e-Learning in dialogue: Using e-learning to explore the local religious environment

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Introduction

Dialogue has long had a central place in learning. Consider the advice given in Pirke Avot by Joshua ben Perachyah; 'Provide for yourself a teacher and get yourself a friend [or associate]...' (Pirke Avot, 1: 6 in Danby, 1938.) Thus, as we look to develop pedagogies suitable for the collaborative learning opportunities provided by Web 2.0, we can build on such tried and tested means by religious communities. A teacher can guide progress but the friend/ associate plays a vital role in developing one's understanding through questioning and discussion. These roles are central to dialogue and e-learning technologies can now be utilized to enhance dialogue within a formal education setting. The accompanying WebFolio1 contains links to all the e-learning media and also provides an opportunity to continue the dialogue.

Twelve months ago I concluded an evaluation of the website *Religions in Wolverhampton*, following the Camelbelt methodology:

My main refection on this experience is to value the opportunities I have had to develop my

awareness of the possibilities of e-learning and to develop my proficiency in developing electronic materials. However, I am still struggling to develop a comprehensive pedagogy for e-learning which will blend with face to face sessions and visits. I am committed to an approach which empowers students through subject research and the development of skills to present their knowledge and understanding to others, and feel that many aspects of this e-learning approach have great value. (Burke, 2007)

This exploration presents an opportunity to re-visit the evaluation with particular reference to the underlying pedagogy for a 'dialogical' e-learning approach to the study of local religious communities.

Developments in the module **Religions in Wolverhampton** have utilized opportunities afforded by new technologies, starting with the institution's VLE (WOLF) and moving through the development of a website on **Religions in Wolverhampton**, to the use of the Webfolio option in the ePortfolio for learning activities. This has essentially been a three way process between learner (myself and students), subject (local religious communities) and technology over the past decade. For most of this period the complexities of technologies and the need to continually develop new proficiencies have overshadowed an exploration and evaluation of the pedagogies underpinning the use of such technologies. (Indeed, as I write a recent update to Office 2007 means that I am constantly diverting from the main task to cope with the technology!)

My contention is that e-learning has dramatically shaped the development of this module as it offers new opportunities for the accessing, processing and recording of information. This introductory module is innovative in terms of content, in setting religions within a local history framework, and innovative in approach in enabling students to develop their fieldwork skills alongside the ICT skills they utilise to present findings. The academic study of religion requires access to suitable materials for students to gain knowledge and develop their theoretical understanding. This has been a major challenge for this module due to the lack of published academic materials on religions in the locality, which has been addressed through the provision of electronic sources. Students are directly involved in this process as researchers, who are supported by the range of electronic sources, in their encounters with local religious communities.

Student learning about and from local religious communities is mediated by e-learning. This approach supports the personal encounter with traditions, as illustrated by this student comment:

> Getting 'hands on' with a community, for me personally breaks the 'academic' barrier. By that, I mean religious faith is not merely an 'academic subject', but real people's lives. We see the struggles and problems behind a community who essentially want to serve and love God in the best way they know-and for me, it makes it more 'real'-whether Christian, Muslim, or whatever.

This evaluation of **Religions in Wolverhampton** will be developed to consider how e-learning enhanced and supported such student 'conversations' with local religious communities.

Religious Studies and e-Learning

Cognitive psychologists have identified problems that students may have understanding religion due to its abstract nature. Scholars have successfully used phenomenological and ethnographical approaches to overcome problems of abstraction, as a way for students to develop critical understandings of religious phenomena. Goldman, 1965, started this process with his recommendation that materials link to the level of student cognitive 'readiness', while Grimmitt (2000) advises an experiential encounter with religion, which Jackson developed through his recommendation that the reality of lived experiences can be accessed through 'ethnographic and personal accounts of religious life' (1997, p. 3). Explicit Religious Education built on this foundation to bring religious material into pupils' lives. Visits to places of

worship have long been part of this process and are included in the experiences and opportunities recommended in The National Framework for Religious Education (QCA 2004) for secondary pupils. RE in schools has the two overarching aims of 'learning about' and 'learning from' religions.

The module Religions in Wolverhampton is set within the framework used by Grimmitt in his Pedagogies of Religious Education (2000), which defines pedagogic principles as 'general laws or substantive hypothesis about teaching and learning' (2000, p. 18), which are then elaborated in terms of pedagogic strategies. The module aims to provide students with an understanding of the religious map of Wolverhampton, its character and historical developments since the late 1950s; and problems of adaptation and interfaith relationships.

Its learning outcomes are to:

- Demonstrate a substantial understanding of at least one religious tradition and some acquaintance with several other major traditions.
- Demonstrate an awareness of the diachronic (historical) development of religious communities in the West Midlands.
- Demonstrate an ability to conduct fieldwork in a responsible manner, recording and evaluating informant testimony.
- Demonstrate an understanding and ability to evaluate the relationships between religious communities in the West Midlands.

The pedagogic principle that underpins the approach, set out by Grimmitt, 2000, is to offer students an experiential encounter with religion through a synchronic and diachronic study of religious communities. This approach recognises the gap between the way Western scholars categorise religions and the reality of lived experiences which can be accessed through 'ethnographic and personal accounts of religious life' (Jackson, 1997, p. 3). The pedagogic strategies employed to achieve this are based around field visits to local places of worship. Thus, local religious communities form the starting point for a study, which explores the historical origins of that religious community and the major phases of its development. Whole class field visits are an important part of this experiential encounter, and culminate in students researching communities in pairs and presenting their findings to the wider group, in person and through electronic means.

The theoretical foundation for this approach owes much to the work of Biggs. Firstly, Biggs', (1999), notion of 'constructive alignment' is present in the construction of the curriculum, the interactive methods of teaching and learning, and finally the assessment tasks. Secondly, there is a focus on metacognitive skills, which Biggs, (2003), identified as the third level of skills, which goes beyond generic and study skills. Metacognitive skills are in essence involved with what a 'learner does in new context.' (2003, p. 94). Thus, the provision of electronic resources allowed students to interact with each religion, to learn facts, figures, and practical issues such as pronunciation of key terms through the sound glossary. This foundation was important in preparing students for their own visits and report on a particular religious community. Whilst students are prepared for field visits in the first weeks of the module through whole class visits, they often find themselves in a situation where they need access to information on the religion to understand their findings. Thus, resources provided an important backup for students.

Mayes' theory of learning: conceptualization/ construction/ dialogue

Mayes' theory of learning provides a support for the approach taken in this module, supporting the student journey through conceptualisation, and construction to dialogue.

This approach addresses the dual challenges of encountering real religion and using electronic sources to support this approach. The first stage concerns conceptualisation of religion at a local level. Such studies have been in place

since John Gay (1971) introduced the notion of 'The Geography of Religion,' which demonstrated important links between geography and denomination distribution. Other studies have stressed the importance of explorations of the local environment. Hastings (in Mason 1994) drew attention to importance of local religious history in shaping the reception and development of religious communities. Wolverhampton is clearly a suitable city for such an exploration, with over 150 places of worship covering the main religions, however published academic sources on religion are few and far between. This dearth has been addressed by the 'construction' and 'dialogue' stages where students are involved in development of resources for themselves and future students.

Scholars have criticised the tendency to see the main purpose of online learning as conveying information, and thus miss the 'vital role for pedagogy' in encouraging students to benefit from their experiences of using electronic materials. (Alexander and Boud in Stephenson, 2001) In this module students are at the centre of the learning cycle which takes them through lectures which introduce new concepts, which are then explored through published works, and contextualised in local environment through local informants (past student reports) and field visits. This approach acts on the recommendation of Kuechler: [that] 'The Web makes it possible to realize the concept of the (undergraduate) student as a researcher and to shift the balance between reproductive learning and active discovery' (1999, p. 145).

The introduction to field work takes place in a planned sequence, firstly in supportive class visits to places of worship, then in pairs to apply their research skills to the specific setting of a religious community. This approach empowers individuals, as they each possess some unique knowledge and expertise on a religious community that they share with the rest of the group. A Muslim student reported: 'I found the task of reporting back on the Salvation Army was really exciting and interesting!! We had the power to conduct the interview in a way we felt was appropriate!'

This approach enabled them to see religion as an important part of people's everyday lives rather than a classroom based academic study. Another student reported: 'What I loved particularly about the module was seeing faiths in action. Not as some ideology in textbooks, and not just some pretty pictures and fancy costumes-but real challenges the community faces-struggles for social acceptance and associated political problems right here on our doorstep.'

Student reports are then shared with a wider audience, as their work is added to the **Religions in Wolverhampton** website.

The student learning environment

The approach was based upon students' easy access to electronic resources through which they could explore the rich variety of religious communities in Wolverhampton. I wanted to develop a resource to support and stimulate student learning, and in addition for the project to be one that students themselves could contribute to. Thus, the decision was taken to develop a website2 and embed it in WOLF. Mudge's guidance was implemented to 'Provide the information in such a fashion that students feel they have some control over the way they learn.' (1999, p. 15) Teaching and learning sessions took place in a modern computer lab with three data projectors and an interactive whiteboard. This enabled students to have hands-on use of computers in each session, which allows for the development and consolidation of basic ICT skills. This worked best where students had to use technology to complete assigned tasks, fulfilling the guidance offered by Grandgenett et al:

> Perhaps the most important key to the successful integration of technology into the teaching and learning process...is to carefully modify the curriculum to include specific technology appropriate activities. (1997, p. 254)

Tasks required students to download material from WOLF and then upload completed tasks back into WOLF,

supporting an incremental development of confidence and competence.

Student evaluation of the hands-on approach was generally positive, recognizing the benefit of instant access to materials, and enabling students to 'do it instead of watching on the board.' They liked the hands on approach which enabled them to interact with materials during sessions. Their keyboard and general navigational skills developed alongside applied academic e-learning tasks. Students engaged actively with lectures by adding their own notes to PowerPoint presentations, they applied guidance on effective internet searching (CARS checking) to electronic sources, which they contributed to discussions within sessions.

However, some students struggled at the start as they found it difficult to concentrate in a computer lab, and they also had to develop a new paperless style of learning. In addition some students lacked confidence in use of ICT and struggled to keep up during sessions. This was overcome within all groups by a collegiate approach, with the 'how did you do that' refrain echoing in sessions, allowing students to share their developing expertise in accessing and recording information with each other. This approach empowered many students who had ICT skills but lacked confidence in Religious Studies, and allowed for them to link up with students with good knowledge of religions.

Mayes theory of learning will be used to draw out aspects of the three electronic media that make up the learning environment for this module.

1. Conceptualisation stage: students exposed to other people's ideas or concepts (Website: Religions in Wolverhampton)

In essence the design of the web resource was for an easy to access resource, which provided basic information, visual and electronic resources and exemplars of student work. Resources were presented to support interaction with each religion, providing a map showing location of places of worship, a summary of main beliefs and practices and an explanation of denominational structure. The completed site will include a range of electronic resources, including sound glossaries, virtual tours of places of worship, video clips of prayers/ reading from scripture and explanations by faith informants. The site also acts as a portal for local publications by the Wolverhampton Inter Faith Group and local historians.

The **Religions in Wolverhampton** website provides an insight into religion in the local community, showing the impact of religion in the history of the area and the place of religion in the lives of real people today. This personalisation presents religion in a way that students can engage with by locating it within their lived experience.

The website stands as a reservoir of information on local religions, providing maps for places of worship within the many religions in the city, and contact details for each place of worship. Where possible a profile of places of worship is built up, through links to their own home page, supplemented by reports written by students in past years. This exposure to the work of others is taken to the next level with works on particular religions, with two main sources **Faith Lives**, providing a local introduction to the faith, and **Faith Guides**, providing a national and education linked overview of each faith. This range of sources provides students with a rich environment in which they are able to explore the key beliefs and practices and develop their conceptualisation of a faith.

2. Construction stage: students apply new concepts in performing tasks (vle: WOLF)

WOLF, the Wolverhampton Online Learning Framework, is based on 'server side technology' which places material on the university's server. There is a WOLF aspect for each module, which allows for the common presentation of module information within the university. In addition there is vast freedom for staff to develop their own subject learning materials.

The **Religions in Wolverhampton** module has a WOLF aspect, which houses a range of resources, including updated versions of the website, which I can update without having to go through the lengthy process with the administrator. WOLF acts as repository for module guides and copies of session content, to allow students easy access where and when they need it. In addition students like the opportunity to return to materials following class sessions, or when they miss sessions. The grouping of past student reports on a specific religion provides a focus for class activities, where students have the opportunity to learn about a new faith whilst developing an understanding of the requirements for student writing at this level. This modelling is very important as it enables students to see 'real' student writing, and to develop an understanding of the characteristics of good writing, and an awareness of weaknesses to avoid.

Students benefit greatly from peer learning; in this module reading reports completed by students in previous years help them to become critical readers. Whilst this gives them something real to emulate it also gives them something to improve on, which is unlikely to be the case with published work. To ensure that students benefit from this exposure they are given feedback on drafts of their work, to check the accuracy of facts and provide suggestions for improving their writing. This approach works very well as students become active rather than passive recipients of feedback.

An example of the 'construction' stage can be seen in application of new concepts from key researchers such the factors influencing contemporary religion (Davie, 1994) to the reported challenges facing local communities in student reports.

3. Dialogue stage: new concepts tested in conversation with tutors and peers (WebFolio)

It is difficult to separate the construction and dialogue stages, but for the purposes of this presentation they have been linked to particular electronic media. Thus, the dialogue stage is to be illustrated by way of the WebFolio feature of the ePortfolio, which students are encouraged to use for their personal development planning. Activities linked to the VLE do allow for the uploading of student findings, but the format lacks the flexibility of the WebFolio format. Sutherland, from the Pebblepad creation team, noted that teachers began to utilise this flexibility to create 'semi-formed assets and WebFolio templates which they are sharing with their students as prompts or scaffolding for the students to complete.' (2005)

In this module the WebFolio is used to provide a variety of WebQuests that can be completed individually or in groups. Firstly, during sessions to enable students to explore new content, in this example the WebFolio on Christianity develops understanding of wider context and prepares students for the field visit. Secondly, the WebFolio on Hinduism encourages students to work together outside of lecture to follow up a field visit. Thirdly, the WebFolio on Black-Led Churches provides non-contact follow up activities which draw on a variety of sources. Finally, the WebFolio on Wolverhampton Central Mosque provides an example of a student sharing research findings with others as a way of opening up the type of dialogue that happens on student led field visits.

Student responses to these approaches have been very positive, not only in terms of the enjoyment factor from using interesting resources, but also the motivation factor in using peer materials and providing materials for peers to use. In addition students noted that this approach is an 'excellent way to learn key skills for future employment in education or journalism.'

Students as researchers

This final stage of dialogue allies this approach to the 'conversational model' of teaching and learning, developed by Laurillard, linking teacher and learner. In this module my conceptual knowledge was used to provide a suitable learning environment, a so termed 'teacher constructed world,' through which students were able to develop their own conceptual knowledge through their experiential learning. Central to this process is dialogue and interaction.

Interaction with the subject matter through learning tasks, which leads to dialogue between students and the subject of their learning. This conversation encourages students to ask questions, to apply their developing theoretical knowledge and understanding to new phenomena, and to present their findings for peer scrutiny. This year (2008) this presentation has taken the form of a guided tour around places of worship, prior to completing the written report on the focus community for each group.

This approach to the study of religion is grounded in encounters with religious communities, close to what Jackson (1997) refers to as a 'conversational' approach. Fieldwork provides the means gather information about religion that can then be used to explore theoretical issues. Thus, visits to faith communities are important within the first year of study, as a means of building a knowledge base and developing their interpretive skills.

The developmental aspect is supported by electronic feedback which provides hyperlinks to relevant study skills and subject resources. The majority are drawn from our own website Sharpen Up Your Skills, but links are also provided to on-line tutorials from Monash University. The next stage is to develop appropriate support materials for Religious Studies, including annotated assignments and on-line tutorials. Further details are available in the accompanying Webfolio (This asset can now been seen publically at **http://eportfolio.wlv.ac.uk/webfolio.aspx?webfolioid=630793**)

Conclusions

Firstly, dialogue with students has been central to these developments, ensuring that technologies enhance and do not obstruct learning. Student module evaluations reported that this e-learning approach increased motivation, developed competence, and allowed for empowerment through the sharing of individual reports on visits. Using past student reports as a way of exploring local communities enabled learners to access peer writing, and identify the strengths and weaknesses of reports. Students then had added the motivation when completing their reports of knowing that future cohorts, pupils in local schools and the general public could read their work. Students reported that the interactive map was an excellent way of accessing information which made looking at religion fun. They also enjoyed WebQuests, stating they were an excellent way of learning key skills for future employment. These positive features also contributed to a higher pass rate on this module than other Religious Studies modules at level one.

Secondly, the benefits for staff, through opening up dialogue with technology experts, specifically e-Materials developers, made possible developments within the website. This support from e-Materials developers, who are themselves Multi-Media students on work placement, has made possible the application of new technologies to my subject area by students for students.

Thirdly, external benefits essentially group around challenging the view of Religious Studies held by particular constituencies. Our University's commitment 'to making a major contribution to the social and economic prosperity of the West Midlands' through applied research and consultancy can be linked to research undertaken by undergraduate students and shared via the website. We are starting to engage in knowledge transfer through the website so local schools can draw on materials to support the teaching of Religious Education. This insight into undergraduate work is also proving to be of interest to prospective students at open days and in Aimhigher events. In addition, one of our graduates has been employed as a faith development worker by English Heritage to open up local religious places of worship to the wider public.

This exploration of e-learning and dialogue: ***Using e-learning to explore the local religious environment***, provides a snapshot of an attempt to harness technologies to enhance student learning. This process builds on Collis' notion of the 'contributing-student approach' to develop a 2.0 pedagogy, to fit technological developments, with students as 'co-creators' who are empowered to 'share, build, support, and manage their learning together, in their common context.' (Collis & Moonen, 2005, 6)

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Endnotes

- e-Learning and dialogue: Using e-learning to explore the local religious environment: **http://eportfolio.wlv.ac.uk/webfolio.aspx?webfolioid=630793**
- The website can be accessed through a Google search for **Religions in Wolverhampton**, or at **http://asp2.wlv.ac.uk/hlss/Religion%20in%20Wolverhampton/index.html**

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