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“On E-Books in Taught Postgraduate Courses”
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The question of innovation in teaching is one that most of us, rightly or wrongly, quickly reduce to the use of technology in teaching. Because of this, the idea of technology in teaching is something that a good number of teachers in tertiary institutions continue to regard with suspicion – as little more than a gimmick that appeases the student demand for entertainment in the lecture hall. However, I want to suggest here that the use of e-Books in teaching is genuinely advantageous to both the student and teacher. Through talking about my own experience of devising and employing an e-Book for my MA course “Advanced Studies in Literature” (Department of English), I would like to highlight what I think are some of the certain benefits of using e-Books in the context of taught postgraduate programmes. While some of what I have to say may be considered discipline-specific, I hope that as I outline what I see as the main advantages of e-Books one will be able to see instances where the use of e-Books could benefit aspects of every course – no matter the discipline.

To this end, I want to focus today on three generic qualities of e-Books. That is the fact that e-Books:

1. Localize course materials
2. Improve student accessibility to course materials; and
3. Have embedded functions that are wonderful for students who learn in a second-language environment

In fact, it is because of these three qualities of the e-Book that I think they are genuinely advantageous to both the student and teacher.

Let me begin, though, by introducing the course in which I employ my e-Book: ENGE5210 “Advanced Studies in Literature.” Like all of my courses, ENGE5210 is a blended course – that is to say, teaching is delivered in both the traditional manner of lecture/seminar *and* through the virtual online learning environment of WebCT. As most will already be aware, WebCT is a wonderful place to store all kinds of course

materials. For example, I use it to host full lecture notes; powerpoint presentations – mine as well as those delivered by students; key learning resources; and, importantly, there is even an area that students can use to test ideas, or ask questions, of either me or, indeed, other course members – the discussion board area.

The rationale behind offering something like WebCT to my students is to destabilize what has become an almost naturalized association between classroom and learning – the belief that learning is something that *only* happens in the classroom. What WebCT allows for is a student to have continuous, uninterrupted access to course materials, meaning that they can study during the part of the day (or, more commonly for PG students, part of the night) that they find most convenient. This, of course, is most important when we think of the lives of those who choose to study on taught postgraduate programmes. At least in the English Department, the majority of MA students are employed full-time; therefore, taking the qualification part-time. That is to say, they are studying around an already full life. Now, I think to recognize this simple fact is hugely important because it means that when it comes to facilitating their learning, we, as course convenors, must try and be as flexible as possible.

And, it is for this reason that “accessibility” becomes an important word; because we must try our best to make our courses as accessible as possible. For me, WebCT improves student accessibility to the learning materials of any course. Once my MA students have finished work, perhaps had their dinner, they can settle in front of the computer and re-read lectures, read some important criticism, perhaps discuss ideas with other people on the course, and prepare for the next class.

The only downside to this arrangement, as I see it, is that the student must be “online.” That is to say, they must in some way be connected to the web. Here, then, is the first benefit of producing an e-Book for a course. Consider an e-Book that has localized the course learning materials – the lecture notes, the course readings, and so on. Once that e-Book has been downloaded (to any mobile device – ‘phone or tablet computer), the student can access all of this learning material *without* being online. Put simply, e-Books further improve the accessibility of blended courses. Students are able to read set texts during their lunch-hour, or on the MTR on the way home. In this way, e-Books make learning fully mobile. The student is free to exploit learning materials in any way they see fit...

There are, though, some specific features of ENGE5210 that encouraged me to go

ahead and create an e-Book. First is the fact that “Advanced Studies in English Literature” is a “survey course,” which in this case means a fairly well-paced jog through the history of the Western Literary Canon – from Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* to the more contemporary thoughts and ideas of Anthony Burgess. This means that there are a lot of readings to be disseminated to students – all-in-all about 160 pages of text. The opportunity to have this material unified in one e-Book is extremely useful. Not only can one preface every reading with a little note that encourages students to look out for certain themes, images, or ideas in a text, but you can also use these little prefaces to develop the over-arching narrative of the course. That is to say, you can render the significance of each text to the wider concerns of the course.

However, there is another benefit to this localization of course materials. If, like me, important paper work seems to somehow disappear from your desk – things like class handouts – which leaves you frantically scrabbling around in your office ten minutes before class, then the e-Book is a “godsend.” It’s impossible to misplace! The e-Book sits happily as a download in WebCT or on your mobile device, and therefore so do all of your learning materials. Even, it has to be said, if your learning materials include audio/visual content.

Indeed, one way in which I hope to develop my current e-Book for ENGE5210 is to include audio/visual content. The problem, it must be noted, is not technological but rather the slow bureaucratic machinery of the BBC and other similarly large institutions! Of course, you must take time to consider the copyright implications of the material you would like to include in your e-Book, but if this hurdle can be overcome I think you will begin to see the way in which the e-Book can deliver an enriched learning experience.

It is this notion of the audio/visual capability of e-Books that leads me to the third point that I want to consider here – the functionality that is on offer with this new technology.

The question of student accessibility aside, it was the functionality of this mobile technology that really crystallized my decision to create an e-Book. The rather wonderful thing about electronic books is that it can do things that regular books can’t – things that are invaluable to students who are reading English literature; things that are especially valuable to those who are doing so when English is their second language.

E-Books, or at least e-Book readers, have the capacity to also run a dictionary or a thesaurus. Again, for a student who is dealing with the sometimes intentionally difficult use of English, this embedded functionality of the e-Book is invaluable. There is no more need to put down your book, find a dictionary, go back to the novel and try to work the sense of this new word or phrase back into the context of the sentence. With the e-Book you simply tap and hold the word you don't understand and a dictionary definition is presented to you – often at the bottom of the page so you can immediately synthesize the definition you have been given with the context in which you are reading it.

Similarly, note-taking is an essential part of critically reading texts. Commonly, e-Book readers will offer the ability to take such notes as you are reading. Again, by simply tapping and holding the section which interests you, you are given the opportunity to write a note on the text. For me the benefits are obvious – no more notes written on loose bits of paper that, again, mysteriously disappear! Your notes are anchored to specific points of the study text, and they will present themselves to you each time you return to that specific section of the text.

Most e-Books also offer a search function. Of course, what this means is that you can quickly find a passage (in perhaps a 700-page novel) that you need to discuss. Alternatively, if you are writing an essay on a particular image or feature of a text, you can search for the occurrences of it by using this feature.

Closely related to the search function, is that of hyperlinks. You can create hyperlinks that are either internal to your e-Book or, indeed, external. What this means is that as the author of the e-Book you can direct students to either other important sections of the e-Book, or send them to other trusted learning resources on the internet. I'm sure there are many benefits to exploiting this kind of interconnectivity granted by the e-Book – again, this is something that I must think more about and develop in future generations of my e-Book.

Let me offer a brief conclusion, then, to this short paper. E-Books offer many genuine benefits for the teacher and learner. They allow you to:

1. Localize course materials
2. Improve student accessibility to course materials; and
3. Have embedded functions that are particularly useful to students who are

learn in a second-language environment

While I've concentrated on the particular benefits to taught postgraduate students of the English Department, I think much of what I have said here will translate to other student groups and other disciplines. So, if you wish to increase student accessibility to course materials, or if you wish to strengthen the over-arching narrative which your course seeks to explore, then I think you must consider spending the time in developing and using e-Books.