

Creating an online subject community: Using WebLearn to support distance learning

Introduction

The University's Virtual Learning Environment, [WebLearn](#), provides a suite of tools designed for community building. These tools can be invaluable for distance learning where the entire setting for the educational experience is virtual. One such example is the [Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching English Language in University Setting \(PGDip TELUS\)](#), run by the [Department of Education](#). This 2-year part-time course, taught mainly by distance, is for experienced teachers of English who want to improve their knowledge, skills and understanding of teaching English language in university settings. The course tutor, [Dr Catherine Walter](#), along with support from the WebLearn team, Education Department administrators and librarians, provides students with a learning experience that is the "equivalent in quality and in 'feel' of an Oxford-based course" through the WebLearn Environment.

The Challenge

Catherine needed tools that could ensure delivery of teaching, encourage exchange, facilitate group discussions and feedback, provide training in research skills and provide pastoral care for students. WebLearn had to become a learning community where students learn not only from the tutor and the materials, but also from each other. Students also needed access to appropriate published materials for study. Though they had full access to the electronic resources of the Bodleian Libraries, students for this course come from all over the world, so were often too far away to physical access library materials. A global intake also meant that asynchronous communication with the students was also essential.

The Innovation

Teaching was organised around the weekly posting of module documents on WebLearn. The documents introduced that week's topics and tasks for students. Documents could also include links to Catherine's animated PowerPoint presentations or to external videos from, for example, iTunesU. Most tasks required responses in a WebLearn forum for feedback and discussion by Catherine and her students. Catherine hyperlinked the references to reading in her documents, except when the students' task is to find resources themselves. To facilitate maximum access to reading materials, relevant e-books were purchased, but most of the course was based around electronically available articles.

To respond to the practical user-problems of a virtual learning environment, Catherine originally offered a forum for technical questions and problems, but she found that the students "quickly turned the Chat Room into a 'virtual water cooler'". The Chat Room allowed Catherine to respond immediately to any technical difficulties and also became valuable community resource.

Top Tips for Success

1. Make sure that students are competent with the technical aspects of the course before teaching begins, including VPN, WebLearn, online library access and email.

2. Construct interactive and varied teaching documents, preferably one where students have to post a response online.
3. Take into account students' full-time jobs and differences in time zones.
4. Use WebLearn's community tools to provide a space for informal chat.
5. During the teaching term, check for technical problems every day.
6. Don't imagine that online teaching will take less time than face-to-face teaching.



Winner of the OxTalent 2012 Award for 'Use of WebLearn to support a course or programme of study'.