Developing and Delivering a Short Distance Learning Certificate Course in Peace and Reconciliation Studies – a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development and implementation of a short distance learning course, entitled "Certificate in Peace and Reconciliation Studies". It aims to illustrate how the development and final design of the course is the result of influences exerted by different stakeholders. Some of these interest groups have been able to influence course design directly at various stages, while the influence of others has been more indirect but still significant. The case study will show that it is not easy to achieve a 'pure' design, based on a specific pedagogical stance, but that in the end, design is based on compromise due to the influences of different stakeholders. A specific pedagogical stance – in this context a constructivist approach, carries with it expectations about the way students will be interacting with the course. The paper examines what expectations are embedded in the course design and explore to what extent the expectations have been realised.

Keywords

Distance learning, course design, stakeholders in course design, staff development linked to project development, student participation in online discussions, course design evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

For the author of this paper, this distance learning project had its beginnings in August 2000 when a member of staff from the Centre for the Study of Forgiveness and Reconciliation (CSFR) at Coventry University approached the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) for training and support in the creation of web pages. It emerged from discussion that the reason behind this request was that the CSFR wished to develop and offer a short Certificate course in Peace and Reconciliation Studies, delivered entirely via distance learning. The CSFR already offered a campus-based MA in Peace and Reconciliation Studies. The Certificate course was to be based on the MA, providing an introduction to this comparatively new field of study. The current author, an educational developer in CHED, was keen to get involved in the development of this distance learning project and was able to make a substantial commitment to support it.

The development period for the project was considerably drawn out – it was not until January 2003 that the first cohort of students started to engage in the course. There were many reasons for the convoluted development path of the project. One of these was that the member of staff from the CSFR, Alan Hunter, was employed on a part-time basis. A second and important reason was that project development was linked to a professional development agenda for both the lecturer and the educational developer. The project provided an opportunity for embedding professional development into the normal working day (Boud, 1999). The lecturer and educational developer would be working in partnership Struthers (2002) to move the project forward. One of the lecturer's initial objectives had been to learn how to create web pages. Since WebCT had already been introduced on a campus-wide basis at Coventry University, this provided the obvious means for delivering the course in distance learning mode. The lecturer therefore also needed to become conversant with WebCT. For the educational developer, distance learning represented a new challenge. This involved researching recommendations for distance learning course design while exploiting the opportunity to relate theoretical notions to practice. A third reason was a lack of institutional readiness to support the development and administration of distance learning courses. It was therefore not just a question of designing a course; it was also a question of addressing many institutional issues involved in offering distance learning courses.

To reduce the need for frequent face-to-face meetings, a private discussion forum was created in a separate Staff Support WebCT web. This forum provided a dedicated communications channel which was accessible to all

parties involved in the project's development. The forum was well used - it accumulated 128 posting over a period of two years. It provides a faithful trace of the project's developmental history.

Analysis of this forum record shows that initially, the dialogue was taken up with matters relating to the use of FrontPage and WebCT. This then moved on to considerations on how to structure course content and wider pedagogical issues, such as how best to engage students in the course. Next, there appear entries relating the ELATE 2001 Conference, which is Coventry University's annual staff development conference. The ELATE conference provided an opportunity for reporting on this distance learning development and focused in particular on institutional issues which needed to be decided to enable effective course delivery. Postings then shift in content to the task of preparing for the course approval process, which turned out to be the first of two. The Course Approval and Review Pannel (CARP) did not feel that the course was sufficiently fleshed out and argued that many issues relating to the distance learning context had not been sufficiently addressed. As a consequence, the course team had to respond to the findings and recommendations of the CARP and set about addressing the issues which had been raised. The online forum at this point contains discussions about copyright issues and deliberations on how to ensure that course participants have access to essential reading. Institutional issues crop up frequently, sometimes associated with reports of meetings with the Pro Vice Chancellor and members of staff in Registry. A significant step in addressing an issue raised by the CARP was the creation of a pilot version of the course which was offered to volunteer students. A further action taken to meet CARP recommendations was the setting up of an 'Information Web' which acted as a recruitment device while giving potential students a taste of the online learning environment. A second CARP in July 2002 accepted the course with minor modifications, and with this the course team finally had the green light to start recruiting students for the Certificate course in Peace and Reconciliation Studies.

STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR INFLUENCES

The Centre for the Study of Forgiveness Peace and Reconciliation

The CSFR saw the ability to offer a distance learning Certificate course in Peace and Reconciliation Studies as a way of raising its profile, alongside existing activities which include research, participation in conferences and contacts with government agencies. Being able to reach a wider audience and building a reputation was the main objective. The Certificate course was not introduced to become a major income stream; therefore course up-take which would provide a 'break even' return would be regarded as satisfactory. The course is aimed at adult learners, professionals whose work relates to conflict transformation. It is concerned in diverse ways with issues of peace, forgiveness and reconciliation. It is important to the Centre to be able to offer an introduction to this new field of study, which would enable those interested in the subject to get a feel for it without having to commit themselves to a full degree course. The Centre has since launched a Graduateship of the City and Guilds Institute in Peace and Conflict Management, which provides a form of progress following the Certificate course. The Centre remains hopeful that in the near future, it will be possible to offer the full MA course in distance learning mode.

The Course Tutor and other members of the Course Team

An initial focus for the course team centred on course content, which was to be based on the existing MA in Peace and Reconciliation Studies. The task was therefore one of selecting and compressing materials from the larger course and adapt it at the same time for presentation in the online context.

Alan had already gained around four year's experience of developing and delivering distance learning courses in a previous job. His initial proposal was to create a Certificate course of eight weeks duration which would contain four units of study. He saw the role of online materials as equivalent to the lecture in the face-to-face situation. He later stated that presenting materials online may be more effective than giving lectures, because it is easy for students to go back to it. He felt that online learning materials had to be prepared with extra care, because student questions had to be anticipated in advance. There was a concern for offering content at the right level and linking it to appropriate assessment tasks. Alan saw interacting with students during course delivery as more akin to the tutorial situation. He also felt that an important part of the tutor's role was to keep students interested. In part, this is done through the provision of timely and supportive participation in the online discussion. Another device which Alan wished to use was to release course materials in stages.

Alan was keen to include tasks and activities that would increase participants' skill in using the Internet. Peace Studies and peace movements are particularly well represented on the Internet. For this reason, he included an assignment which required students to search the Internet for websites which interested them and which were relevant to the course. Students were required to produce a report on the websites they had selected, together

with an evaluation of the websites. These reports had to be posted to the discussion forum for the benefit of fellow students. This was not an assessed exercise. The acquisition of academic skills was also an objective of the course. Finally, staff from the CSFR were seeking reassurance and confirmation that the structures existed to support the technical aspects of course delivery and that recruitment, enrolment and accreditation processes would all function for students from a distance.

Educational Developer / CHED

CHED is one of the key change agents within the University (Thomas & Beaty, 1998). In this role, it seeks to promote change which is in line with University policies and the changing contexts in which HE is operating in the UK and worldwide. With the campus-wide adoption of WebCT, Coventry has been one of the first universities in the UK to embrace online learning on a large scale. While online learning at Coventry is mainly used to enhance face-to-face teaching, there are pockets of active participation in distance learning across a number of Schools, particularly in Coventry Business School (CBS). The Certificate Course in Peace and Reconciliation Studies offered an opportunity to explore many issues associated with distance learning in a small scale but relevant way. This project provided an opportunity to gain additional experience in producing and delivering a distance learning course. Running such a course would put to the test the effectiveness of the technology and our ability to support students who would be geographically widely dispersed. Every effort would be made to ensure the smooth delivery of the course, by running a pilot for example, and by ensuring that user IDs and passwords for the Online Learning environment were functioning before releasing them.

The educational developer was able to make recommendations for the selection of specific tools within WebCT and for ways of using them. Experience gained through participation in the ESRC Networked Learning Seminars which later produced a Manifesto on Networked Learning (Beaty et.al., 2002) also guided her input into this project. Goodyear (2000) influenced course design along similar lines, conceptualising networked learning as the creation of a community of learners with links between individual learners, and learners and tutors. The great emphasis placed on collaborative learning in an e-learning context suggested group work as an appropriate means for achieving this. There also had to be a way of connecting this community learners to its learning resources. This meant finding ways of getting students to engage with the learning materials of the course, as well as supporting them in finding ways of connecting to relevant knowledge sources elsewhere, particularly on the Internet. These considerations invoke notions embodied in the FREE model (Orsini-Jones & Davidson, 1999; Davidson & Orsini-Jones, 2002) of learner interactions in a resource-rich learning environment. Chickering and Ehrmann's (1987) seven principles of good teaching practice also influenced course design. It was felt that self-introductions by students and staff would foster contacts between students and staff alike and highlight diverse talents and experiences of course members. These seven principles resulted in a substantial list of recommendations, many of which could also be attributed to other influences. Given the fact that the Certificate course was to be only an eight week course, it raised the questions whether this would be long enough to establish a learning community. Another question was whether it would be possible to say one way or the other that a learning community had been established.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education publishes distance learning guidelines which were consulted early during course development by the course team. Many of the issues raised therein had already been considered. There are points of design which were particularly influenced by these guidelines. These include the provision of explicit guidelines about the amount of time students should take over specific assignment, how students are expected to communicate with tutors and the kinds of response times they can expect in return. A special forum was created where students could comment on the course and raise any difficulties they were experiencing. In addition, students were encourage to contact staff through module mail if they wished to voice any complaints in private. It was pointed out to students what kinds of tracking WebCT can provide on their access to the course web. Students were also made aware of provisions made in case the network should suffer a breakdown while the course was in progress. Students had information about the members of staff who would be teaching on the course, including contact information. They were also provided with contact details of a technical support person. Information was given either as part of the course handbook or entered in the course web's calendar or both.

School of International Studies and Law

There were two phases to the course evaluation process – the first was a School Course Approval Panel (SCARP) event, which looked at newly proposed courses prior to the official CARP meeting which represents the second phase. These procedures are used to scrutinise a newly proposed course in order to ensure course quality and compliance with University regulations. The most significant outcome of the SCARP with respect to the Certificate in Peace and Reconciliation Studies course was that group work was taken out of the course design. It was felt that assessing group work can present problems and that therefore it would be best to have individual assignments. The rationale behind this decision was to forestall future problems in assessing students on the course.

Unfortunately, group work had been the basis of introducing collaborative work into the course. As a result of this decision, the course team had to seek other ways of promoting active, collaborative learning. The course design encouraged student debate in the online discussion forum, but it was felt to be unwise to make this an assessed part of the course. As a result, participation in the online discussion was now merely encouraged but there was no longer a compelling reason for students on the course to participate in discussions.

University through the CARP event

The first of the two CARP events influence course design to a considerable degree. The course design was scrutinised in great detail, not just with reference to course content, but most particularly also with reference to the distance learning context. Questions which were asked included: How would students know that a distance learning course was right for them? What provisions had been made for students to change their minds, if they embarked on the course but then decided that they wished to withdraw? How would students be supported in the use of the online learning environment?

The main recommendation of the CARP in terms of affecting course design was that there should be a two week induction period, allowing participants to get used to the online environment before engaging with the course proper. The proposed eight week Certificate course therefore now turned into a ten week course. Other recommendations included addressing copyright issues, formulating strategies to handle plagiarism, linking the course to other educational provision at Coventry and offering staged assessments in order to be able to provide feedback on parts of the assessed work before the end of the course.

Consequently, course assessment changed from group work involving research and presentation to individual, written assignment to two individual contributions due in weeks six and ten of the course. In addition, during the induction period, two submissions were asked of students: in week one they were asked to introduce themselves to the group via the discussion forum and in week two their task was to post a survey of Peace Studies websites to the forum. However, these contributions were not part of the course's summative assessment. Concerns relating to plagiarism were also raised by the panel; this influenced the shape of assessments too. Alan decided that if assessments related strongly to the student experience of the course and their work context, this would make it difficult to submit materials not authored by the students themselves.

Another response to issues raised by the CARP was to create a 'Taster' or 'Information' web and make this anonymously accessible to potential students via the Internet. Essentially, this was a modified version of the real course web. It contained only part of the course content, with information about the full content. It was restricted in functionality, in order to ensure that the online space could not be misused. The Information web could be accessed from the CSFR's web pages. It was well used: the tracking facility of WebCT recorded 4758 hits between October 2002 and January 2004. Because access was anonymous, it is not possible to say how many individuals visited the web. The hits essentially tells us the pages available in the Information web were collectively accessed 4758 times.

Student influences from the pilot study

In November 2001 a pilot version of the Certificate course was offered to nine volunteer students based at home and abroad. It lasted three weeks and students were asked to spend about five hours per week on the course. The pilot course contained one of the four units of the full Certificate course and relevant parts of the course handbook. Participants included students from China, India, Cambodia, the USA and the UK. Students were asked to introduce themselves and share some of the reasons why they were interested in Peace Studies before engaging with the learning material of unit one.

All participants provided self-introductions and several included pictures of themselves and their place of work. These introductions created a sense of excitement; students and tutors alike articulated how impressed they were with the range of experiences and interests participants were bringing to the group. Subject-specific

contributions were of high quality. In total, course participants posted 40 contributions to the discussion forum. What did not happen, however, was that students commented on each other's contributions. Participants continued to go into the web for some time after the pilot period ended, mostly to offer seasonal greetings and to express thanks.

Only one of the volunteer student provided feedback via the online feedback forum and only three students completed the online course evaluation survey. Overall, the responses indicated that participants had enjoyed the experience of doing the course. Interaction with other students came out as the key element for making the course valuable. Suggestions for improvements included clearer guidance on what students were expected to do. One participant suggested that the provision of time markers would be valuable, so that students would know how far they had progressed into the course and how much time was left for them to complete their studies, a suggestion which was later implemented in the full Certificate course. Another suggestions was that links to web sites should be offered with short descriptions about their content and relevance, to help students prioritise which links to explore.

For the course team, the enthusiasm and excitement generated through participants' self-introductions was very encouraging. This was a powerful device for creating a sense of community amongst participants. However, variations in the willingness to engage in online discussion was already apparent at this stage. Significantly, the participants who did make use of the discussion forum felt that it was a key part of the online learning experience. Some went as far as suggested that engaging in online discussions should be made compulsory.

THE COURSE AND ITS FIRST IMPLENTATION

An Outline of the First Run of the Certificate Course

One of the most noticeable changes was extending the course from eight to ten weeks, based on the CARP's recommendation that there should be a two week induction period into the online learning environment. This period would be used to iron out any difficulties with accessing WebCT and address tasks like self-introductions, Internet searches for relevant web sites and a focus on academic skills based on appropriate learning resources on the Internet.

Information about the course, what was expected of students and in turn what students could expect from staff in the way of response times and feedback was clearly spelt out. Information of this nature was provided in the online course handbook. The calendar was used to mark course events, such as when assignments were due. The calendar was also used to mark course time, with statements like 'Start of week three', based on a recommendation made by one of the volunteer students who had taken part in the pilot study.

The discussion tool was used extensively. Separate fora were set up for different purposes. Apart from the main forum, there was a separate one for posting self-introductions and one for each of the four learning units in the course. An additional forum was provided for course comments, which was also used for reporting any technical problems. Guidelines for using the discussion forum, including recommendations for engaging in discussions based on Goodyear (2000) were included in the handbook. Course material was presented in four units, but made available in stages as the course progressed. The course materials had been purpose built by different members of staff from the CSFR. All contained multiple hyperlinks to information on the Internet.

Summative assessment consisted of two pieces of written work, each 1000-1500 words in length, each contributing 50% towards the final mark. Submissions of these were due at the end of weeks six and ten respectively. These were preceded by a requirement to produce an evaluation of web sites relevant to Peace Studies. This report on web sites was not an assessed piece of work, but it was required for permission to proceed. Feedback on these reports would be given in the form of a summary of student findings and posted to the discussion forum.

The delivery of the course was very much influences by the actions of the course participants. Alan reports: "probably the strongest part of the whole course was the quality of the student intake, twelve mature individuals, mostly mid-career professionals, several of whom were aid-workers. ... They came from a wide variety of countries including Nepal, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, and the USA."

Participation in the discussion forum was strongly encouraged, but it was not an assessed part of the course. The online course material introduced concepts and issues in the field of Peace Studies and contained a number of questions which the students were asked to focus on. Students were encouraged to post their reflections into the discussion forum. This strategy would make visible to what extent course participants had engaged with course materials and it would also provide an opportunity for students to benefit from and comment on each others work.

The following statistics give a very brief impression of student engagement in the course. Twelve students enrolled on the course. Overall, they posted 103 messages to the different discussion fora, many with attachments. Postings from individual students ranged from 2 to 22. Posting (including those from students and staff) were accessed by students a total of 1331 times. Individual students accessed postings from between 34 to 154 times. Hits (which include accessing contents pages and accessing posting in the discussion forum) ranged from 141 to 709.

Examining Expected and Actual Student Behaviour

In terms of the expectations embedded in the course, we should recall that the overall aim of the course is to function as an introduction to the field of Peace Studies. The CSFR also particularly wanted to explore the distance learning dimension of course delivery. A quote taken from a subsequent posting to the Certificate's discussion forum by Andrew Rigby, the Director of the CSFR reads:

> "One of the things that I say to the MA students here at Coventry is that my aim is to create a disciplined environment within which they can pursue their interests and fulfil their potentials. That is – the aim is not to feed students with the correct thoughts, concepts, theoretical frameworks etc – but to create an environment within which they can pursue their own explorations in a disciplined fashion."

These expectations were fulfilled in Andrew's opinion, as he continues: "*It seems to me ... that in your observations and comments you have responded in exactly the spirit that I had hoped for – engaging with the material and moving on with it, using it to inform your own perspectives and analyses.*"

Several students commented on the advantages of being able to engage in such a course via distance learning, mostly on the basis that it makes geographical distances irrelevant and that it gives the flexibility to engage in the course while being able to honour work and family commitments. However, there were also comments suggesting that engaging with fellow students and tutors in virtual space was neither as rewarding nor as easy as having face to face discussions. The fact that the online context provides the opportunity to communicate and learn with people from very diverse backgrounds was seen as one of the positive sides of online learning.

Several participants declared that they were new to the field of Peace Studies. Overall, the response to the course has been overwhelmingly positive. Participants commented on the high quality of the course material; they felt that the level was about right and many articulated that they had found the exercise of searching for and evaluating relevant web sites valuable. With regard to assessments, one person suggested that there should have been more (!). The final assessment, which was to write a reflective essay on the course, including comments on the distance learning aspect, was unpopular with some participants, who felt the exercise was more for the benefit of the course team than for the benefit of the individual student.

The most interesting issues arise out of the variations in participants' willingness to engage in online discussions. A closer analysis of the postings reveals that out of the twelve participants, eight responded in positive, appreciative or encouraging ways to comments sent in by peers. There were a total of 38 such postings, consisting of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9 contributions respectively form individual participants. One participants offered a comment without making reference to peer postings, and three participants did not send any postings of this nature at all. Postings which contained assignments numbered 53 in total. Two participants sent in their email addresses at the end of the course, inviting contacts from participants outside of the course. The remaining posting did not fit any of these categories.

One expectation which is strongly embedded in this course design is that students should engage with each other, with course tutors and with course materials and wider resources relevant to a community of learners engaged in Peace Studies. A device which has been used effectively here has been to invite students to post their responses to the course material and specifically the questions therein to the discussion forum. We can see from the statistics provided in the paragraph above that this strategy was effective in the sense that there were many such postings. In fact, all participants sent in assignment postings, but as we have seen, some participants did not engage in the discussion forum with other students. One factor which has contributed to this situation is the level of confidence of participants in the relevance of their knowledge, which is to be expected in an introductory course.

Variations in learning styles are clearly also an important factor. One participant states: "*Discussion forums were a new experience… I did not take advantage of it during this course…..I usually enjoy going through the learning process privately..*". The interesting thing is that even students who see themselves as solitary learners do see the advantage of collaborative learning in the online context, as the following quote shows: "*…herein lies a dilemma – for even with my introverted preference to think things through quietly on my own – a greater sense of connection with the other students on the course, as well as the tutors, would have made for an even richer experience.*"

Another participant, in fact one who contributed substantially to the discussion forum, was more critical of the nature of interactions in the course, saying that "*since the beginning of the course, we have all be posting our thinking in the form of a document, and pseudo-assignments. However, I feel we have not really discussed anything. Personally, I have been intimated by the format and have been pressured to 'submit'. However, the more I read your stuff the more I feel we should talk more…*"

There were many comments, taken from the survey and the reflective reports which express the view that the discussions were an exciting part of the course. Many participants appreciated being part of a group of people from diverse backgrounds and different geographical areas. Some suggested that other means of communication should have been included, such as Chat. One participant commented that "*it took some time to develop relationships/trust with classmates*", which does suggest that there are limitations to community building in such a short course.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the biggest challenges in course design for distance learning lies in catering for diverse approaches to learning by students. To some extent, this translates into the challenge of persuading some students to adapt and try new styles of learning. The solitary learner cannot benefit fully from participation in a course based on collaborative learning and knowledge construction, which is a strong emerging paradigm for distance learning in virtual space (Beaty et.al., 2002). Finding ways of building up participants' confidence in their knowledge and experience may be an important part of course design. It may also be necessary to make much more explicit the constructivist notions which widely underpin approaches to distance learning. Students may then not end up missing "*the feeling of being taught, because it was more or less up to myself what I was going to read and write, with the exception of the assignments*".

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