

**Developing undergraduate students' understanding
of historical enquiry and research through flexible
online learning and feedback**

Contents

Developing undergraduate students' understanding of historical enquiry and research through flexible online learning and feedback	1
1. Introduction.....	3
1.1 Context and Project Aims	4
1.2 Project Funding, Participants and Calendar	4
1.3 The Project	5
Aims and Objectives of the project.....	5
2. Iteration 1: 2013-2014	13
2.1 Designing the Toolkits.....	13
2.2 Implementing the Toolkits	16
2.3 Evaluating the Toolkits.....	16
2.4 Disseminating the Toolkits	17
2.5 Conclusions and Next Steps.....	18
3. Iteration 2: 2014-15	19
3.1 Designing the Toolkits.....	19
3.2 Implementing the Toolkits	20
3.3 Disseminating the Toolkits	21
3.4 Evaluating the Toolkits.....	21
4. Project Platforms and Resources.....	24
4.1 Developing Historical Thinking (Website)	24
4.2 Historical Enquiry and Research (Facebook).....	25
5. References.....	26

1. Introduction

Undergraduates beginning History

When undergraduates begin a History degree, they face a number of challenges. They may lack confidence, they may not be used to working independently, and they may have misconceptions about the past, and generally weaker ideas about History as a discipline, than we might expect, (Booth, 2013). In short, they may need to make significant progress in aspects of historical thinking during their first year if they are to flourish as an undergraduate historian.

To support undergraduates in making the transition from school to university study, some programmes build in historiography or historical methods modules in the first year. These modules are not always as highly rated by students as perhaps they should be. It can be difficult for students to understand the purpose of these modules, the forms of assessment in use may be alienating, and students may not be clear about how modules of this type relate to the rest of their degree, (Booth, 2013).

There is scope for designing introductory historical enquiry modules that are more memorable, supportive and engaging than a conventional lecture series. A module of this kind could help students to make the transition to higher education more successfully, (*op cit*).

Digital Learning Tools

Online learning tools – in the form of VLEs in Moodle, Blackboard and other platforms – are a staple feature of learning at university. Yet

‘The evidence is growing that despite familiarity with personal technologies, learners are generally poor at deploying their digital skills in support of learning. They lack critical media and information literacies, and struggle to translate the capabilities they do have into different contexts. ... Tutors' confidence and capacity to be innovative in their use of technologies are critical to learners' development. (Coventry *et al*, 2006).

Online learning platforms, online activities and digital materials present their own challenges to lecturers and to students, and so there is a need to investigate the forms of online participation most likely to support historical thinking. It has been argued that:

There are far more examples of embedded practice in professional and vocational subjects, especially where professional bodies are open to exploring how practice in their profession is changing. Less well embedded are notions of digital scholarship – the changing research practices of disciplines and how these need to be reflected in learning tasks and assessments., (Beetham *et al*, 2009:71-2)

Another area for investigation is the interplay between online activities such as the exploration of subscription-only databases of primary sources, and conventional face-

to-face teaching, such as lectures, (Coventry et al, 2006; Beetham and Sharpe, eds, 2013).

Historical thinking is assessed in many ways, through essays, debates, commentaries of sources and the like. Online environments offer both opportunities to support traditional forms of assessment, and the chance to design newer forms such as e portfolios, (Cambridge, 2010).

Further areas for exploration include the assessment of historical thinking, and the role that online formative assessment might play in promoting confidence, engagement and progression, (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Research with students of primary and secondary age has suggested that progression in understanding of substantive and procedural concepts does not take place systematically, but may develop as unpredictably as the route taken by a goat track up a mountain, (Lee and Shemilt, 2003). An online learning environment can provide the models and scaffolds characteristic of explicit instruction, as well as opportunities for debate, exploratory talk, and reflection associated with constructivist approaches, (Tobias and Duffy, 2009; Mercer, 1995).

At the same time, an online environment retains the traces of teaching and learning journeys undertaken. This affords valuable opportunities for research and development, (Fielding *et al*, 2008/2014).

1.1 Context and Project Aims

The Nature of the Project: Teaching and Learning Collaborations

The nature of the project is unusual in a number of respects:

- Collaboration in learning design between history faculty and educationalists in the same institution
- Collaboration in learning design between history faculty and PhD in same institution
- Collaboration in learning design between two institutions
- Action research: the first iteration in two institutions led to changes in the second iteration at both universities, with some impact on each other as a result of shared evaluation approaches and debate at dissemination events during the project

1.2 Project Funding, Participants and Calendar

The Developing Historical Thinking project was funded by a total of £30,139.75 received from the Higher Education Academy over a two year period. In addition to funds obtained from the HEA a further £50,734.29 in match funding from Edge Hill University and Roehampton University was included in the original bid. This latter contribution largely covered costs of staff time for involvement in the project (other than costs for buying out teaching to make project staff available to devote to the

project), estates and indirect costs. HEA funding largely covered replacement teaching costs, travel and accommodation expenses (to enable face-to-face meetings of the team as well as attendance at conferences to give sessions on the project and its resources), the cost of enabling free public access to two dissemination workshops and bursaries of £750 each for postgraduate students working on the project. The project team were first informed about the success of their application in June 2013. Information about project participants can be found at:

<http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/histlearn/people/>

A clear calendar of progress and events was outlined in a project plan produced soon after the team was informed their bid had been successful. That calendar began with recruitment of postgraduate students for the project and the gathering of undergraduate perception data. In total three postgraduate students from Edge Hill and two from Roehampton joined the project (see the HistLearn site for their differing fields of research expertise). A research officer, David Allan was also recruited to help with evaluation. In the project plan were key design and planning workshops for the team (a mix of online and face-to-face team meetings were held on a regular basis), initial meetings were held in June, July and September 2013. The focus of the calendar was planning for the two iterations of the project and then evaluations of those iterations (the evaluation of the first iteration being particularly important as this underpinned design of the second). Other important events in the calendar were the two public dissemination workshops (held April 2014 and November 2014). HEA funding supported 50 free places at each of these public workshops. Also embedded in the plan were key deadlines for interim and final reports and preparation and submission of final toolkits.

1.3 The Project

The project has been designed to explore approaches to developing undergraduate students' understanding of historical enquiry and research through flexible online learning and feedback in two institutions: Edge Hill University and the University of Roehampton.

Aims and Objectives of the project

The project aimed to bring together expertise from two institutions, over two years, to explore practice in online flexible learning design and in the provision of formative feedback in two parallel modules.

The expertise included:

History faculty interested in developing innovative approaches to historical enquiry.

PhD students encouraged to create bespoke digital materials and activities for the modules.

Experts in e learning were involved to offer technical support for resource design *and* to support virtual as well as face-to-face project meetings and data collection for research purposes.

Educationalists researching historical thinking and teacher education in order to draw on pedagogical research to inform the learning design of the two modules.

OBJECTIVE: To develop and refine online platforms, resources and learning opportunities for flexible use by undergraduate students following introductory courses in historical enquiry and research that would help develop and enhance their learning.

The two-year project enabled those involved in the project to change the design of the module in year two having considered the nature and extent of student participation in the first module. Changes included a clearer alignment between resources, activities and assessment and attention to student anxieties about online participation. Workshop events supported by the HEA enabled discussion with others in the sector about emerging findings.

This project provided a valuable opportunity to develop learning resources in the light of detailed user data, both qualitative and quantitative, taken from the module sites. While module convenors in many universities regularly revise their courses in the light of student feedback (delivered through module evaluations for example), this feedback is often impressionistic and sometimes does not tally with actual student engagement (because not all students respond to module questionnaires). Combining information from standard modes of feedback such as module evaluations with student focus groups, tailored questionnaires, an overview of assessment outcomes and user data drawn from the VLEs gave project leads at Edge Hill and Roehampton a much clearer picture of how students were using the online platforms and tools, and what they were taking from them.

Evaluation of the first iteration flagged up not only issues for developing pedagogic strategies but fundamental points about how students were accessing the sites. This included technological problems they were encountering and the need to crystallise for students the value of resources in relation to their own skills development and successful completion of formative and summative assessments. In the midst of the first semester of their university career students required clear and reiterated signposting of the purpose of the tasks they were being asked to undertake. Collaborating with PhD students and history educationalists enabled teaching staff to benefit from a range of expertise and perspectives. For example, Ali Messer's work on using discussion boards helped inform new guidance on contributing to discussion boards which encouraged greater student participation in these forums. Information taken from focus groups – specifically students felt that the PhD students were more approachable than academic staff as they were closer in age and experience which helped prompt the involvement of PhD students as moderators in discussions which also stimulated student engagement. The teaching team in both institutions also benefitted from interaction with other teachers and trainee teachers in HE via our two dissemination workshops. These events not only allowed us to disseminate project

findings but invited comment on the tools and platforms that we had developed, which in turn helped inform redesign in the second iteration of the modules.

OBJECTIVE: To enhance the pedagogic experience and practice of postgraduate students by providing them with opportunities to design, implement and evaluate online learning platforms to support undergraduates.

This aspect of the project was unexpectedly powerful, in terms of the development of postgraduate thinking about the nature of online learning generally and specifically in relation to historical thinking. It also led to the creation of some very useful and engaging materials for undergraduates in the two modules within the project, including video, quizzes and online debates, now a part of the project toolkit.

The main way by which postgraduates supported undergraduate learning was by the weekly journal entries that students were encouraged to write. Each week students would record an entry related to the tasks that had been designed to support the relevant course material, and both the postgraduate and the tutor would respond. At Edge Hill University, the module was divided into three different seminar groups, so each postgraduate took a seminar group in the online feedback, with the tutor and the postgraduate working closely together. Responses were designed to engage with the student answers, to encourage a scholarly debate, to suggest ways in which students could improve and/or develop. In brief, the engagement was meant to be slightly different from the traditional student-tutor discourse. In the best cases, this saw students develop upon their answers further within a longer 'conversation' of up to five or six entries.

Postgraduate students were also involved with the development of course material. The 'What Kind of Historian are you?' quiz was one example, which provoked a series of interesting responses at both Edge Hill and Roehampton, but there were also 'vox pop' videos recorded at Edge Hill University as well as activities such as a source exercise on Thucyclides at Roehampton. Also, each of the Edge Hill postgraduates designed a lesson plan, which contributed towards the online toolkit, and in the second iteration, the postgraduate students contributed video material on a course topic which contributed to the activities that week. The impacts of these were to introduce students to the basics of historical argument within a dialogical, one-to-one, framework, thereby sharpening their critical skills. As this was a module aimed primarily at methodological study rather than chronological study, this involved studying aspects of the discipline that would not have been studied previously, and made students reflect on the nature of history more directly than what they would have encountered at GCSE or A-level. Judging by some of the insights in the journal articles at the end of the module, one could see a positive evolution within the work of some students, providing good preparation for future study. It also forced postgraduate students to research and debate questions outside of their specialism, which could be seen as good practice for any future teaching career.

It is worth noting that none of the five postgraduate students involved in this project studied standard History programmes at undergraduate level (the Edge Hill postgraduates consisted of a linguist, a literary scholar, and a musicologist- at Roehampton, it consists of a philosopher and a classicist). So this was an introduction to domains of historical epistemology for them. This obliged postgraduates to engage with the question of the purpose of the historical discipline. So it could be argued that the benefits were mutual- both undergraduates and postgraduates developed their skills in terms of historical thinking, and in the case of the postgraduate students, this introduced them to issues that were directly relevant to their research, thereby strengthening their research skills. Designing course material was also a challenge, and it forced postgraduates to engage with new challenges- i.e. preparing a class and preparing a video are two different skill-sets. An example would be the 'What Kind of Historian?' quiz, which introduced them to various historiographical problems/dilemmas that one would probably not encounter otherwise. In short, not only did postgraduates provoke thought amongst undergraduate students but they also found themselves reflecting upon their own research and arguments. They felt that they came out of the project as better historians.

OBJECTIVE: To develop models of formative feedback using e-learning: throughout the design of the platforms, a key focus was on the design, implementation and evaluation of peer (undergraduate / undergraduate) and expert (postgraduate / undergraduate and academic / undergraduate) formative feedback.

Each institution explored a range of approaches to formative feedback, including formative comments from PhD students and History faculty upon online journals and e portfolios.

At Roehampton University, a number of approaches to formative feedback were taken. Students were given formative feedback on a draft of their e-portfolio (the e-portfolio was submitted on Mahara and feedback delivered through the same platform). As there are some limitations to Mahara as medium for delivering feedback – students can delete their feedback and if students have created their portfolio within their profile page it is not possible to deliver private feedback – the feedback on the final portfolio was delivered via Turnitin. Aside from direct feedback on the assessment, a number of different avenues for delivering feedback were explored. Discussion boards were utilised as means both of encouraging peer-to-peer learning and giving feedback on key historical skills and modes of thinking (asking the right questions, engaging in independent research).

In the first iteration students tended to take the feedback from the discussion boards as a signal that their participation was over, rather than using the feedback as a spur to further engagement with the debate. Shifting the guidelines for discussion and involving PhD students as moderators rather than the module convenor seemed to encourage more extended discussion amongst students. Students also benefited from peer 'feedback': while students were initially reluctant about posting their draft portfolios on a common group page (perhaps as a result of both fears that other

students might appropriate their work or about being exposed if their work was deemed inadequate), comments from Roehampton focus groups indicate that students came to recognise the value of seeing other examples of student draft work. This gave students an opportunity to see what their peers had done with the same assessment requirements and the same software platform (Mahara). Many found that it was reassuring, rather than anxiety-producing, to see the standard of other students' work. In addition to these modes of delivering feedback, students also undertook a number of exercises, developing and testing historical skills. These exercises provided quick feedback through instant responses and model answers. User data revealed that at Roehampton a number of students revisited discussion boards or retook exercises, indicating that they implicitly recognised the value of these exercises in delivering feedback.

An important advantage of the involvement of two HE institutions was that this allowed greater experimentation through differences in VLEs, contexts and approaches. Differences which enriched the evaluative potential of the project. During the first iteration at Edge Hill University resources were located in a Blackboard site which sat parallel to that which already existed for the module. Students were directed by lecturers on the module to view the resources and undertake the tasks on that site ready for discussion in forthcoming sessions. Unlike Roehampton, engagement with these materials was not subject to summative assessment. Issues around student participation in the first evaluation resulted in face-to-face dedicated session time being timetabled for the second iteration so that students had not only time and space to specifically explore project resources but also had staff present who supported active discussion of site materials and dealt with questions about content, tasks and technology. This change for the second iteration enabled closer use of resources which in addition had been constructed so that they more explicitly aligned with assessments (while also encouraging students to interrogate those resources in a critical manner). Students were also introduced to, and worked with for one or two sessions, the postgraduate students who acted as moderators responding to undergraduate online posts. For both iterations at Edge Hill it was postgraduates on the project, supported by academics, who responded to student online reflections.

At Edge Hill the resources provided as part of the project on the balloon debate and on constructing and de-constructing arguments played a key role in encouraging and supporting students in their formative work before embarking on their summative assessments. Students contributed to both individual journals and discussion boards on specific concepts. Balloon debate videos offered students an opportunity to assess and critique debates put forward by members of staff. Students undertook discussion of the videos in session time which enabled the study pairs in which they were working the space to formulate their ideas together. Students were then asked to read a short guidance document on the concept of historical significance and relate that to the videos and by extension the historical characters they had chosen for their own balloon debate presentation. They then posted their reflections on the discussion board

enabling wider consideration of their own contribution and that of other students as well as feedback to be received from postgraduates.

Emphasis at Edge Hill University was on supporting and promoting student reflection and understanding of how to construct and evidence an historical argument. This was begun by a video introduction with an accompanying show example of an argument in action so-to-speak. Video resources about the kinds of primary sources available to historians were intentionally about less commonly used material in order to intrigue students and encourage them to think more creatively about what sources they could potentially use. Several short videos from an academic and two postgraduates illustrated and modelled their own journey of historical discovery. This was also designed to complement the examination and use of other kinds of primary sources on the module (see module guide). As Booth has observed, 'Primary sources are widely viewed as an invaluable vehicle for engaging students, fostering perspective-taking, developing skills of interpretation, judgement and the formation of a historical argument, and, more broadly, cultivating a reflective, empirically-based, problematizing approach to the construction of historical knowledge.' (Booth, 2014: 119).

Thus students had already proactively discussed online and in sessions how to construct an argument before embarking upon scrutiny of arguments underpinning a range of ideologies in a summative assessment. Although particular ideologies were by-and-large dealt with in specific weeks there were also opportunities to enable students to think laterally, especially in week seven (which concerned liberalism) when two videos interpreted and interrogated arguments put forward by and about two different political figures from socialist and anti-colonial perspectives. Overall, it was the case that students at Edge Hill tended to be more comfortable with using the relatively private space of journals which maintained an online relationship with postgraduates than the open discussion forums. At Edge Hill University postgraduate students operated as respondents to student online contributions from the start and the positive response from students to this aspect of feedback meant that this was maintained throughout. Postgraduate students were each allotted an academic (history or education) 'buddy' to provide ongoing support in communicating with students. Thus feedback to postgraduate students was also maintained via regulate contact and meetings with their 'buddy'.

OBJECTIVE: To enable collaboration and knowledge exchange between institutions (two HEIs) and between faculties (History / Education) through knowledge transfer and collaboration between historians and educationalists in the development of evidence-informed practice in e-learning, flexible learning and assessment for learning.

The project team succeeded in achieving this objective and the process is ongoing building on successes already achieved. Academics and postgraduates in both institutions have collaborated across faculties in face to face project design and planning meetings and in regular virtual meetings throughout iteration one and the iteration one evaluation phase. We have collaborated in the design of platforms and resources, encouraging cross-fertilization between the two institutions resources and platforms. We have also collaborated in evaluating iteration one of the project and co-presented phase one of the project and the phase one evaluation to the wider community in a number of ways. These include dissemination events, BBC Radio 4 Making History, at the Historical Association conference in May 2015, and at the School History Project summer conference in July 2015.

Perhaps the most explicit evidence of successful collaboration, as has been pointed out by the external evaluator, is regarding the teaching and learning activities trialled at the two universities and made publicly accessible on the HistLearn website at <http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/histlearn/> hosted by Edge Hill University. Collaboration across disciplines (history and education) has also been very valuable and this has fed through into teaching materials delivered on the Roehampton module (i.e., use of Cercadillo's work on historical significance). Interviews with participating staff demonstrated that the cross-fertilisation of ideas between history and education has been valuable and that interdisciplinary conversations have been fruitful. Our project dissemination events have also illustrated this process, enabling historians and educationalists to meet and share ideas in ways that are otherwise hard to achieve. Project platforms continue this process, by showcasing the collaboration and by being targeted at history educators in university and in school and college sixth forms. The Roehampton materials can be viewed at <http://external.moodle.roehampton.ac.uk> where guests can enrol onto the site called: [Historical Enquiry at Roehampton: Toolkit](#).

OBJECTIVE: To contribute to knowledge in the wider History HE community about effective practice in supporting historical enquiry.

Dissemination events and activities (project workshops, social media activities, the HistLearn website) were an integral part of this project. Since the project end date, a number of further dissemination activities have been undertaken, including presentations at the Historical Association and Schools History Project conferences. In addition, Ted Vallance has also repurposed some of the project exercises for use in teacher training events hosted by the Prince's Teaching Institute. The project has also featured as a segment on BBC Radio 4's 'Making History'.

While the project team are working hard to disseminate project findings with the wider History HE community there are both practical and intellectual obstacles which need to be overcome. The end of the HEA subject centres has removed one common port-of-call for teachers in history in HE to seek further support and guidance. As a stop-gap, the project website and links to toolkits have been posted on the Warwick legacy site for the HEA subject centre.

There are two other key obstacles to engaging the history HE community. The first is the prioritisation of research in most universities, which has left most history

academics, no matter how committed they are to teaching, with very little time to reflect on their teaching practice and with very little incentive (until very recently) to do so. The announcement of a teaching excellence framework by the Conservative government may change the environment again but the likely emphasis upon metrics suggest that more game-playing and form-filling, rather than investment in enhancing teaching practice, will be the outcome.

The second, which it may be more possible to address, is a perception among history academics themselves that 'skills' teaching is 'content free' and doesn't really relate to the nature of history as a discipline. Comments of this kind have been noted both in media discussions of the project and in discussions in an HA/HEA focus group on history education. This mind set is surely developed from the current standard method of delivering 'core' subject skills in most history programmes: 'skills' and 'historiography' are separated, the former treated as a practical set of techniques (bibliographic, technological, literary) that students will need to acquire in order to produce work of an acceptable standard, the latter as a collection of important theories about the study of the past. Few history teachers in HE are in much dialogue with history educationalists and few are therefore aware of the important work that educationalists have done in unpicking the often unarticulated key assumptions of history as a discipline.

In order to address this, the project team are now exploring the possibility of developing a research network exploring the production of historical knowledge which will foster greater collaboration between history educationalists and historians, and encourage historians to reflect more critically on how they approach their work and why they write the kind of history that they do.

OBJECTIVE: To contribute to knowledge in the wider HE community about effective practice in online flexible learning design and in the provision of formative feedback.

To date much of the contribution to the wider HE community about online flexible learning design on the project has been via two dissemination workshops which have been held at Roehampton University (April 2014) and Edge Hill University (November 2014). Both of these events showcased sessions about evaluations of the first and second iterations of the project and explained the design of the platforms at both universities, the means by which students had engaged with resources and received feedback. Crucially, these events also demonstrated evidence of progress in student thinking recorded via the project. Each workshop had 50 free places available. A total of 37 people attended our 11 April 2014 event (the registration allocation of 50 was taken up completely but a number of those who registered did not ultimately attend). The second dissemination workshop held at Edge Hill University on 7 November 2014 was attended by a total of 54 people, including a significant cohort of PGCE students, teachers of history from A level to university level and a curator. In addition information has been disseminated via sessions at external conferences, including the Historical Association annual conference and the Schools History Project Conference in 2015

2. Iteration 1: 2013-2014

2.1 Designing the Toolkits

Introduction

Discussion ranged over a number of possibilities in 2013. We considered sharing instances of the online platform used with students on the modules, with participation appropriately anonymised. This approach was eventually adopted at Roehampton and can be found at <http://external.moodle.roehampton.ac.uk> where guests can enrol onto a site called Historical Enquiry at Roehampton: Toolkit.

At Edgehill, materials from modules and dissemination events have been elegantly displayed at <http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/histlearn/>.

A YouTube channel was set up to host some bespoke materials called Historical. Exploration. We also decided to use some public material where it was especially pertinent to the modules taught, for example an extract from an interview with Raul Hilberg, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-aAwsJjXjY>.

Each of the iterations developed forms of digital formative assessment. These included quizzes, *vox pops*, discussion fora and journals. These activities were designed by module tutors and PhD students. The activities built on suggestions from e learning experts and educationalists in the project.

The final assessments for the modules were different. The Roehampton module was assessed digitally via an e portfolio called Mahara. The Roehampton toolkit includes the resources developed to support and guide students in using it. At Edgehill students were assessed via a class-based balloon debate, a written de-construction of a provided historical argument and a class-based exam assessing the ability of students to apply their knowledge of ideologies.

Edge Hill University

Upon receiving news of their successful bid, one of the first actions taken by the team at Edge Hill University was to put together and submit an application for ethical approval for this research (a parallel application was submitted at Roehampton). Edge Hill University has specific ethical guidance for researching undergraduates. Certainly student participation in research activities is encouraged, especially as this allows students to experience research activities from the perspective of the research subject. However it is recognised that the student/lecturer relationship is not necessarily an equal one. Protection of the student in any research project is paramount. Participation should be voluntarily, non-discriminatory in any way and students retained the right not to be involved or to withdraw from involvement without detriment. Those precepts were maintained throughout this project. In addition, Edge Hill guidelines suggested that data collection should not be scheduled in time allocated for teaching and instructional activity without strong justification and that research activities undertaken by students should not be part of required class activities. With those guidelines in mind and also likely difficulties in obtaining appropriate additional room space late in the academic year the Edge Hill team decided to run the first iteration of the project via a Blackboard site parallel to the existing module site and with limited dedicated face-to-face time with undergraduates. The module co-ordinator, Roger Spalding, was

part of the project team and the team as a whole worked closely with the lecturers on the module. An introductory session was held at the beginning of the semester in order to explain the project to students and how it would operate as well as to introduce the project team and request their written consent.

The toolkit at Edge Hill University made use of a Blackboard site which is used as standard for all modules at the university. All students registered on the Blackboard site for the module HIS1014 Ideology: Theories and Practices were by September 2013 also registered on the parallel one for the project. Similarly the resources and tasks on the Blackboard site for the project ran parallel albeit complimenting and, especially during the second iteration, aligning to assessments for the module. These resources and tasks were at no point embedded in the module in the same way as at Roehampton where students engaged with project materials as part of their work towards submission of their final summative e-portfolio.

Advice and technical support was provided by a Learning Technology Development Officer at Edge Hill, David Callaghan. Access to Blackboard sites is only to students registered on modules (as well as relevant staff) so no external access could be given until the toolkit (stripped of student contributions via journals and discussion boards) was made available externally at the end of the project. Resources constructed for the project were, framed in a modified way, made publicly accessible via the project HistLearn website hosted by Edge Hill University. The format and structure of the project Blackboard site at Edge Hill University was aligned closely with the structure of the module itself which aided student access at the appropriate points in the course of the module and made the relevance of particular resources more explicit. Because the structure was explicit a similar method was used for the second iteration although some resources were located so as to encourage increased lateral thinking between sections and instructions were more explicit in their highlighting the usefulness of resources to specific formative and especially summative assessments. In that respect the toolkit at Edge Hill differed from that at Roehampton which did not pursue a thematic section approach. However, these decisions were in large part determined by the different nature of the modules and their assessment modes.

At Edge Hill University the three postgraduates recruited onto the project were an essential part of the discussions underpinning the design of materials. Indeed, suggestions to undertake a *vox pops* and to construct a quiz 'What Kind of Historian are you?' derived from postgraduate students. These ideas were the result of their reflections on their own early academic careers at university and the support they felt would have been useful. Equally, students contributed their research and methodological specialisms to the project with videos and activities- for example, Mason Norton recorded a talk about oral history, and Matt Lawson talked about the use of music in Holocaust film.

University Roehampton

It needs to be clarified that the set up at Roehampton and Edge Hill was different – at Roehampton we embedded the platforms and tools within the test module. There was no direct student participation in the ‘toolkit’ as this was drawn from the material employed on the test module but with some reflection on the success (or otherwise) of these tools and strategies, and with student data removed/anonymised so that it could be accessed by external users without raising ethical issues.

The University of Roehampton toolkit was developed by the project team at Roehampton in conjunction with our e-learning advisers Harry Hattingh and Karen Shackleford-Cesare. The initial draft was prepared for showcasing and comment at the first dissemination event held at Roehampton in April 2014. The aim was to prepare a toolkit which demonstrated how platforms to support historical enquiry could be developed through the Moodle VLE. We employed a site on the external moodle site for Roehampton to enable guest users to access the resource effectively. In order to get around ethical constraints, screenshots of discussion board threads were anonymised while we also created a module ‘mirror’ site, with all student data removed, to show how these tools and platforms were embedded into the Roehampton module, Independent History Research Project.

The draft toolkit did present some problems. The external moodle site is separate from the internal moodle servers, so it is not possible simply to transfer content from internal to external sites. In addition, the guest login function proved an obstacle for many external users who needed first to register and then self-enroll on the toolkit page. While this process allowed us to track individual users of the toolkit it seemed to be preventing many visitors from accessing the toolkit in the first place. The formatting of the initial toolkit also closely mirrored the module site and both this and the lack of a clear introductory statement regarding the purpose of the toolkit may also have made it less appealing to teachers in history.

For the second iteration, a re-design of the toolkit was begun in discussion with Harry Hattingh and Karen Shackleford-Cesare. This has made the final toolkit clearer in terms of presentation and also clarified through a more directed introductory statement the aims and objectives of the toolkit. We have also opened the toolkit for general public access without self-enrolment. While this will limit the data we can gather about toolkit users, it removes at least one of the obstacles to users visiting the site in the first place. We took on board many of the design recommendations made by the e-learning team but decided not to pursue a thematic section approach as we felt that this would generate too much overlap between sections. Instead, the toolkit has been organised by tool or platform with separate sections detailing dissemination activities and presenting evaluation data and reflections.

2.2 Implementing the Toolkits

Introduction

At the Roehampton end, we needed to release the draft toolkit in time for the April 2014 dissemination event. While this did allow enough time from the module end (Dec 2013), other project commitments (organisation of the dissemination event itself) ensured that this was a somewhat hastily constructed resource. At Edge Hill the research ethics guidelines and (given that we could not begin to plan for the module until late June) potential rooming problems played a role in decisions about the mode of rolling out the first iteration since it was felt important that student should have consistent room space throughout their first semester. In addition there was a feeling that students may appreciate the online space available via the separate Blackboard space and a means to explore their historical thinking outside of the module. At Roehampton the project resources were embedded in the module and made use of the same learning space and time.

Edge Hill University

For the first iteration at Edge Hill University September was a key month for the construction of resources. There was an emphasis on the provision of visual material which was maintained throughout the project as it was felt that many of our students were strong visual learners and also that such materials would complement effectively the text-based nature of many primary sources students examined on the module. In addition the project team and in particular one of the postgraduates recruited, who was in the Media Department, were keen to investigate the power of this medium, specifically well-designed podcasts.

University Roehampton

The e-learning team at Roehampton provided the necessary external moodle site which was then populated with content from the module site (leaving out any student data). This was then re-shaped into sections showcasing particular tools and platforms, with a narrative of how they were used and with what success in the first iteration of the module.

2.3 Evaluating the Toolkits

Introduction

Surveys were used before, during and after each iteration to explore attitudes amongst History undergraduates to learning online. After the first iteration we used the surveys to explore more explicitly the nature of student participation in discussion fora and the revisiting of materials online.

Each of the online platforms generated user data, such the number of visits to the site, including multiple views of some activities (such as quizzes, discussions, journals). It was also possible to track contributions to discussions and additions to journals. The data also revealed different patterns of participation, with some students responding to others in discussions, whilst others simply viewed posts. Some students participated during the face to face teaching on the module, some returned to the site multiple times after taught sessions and before the summative assessments. Contributions to

discussion were considered as evidence of changing ideas and also ideas informed by multiple learning activities (blending).

Interviews with students were designed to explore the nature of their attitudes to online learning and whether or not these had changed; and to explore possible explanations for the patterns of participation.

To assist the project team in evaluating the methods used to study the first iteration, we shared emerging findings at the April 2014 event at Roehampton. Workshop participants were invited to contribute data (via Poll Everywhere) their thoughts about the research methods employed and possible interpretations of emerging.

All the data outlined above was then considered by the project team before the second iteration of each module was designed. The same approach was then adopted, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse responses to the second iteration.

Edge Hill University

The most important issue which emerged from evaluation of the first iteration at Edge Hill University was the level of engagement by students. Two issues were highlighted, that the resources were perceived as being separate from the module and so optional. Despite repeated reminders to students via email and in face-to-face module sessions about the importance of the resources of the project Blackboard site many students failed to see their full relevance. A key aspect of this was that the resources were not perceived to be of direct support for the assessments on the module.

University Roehampton

We reviewed the toolkits at our June 2014 team meeting. There was a general agreement that access and visibility of the toolkit remained an issue and something that the set-up of the external moodle site made difficult. This despite a positive response to the April workshop which didn't seem to be reflected in the low numbers of people who self-enrolled on the toolkit.

A particular problem related to online discussion: we wanted to show changes in participation between the two iterations without revealing the identities of participants.

2.4 Disseminating the Toolkits

The workshop in April 2014 outlined the first iteration of the project and its test modules at both Roehampton and Edge Hill. Project leads at Edge Hill and Roehampton introduced the project and explained the nature of the test modules, PhD students presented on their contributions to the first iteration and initial evaluations of the project were offered. Reflections on the project were given in closing session by Professor Alan Booth and Miles Berry. Participant feedback was very positive 'great stuff, very applicable', though only two delegates filled in the evaluation questionnaire.

On the HistLearn site the postgraduate students at Edge Hill undertook the design and development of a lesson plan to be aimed at 16-18 learners, with each postgraduate designing a lesson- Linda Friday looked at the use of literary sources in History, Matt Lawson looked at the use of music, and Mason Norton designed a lesson on oral history. Each of these three lessons drew upon materials created as part of the project, featuring both researchers engaged within the project and also researchers not engaged within the project directly, but at the two institutions, such as Dr Carrie Hamilton of Roehampton.

Dissemination took place via the HistLearn website, but also via the EHU History Noise Facebook page. It was via this that the project team received an offer to use the quiz on a paying website for teacher resources- after the discussion between Mason Norton, Dan Taylor and the project teams, it was decided not to accept this offer, because it contradicted one of the project's stated aims- the creation of a free learning toolkit.

At the workshop in April 2014, Nick Patrick, the Producer of BBC Radio 4's *Making History*, was invited by Ted Vallance. During the course of the day, he recorded contributions from Alyson Brown, Ted Vallance, Mason Norton and Dan Taylor, and this was broadcast on August 5, 2014 on Radio 4. The programme's webpage also contained a weblink to the 'What Kind of Historian are you?' quiz at the HistLearn website.

2.5 Conclusions and Next Steps

From the Roehampton end, the priorities with iteration two were: encourage students to engage with subscription-only resources – evidence from student work and training sessions that students still not employing these resources and going for poorer quality OA material instead; facilitate greater student interaction and debate in discussion forums so that it was less of a dialogue between student and tutor; employ video materials in a more integrated way in the second iteration (mainly used as additional resources in iteration 1).

At Edge Hill University the priorities for preparation for iteration two focussed on strategies to improve the level of engagement by students with the project resources. The quality of some of the engagement during the first iteration was very good but only a minority of the students with access to the site actively engaged, although there was evidence that many more had viewed materials. Furthermore, engagement had been patchy suggesting that students perceived some materials to be more relevant/useful than others. There was a reluctance to engage with discussion boards, journals were felt to be a more comfortable zone for these new students. It was also noted from students that further and repeated signposting was required about the parallel Blackboard site on which the project resources were to be found. Signposting was required not only about the existence of the site but more specifically about the aims and objectives of the resources. It was necessary to make it more explicit to students what was in it for them and how they would benefit from the development of their historical thinking skills. In addition the project team had over-estimated the familiarity of students with online platforms. Therefore, at an early point the need to timetable dedicated face-to-face session time was recognised.

The greater engagement of students with the Roehampton materials in the first iteration highlighted the need to more closely align project materials to the module and to make the purpose of those materials absolutely explicit to students. As a consequence a more blended-learning approach was adopted and additional classroom time (outside of standard module time) was organised. A decision was also

taken to add more video material, and to review some of the existing material- making some necessary amendments along the way.

At Roehampton University the team wanted to make better use of the video resources that were being developed as part of the project, which was something that Edge Hill had integrated much more directly into the exercises in their toolkit. There also seemed to be more sustained discussion (though with a small number of participants) at the Edge Hill end and the role of PhD students in helping to sustain that was also something we learned from Edge Hill University experience.

Whether the open ended nature of the Roehampton source commentary was potentially weaker than the focus on ideologies in the Edge Hill was also discussed but it was decided to stick with the free choice of topic. Students had to learn to use of Mahara, and were provided with significant modelling of approaches through lectures, with online activities designed to consolidate their learning as they completed the module.

3. Iteration 2: 2014-15

3.1 Designing the Toolkits

Edge Hill University

Several meetings were held between and across project teams. During planning of the second iteration at Edge Hill we welcomed contributions from all our History lecturers and a postgraduate student outside of the project team. It was felt that the basic structure of the platform had worked and should be maintained. Modelling of historical approaches and thinking was also retained as a key method, although with the recognition that we should be modelling not only how we went about the historical process but showing that we were enthusiastic about our subjects. However, there was greater emphasis on relating engagement with resources and reflective thinking on those resources in a more social context – dedicated classroom space. As has been pointed out elsewhere, in history teaching there is ‘a growing tendency to see learning in social terms: as a process shaped in interaction with others rather than a purely individualistic activity (Booth, 2014: 115). Hence, this would give opportunities for the co-construction of a context for learning.

There was also a concerted effort in the second iteration to make the structure of the materials more consistent across the topics- there had been some imbalance during the first iteration, which was a consequence of the time restrictions imposed at the beginning of the project. Hence, more videos were added, in order that there could be an audio-visual input each week, and encouraging greater consistency, thereby giving the impression of a firmer base from which students could learn.

University Roehampton

At Roehampton discussions with e learning colleagues led to the decisions described above: we created an online resource using an instance of Moodle. Users have to enrol to this site, unlike the histlearn site, and this may prove to be a weakness.

We had meetings with the e-learning team in the autumn of 2014 to look at developing a more engaging site design for the toolkit. Unfortunately, these discussions didn't really get us very far – the template that e-learning developed was not appropriate for the content of the toolkit though they had some useful basic design suggestions (tabbed rather than linear organisation of blocks) and the general idea of creating a clearer introductory statement about the purpose and target audience of the toolkit had some value. The Roehampton team met again in Feb 2015 with a view to further development of the toolkit from iteration 2 of the test module. The original subdivision of the toolkit by tool/platform was continued and members of the project team began uploading/building sessions. The final version of the toolkit was made publicly accessible in May 2015.

3.2 Implementing the Toolkits

Introduction

We learned from the first iteration that some students were unsure about the value of the online activities and unsure about how they might participate. We planned more carefully for participation in the second iteration, giving further support, for example in using Mahara. The purpose of activities was made more explicit, at both institution the purpose of online activities was repeatedly reiterated. At Roehampton students were advised online in discussion fora exactly what expectations were regarding posts.

The modules were designed to make transition from school to undergraduate study as stress-free as possible and so in a sense there was an ethical dimension to the changes made as a result of asking students about their experiences in the first iteration.

We also were concerned to ensure that students in the second iteration, as in the first, could be confident that their anonymity could be guaranteed in any work published.

Edge Hill University

The key difference between iterations one and two at Edge Hill was the introduction of face-to-face classroom time to enable students to interact and engage with the project toolkit in a more supported and social manner. This was intended to increase student confidence to contribute to journals and discussion boards online as they would be interacting either following or in advance of discussion in classroom sessions. In addition, some materials were designed to be more closely aligned to assessments in order to make the relevance of all the resources more explicit. A greater consistency was also encouraged in order to prompt take-up. There was also more time given over to discussion and preparation before the second implementation cycle, which was based on an identification of what the project needed to achieve, and what had not worked during the first implementation.

University Roehampton

The second iteration of the module (Sept to Dec 2014) saw the implementation of new guidance for the conduct of debate on discussion forums (greater emphasis on

responding to other students, greater reassurance about the moderation of forum discussions), a revised source database task which required students to engage with a subscription-only resource, new exercises devised by PhD students to explore questions relating to causation, and more integration of videos into module exercises.

3.3 Disseminating the Toolkits

As with the first dissemination workshop in April 2014, a major component of the second workshop was evaluation. However, at that stage the evaluation was incomplete as the second iteration of the project was still underway. The second workshop investigated the importance of historical significance as an integral part of argument construction and the presentation, which can be accessed on the HistLearn site, investigated innovative ways of exploring this with students. A further key issue addressed at the workshop was historical thinking in an increasingly digital world. A keynote address was given by Dr Marcus Collins on the Beatles and Historical Interpretation. Postgraduate students were prominent in sessions on historical significance, digital resources and in the evaluation session. Fifteen evaluation forms were received from delegates, of those 13 judged the workshop to be good, very good or excellent. The two who found the workshop less than good were both PGCE students who felt that the context was targeted at teachers of undergraduates and so was less useful for them. There were other comments from PGCE students who felt not all of the workshop was entirely relevant for them but still commented, for example, that 'the conference has given me a good set of new ideas to take back to the classroom' or 'The presentations on significance, the Beatles and historical thinking in the digital world will aid me on my PGCE course.' All delegates assessed the presentations to be good, very good or excellent. In particular attendees commended the variety of the sessions and how thought-provoking they were.

3.4 Evaluating the Toolkits

Introduction

The project design was interesting from a number of perspectives. The project lasted for two years and changes were made to the modules at the centre of the project, setting the project within an action research framework, (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

Modules were run concurrently at two institutions with the aim of studying participation and outcomes in different settings.

Colleagues involved in supporting the tutors teaching the modules drew on expertise from their PhD studies, e learning perspectives, teacher education and the study of History in schools.

Digital resources were created by a range of participants in the project. Students themselves also became creators of digital artefacts through involvement in vox pops, journals, Mahara portfolios and posts to discussions.

We have a number of opportunities open to us as we evaluate the project, as a result.

We have kept records of our work together, using wiki, Dropbox, Skype, and Blackboard Collaborate, email so that we have two cycles of action research endeavour to analyse and evaluate.

We were concerned to involve students throughout by explaining the purpose of the project and using surveys to ask them about their perceptions.

Our understandings from these surveys will be enhanced by using data from interviews with students from both iterations.

The dissemination events held under the HEA banner in 2014 and the conferences in 2015 all produced evaluative commentaries from interested parties and this data will be included in any analysis we undertake.

The online activity of students left digital footprints in each iteration of each module. We have begun to analyse the timing, duration, and frequency of online activity from all participants. We are in a position to compare responses in two institutions and over two iterations. We can also consider the nature of the participation through content analysis, (Plowright, 2011).

Edge Hill University

The findings of the first iteration at Edge Hill were somewhat disappointing.

On the one hand, positively:

- Postgraduates and academics succeeded in collaborating in the design of what they perceived as effective online learning tools to support students on the module;
- Where it was possible to track the development of thinking over time there was good evidence of change in thinking.

However, on the other hand, negatively:

- The site very much operated in parallel, rather than in tandem, with the face to face taught module and students prioritised the face to face teaching;
- A minority of students engaged with the site in a sustained way by posting and this kind of use declined dramatically over time;
- More students, but still a minority, engaged with the site by reading and viewing but this use declined dramatically over time;
- It was not possible to gauge improvements in thinking for most of the students over the course of the module because of low levels of posting;
- Evaluation comments indicated that most students were unable to comment on how they had used the site because the majority had not engaged with the materials.

Findings from the second iteration were very positive and in marked contrast to findings from the first iteration, as follows:

- We were able to fine-tune and further develop the resources from iteration one and take-up and student responses to those materials in iteration two fully justified our confidence in the value added by these resources;
- Although there were fewer students enrolled on the module in iteration two (44) than in iteration one (52), students engaged with the site fully in the second iteration:
 - the mean number of visits to the site in iteration two was 163 visits (as opposed to 16.5 in iteration one);

- in iteration two the majority (43 of the 44) of students engaged with the site from the start and in some weeks (the second and the last weeks of the module) all students engaged with the site;
- with the exception of 'reading week' (when student viewers declined to 15) the majority of students visited the site in every one of the 10 weeks of the module and 40 or more students did so in 6 of the 10 weeks;
- students posting to the site were a minority - of the 8 weeks when posts were made, in two weeks fewer than 10 students posted, in 5 weeks between 10-19 students posted - however, in the final week, 30 of the 44 students posted to the site.
- Because there was a large volume of students posting in the final week of the module, it was possible to gauge impacts on student thinking and there was good evidence of sophistication in student thinking apparent in the qualities of their posts and, where applicable, in the contrasts between their earlier and their later posts. In many cases, indeed, it was clear that by the end many students were both identifying as historians and writing reflexively about this identity;
- Evaluation data collected through the student questionnaire repeated from iteration one was also very positive. Although students still had suggestions about improvements that could be made to functionality it was very rare to find students stating that they did not engage with the site (and there was only one case where a student stated that they were unaware of it). 76% of questionnaire respondents stated that they used the site to prepare for taught sessions, 81% that they used it to follow up taught sessions and 76.2% stated both that they used to the site to develop their own thinking and to see what other students had to say.

We can say, then, that by the end of iteration one we had succeeded in developing effective online tools through collaboration cross-faculty and between postgraduates and lecturing staff and that throughout iteration two we were able to successfully engage students in the use of these tools as an enhancement of their learning on the module that was both perceived as valuable by students and used by them in a sustained way. This use was also found to have demonstrable impacts on the qualities of their thinking.

We were pleased with the developmental work conducted in iteration one and the two-cycle structure of this project enabled us to make modifications to the delivery of the tools in iteration two in ways that were very successful.

University Roehampton

The findings of the first iteration at Roehampton were that:

- Some students were dubious about the value of the online activity, especially the value of taking part in online discussion, whilst
- Other students were engaged by it and encouraged to explore resources beyond those used by the general public (such as Old Bailey online)
- There was a need to blend the lectures and online activities still more explicitly in the second iteration

- If online discussion was to be useful to students they needed to be given a rationale for it, instructions on how to participate, and to be rewarded for participation with feedback
- There would be some value in fine tuning the scaffolding and modelling provided in using Mahara as an e portfolio
- The resources gleaned or created by EHU could be very useful in addition to Roehampton materials and needed to be highlighted for students

Findings from the second iteration, provisionally, were that:

- Explicit instruction in online activity, including Mahara, participation in discussions, using open access and sign in online materials could result in increased participation
- Students in interviews suggested that the combination of having to do something for the tutor and then the intrinsic rewards of the online activities were both a factor in their participation
- Students re visited materials and discussions multiple times especially in the second iteration, suggesting that some perceived it to be of value
- At the first dissemination event some suggested that evidence for the value of the online nature of the activities was weak especially with regard to online discussion. In the second iteration, however, an analysis of the kinds of responses made by students seems stronger; for example they show a greater awareness of the ideas of others and that reading the posts of others was a spur to their own thinking.

4. Project Platforms and Resources

4.1 Developing Historical Thinking (Website)

<http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/histlearn/>

The external facing website for the project was hosted by Edge Hill University and given the website address <http://www.edgehill.ac.uk/histlearn/>. Due to it being hosted by Edge Hill the site followed the standard institutional format. The site is organised to give information about the project and the project team as well as to highlight events. The two dissemination workshops were promoted from the site and videos and slides made for, and at, the workshops were edited and posted on the site. Therefore, these materials composed additional resources on subjects such as the transition to studying history at undergraduate level, how students assess historical significance, digital research, and using technology to support undergraduate teaching. The project's Histlearn site was launched in February 2014 and released new resources from the first iteration every two weeks thereafter. That process was continued as later resources were uploaded from the second iteration. The HistLearn site was also used as a more flexible medium not only to disseminate information about the project resources but also suggesting varied potential uses for the resources constructed. This enabled activities to be suggested which did not relate directly to the modules running at Edge Hill and Roehampton Universities. The number of page views has

varied over the length of the project but has reached over 1500 for one three month period following the first iteration.

4.2 Historical Enquiry and Research (Facebook)

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Historical-Enquiry-and-Research-an-HEA-research-project/588474487887971?ref=hl>

The project facebook site is attracting a regular stream of 'likes' which is encouraging with posts not just about project activities but general 'history/history education in the news'. Items, have been good for generating discussion and interest in the project.

4.3 Twitter

This account is useful in the context of dissemination activities, options for live tweeting and encouraging other delegates to follow the HistoricalEnquiry and HlstLearn sites.

4.4 Papers

At least three publications are planned from this work. A key article on the Developing Historical Thinking project, a paper on action research and a third on e-learning.

5. References

- Beetham, H, McGill, L and Littlejohn, A (2009) *Thriving in the 21st century: Learning Literacies for the Digital Age (LLiDA project) a JISC project*
- Beetham, H and Sharpe, R (2007) *Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age: Designing for 21st Century Learning* London: Routledge
- Booth, A. (2003) *Teaching History at University: Enhancing Learning and Understanding* London: Routledge.
- Booth, A. (2014) *History Teaching at its Best*. Borrowash: Rippleround Publishing.
- Cambridge, D. (2013) *Eportfolios for Lifelong Learning and Assessment*
- Cohen, L, Manion, L and Morrison, K (2011) *Research methods in Education (7th edition)* London: Routledge
- Coventry, M, et al (2006) *Ways of Seeing: Evidence and Learning in the History Classroom* *Journal of American History*
- David J. Nicol & Debra Macfarlane-Dick (2006) *Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: a model and seven principles of good feedback practice*, *Studies in Higher Education*, 31:2, 199-218, DOI: 10.1080/03075070600572090
- Lee, P. & Shemilt, D. (2003) 'A scaffold, not a cage: Progression and progression models in history', *Teaching History*, 113 (1) 13-23
- August 5, 2014: *Making History*, BBC Radio 4
- Plowright, D. (2011) *Using Mixed Methods* London: Sage.