
It's easier to have the physical book-there's no scrolling. I'm not fond of reading too much off a screen.
You can annotate easily.
It might stop you going to the library. Getting up and looking for something yourself rather than sitting at the computer, typing something, clicking on something, it's there.
You might get lazy and instead of relying on your own observations you might wake up in the morning and go on the website.

Recommendations for materials
It should be short; I'd recommend 3-10 minutes.
Maybe you could have MERL staff recorded and visiting people coming in to talk, or the other way round.

What are your ideal online resources like?
I don't care about it looking flashy, as long as everything works. It should be simple.
Easy to follow and access; there are so many things to look at.

Would you use them if they are not compulsory?
It's a time thing; if I'm late I will only do the necessary ones; if I have more time, I will read extra things.
Yes, they are an alternative source.
There is always something that I will do, get an extra image, for example.
It's nice to know it's there even if I don't use it.

Summary of results

All nine students questioned used Blackboard, Reading University's VLE, mainly for tasks such as checking course tasks, downloading and revising course materials and printing administrative documents. Use for museum-based courses was slightly lower but most students used Blackboard and other

databases. Just over half the students used web-based teaching and learning exercises on their courses, and about a third used them on museum-based courses.

Students welcomed ideas for online learning resources such as digitised objects and associated documents, and recordings of museum staff speaking about their work. They valued these mainly for logistical reasons, for example the chance to revise work and also to access materials outside library hours, remotely and at times which fitted in with their working patterns. It was essential that they could see the relevance of such resources to course tasks and that they were easy to use. By contrast, innovative technology was a low priority and attractive design a medium priority.

Discussion

Students see it as essential that online resources help them to complete their assignments and support course tasks; no students talked about the pleasure of accessing more information for its own sake or for background information, for example. There is thus little support here for developing resources as optional extras which complement students' courses in interesting ways. Online resources do not have to be compulsory, but they need to be clearly relevant to students' course tasks and fulfil a need not already met offline.

The value of the 'e' in e-learning (Mayes and de Freitas 2004) for the students is mainly logistic, for example enabling access outside library and museum hours and enabling quick location of relevant resources through a search function. Advantages of using them will be balanced against time invested in finding them and learning how to use them. They thus need to be easily accessible through Blackboard (which students are already familiar with) and simply designed.

Along with more accessibility comes the opportunity to return to objects and documents online - revision, in other words. This is extremely valuable for learning. In fact, it is a meaningful use of the word 'embedded' - not just included in syllabuses, but becoming a part of students' thinking: 'unless students use what they learn... They will soon forget it, no matter how good it is, or how well they learned initially. It has to become embedded in the way they think, before retention can be expected, and that means repeated use' (Laurillard 2002:202).

Students were also aware of the disadvantages of having material online in terms of making research too easy. But one student said: 'I don't feel I have to work less hard online; you still have to put a piece of work together, and come up with your own content.' This comment illustrates that it is crucial that students access the resources in the context of developing their own thinking and research skills, and so ease of access should not be to the detriment of thinking and working skills needed to fulfil course tasks. This is a matter for the teacher who has designed the course tasks and is responsible for integrating the resources into curricula. Students do not see it as desirable that online resources replace consultation of primary resources such as objects and paper documents.

Students saw the value of the resources as supporting and reinforcing their off-line learning - they did not see it as a different or alternative type of learning. Another point is that e-resources are sometimes described as offering personalised learning (e.g. Yuan 2008). In fact, one of the main uses of e-resources in this case is for mass accessibility.

Conclusion

Findings of this research, while not unexpected, underline the fact that resources need to be explicitly integrated into curricula and are not likely to be used by students otherwise. Their sustainability is best assured if they are accessible via Blackboard, are relevant to course tasks, reliable and easy to use.

References

Laurillard, D. (2002) Rethinking University Teaching: a Framework for the Effective Use of Learning Technologies. Abingdon, Routledge Falmer.

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