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NATIONAL, INTER-INSTITUTIONAL, GRADUATE MODULES – BLENDED LEARNING APPROACHES FOR PHD EDUCATION IN IRELAND

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Abstract

This paper describes the design and delivery of national PhD lectures with 40 PhD candidates in Digital Arts and Humanities in Ireland. Blended learning approaches were utilized to augment traditional teaching practices combining:

- face-to-face engagement,
- video-conferencing to multiple sites,
- social media lecture delivery support – a live blog and micro blogging
- shared, open student web presence online

Techniques for creating an effective, active learning environment were discerned via the range of learning options offered to students through student surveys after semester one. Students rejected the traditional lecture format, even through the novel delivery method via video link to a number of national academic institutions was employed. Students also rejected the use of a moderated forum as a means of creating engagement across the various institutions involved.

Students preferred a mix of approaches for this online national engagement. The paper discusses successful methods used to promote interactive teaching and learning. These included:

- Peer to peer learning
- Workshop style delivery
- Social media

The lecture became a national, synchronous workshop. We describe how allowing students to have a voice in the virtual classroom they become animated and engaged in an open culture of shared experience and scholarship, create networks beyond their institutions, and across disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords: Innovation, technology, education, postgraduate, graduate, interinstitutional, PhD peer to peer learning, social media integration.

1 CONTEXT

There has been an explosion in the range of technology enhanced delivery options open to educators in recent years. Speculation that the conventional university is destined to be made obsolete by technology has grown from a trickle in 2006 Chen et al [1] to a torrent. Developments like Coursera and Udacity seem to bring closer the age of global 'mega-universities' described by Desai et al in 2008 [2]. The traditional, face to face, small, graduate reading seminar in humanities PhD education has now been joined by a range of delivery options. These include;

- Video lectures,
- Online synchronous and asynchronous discussions,
- A range of lecturer-led, peer, and team learning methods,
- Reflective blogging,
- Social networking and other tools.

Many academics are only familiar with a limited subset of the delivery options now available, but if our graduates are to meet the “employability agenda” they need to be exposed to, familiar with, and able to operate across a range of different collaboration methods. Effective integration of these new tools, piloted at graduate level and proliferated down through the curriculum, is a key challenge for the university. For educators, it is now necessary to find, and master, tools to support two-way communication with students” [3].

Most literature on delivery modes in online education tends to focus on the choice of an appropriate mode or tool. Classic texts on the topic like that of Laurillard divide tools for technology enhanced learning into different categories - narrative media, interactive media, adaptive media, communicative media and productive media all of which are treated separately. There is a clear assumption that the students will use different types of tools for different types of learning at different times, and the challenge for the course designer is to “balance” these in an appropriate way [4].

Research on technology enhanced learning in graduate education tends to follow this pattern by focussing on one mode only. Thus Swan has a detailed study of asynchronous learning among graduate students [5] while Tu and McLissac argue that “computer-mediated communication (CMC) environment(s) present very different characteristics from the FTF classroom” which clearly references the sort of social isolation which can arise in asynchronous communication [6] but which is an important part of face to face interaction according to Argyle and Dean [7]. This is very different to recent work in the Digital Humanities community which emphasises multi-modal interaction and the rhetoric-in-action of a collaborative conversation for example in Inman’s work [8]. This represents a strand of thinking about information collaboration and creative use of tools which has a long pedigree amongst leading thinkers in creative learning, including Brown and Duguid [9], and later Thomas and Brown [10] in *A New Culture of Learning*.

The adoption of US and European style structured PhD programmes in the humanities, with significant taught elements in place of the old style PhD conducted entirely by independent research has encourage some humanities academics in Ireland to look at how we can best meet the demands and expectations of PhD level students for taught programmes. While there is a wide range of taught master’s level courses in Arts & Humanities in Universities in Ireland, doctoral programmes have different intake profiles. Consequently, in delivering this type of course, in an inaugural iteration of a national program, as humanities academics we have had to look at new styles of teaching, new ways of fostering engagement and new principles of participation in graduate education.

Two local, contemporary factors push educators towards greater inter-institutional collaboration in structured PhD programmes. Firstly, many humanities disciplines in individual universities do not have a wide enough range of staff to provide a properly challenging taught experience for PhD Students. This is especially true for programmes in new inter or transdisciplinary fields like Digital Arts and Humanities where subject matter expertise on individual campuses often consists of one or two staff operating at the edge of the traditional disciplines. The experience of specialist teaching involving small universities or novel areas of research is one which can be generalised from this programme to other programmes operating in similar contexts.

The second factor is the increasing pressure to “do more with less” in the current economic climate. This austerity in budgets is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, and may get worse. As a result, maintaining existing taught PhD programmes or developing new ones may require the development and delivery of the taught elements on an inter-institutional basis to continue to deliver a high quality teaching and learning experience for all participants.

The Digital Arts & Humanities Structured PhD programme within which this teaching experience was explored was a novel venture in many respects. Funded by the Higher Education Authority and the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, it built on a prior, smaller PhD Programme, *Texts, Cultures and Contexts*. DAH involved more institutional partners across Ireland, North as well as South. The planned intake was larger - forty six PhD studentships were shared among the main partners making it the largest inter-institutional structured PhD in Ireland, and one of the largest PhD programmes in Digital Arts and Humanities globally.

2 DESCRIPTION

The DAH core module, *Conceptual Introduction to Digital Arts and Humanities*, was designed at relatively short notice between programme approval and delivery with participation from four universities. Initial discussions about delivery focussed on two alternatives - asynchronous online

discussion in forums, or synchronous delivery of lecture and discussion. Since some members of the team were not experienced in leading and moderating asynchronous forums, delivery by videoconference, supported by asynchronous online discussion, was chosen as the prime method. This accommodated a wide range of pedagogic styles, with some institutions delivering traditional lectures by video, and others emphasising asynchronous discussion. Most contributors used a single mode of delivery -either lecturing across the video-link, leading discussion over the video-link or leading asynchronous discussion in the online forums. Contributors relied on the delivery mode with which they felt most comfortable, and did not generally move into other modes of delivery.



Image 1- multi site video conference screen shot

University College Cork contributed two of the twelve classes to the course, on the topics of 'Representing Data: From 2D to 3D to Virtual Worlds' and 'Defining Data'. In planning these, the UCC team decided to blend delivery methods and offer a multi-modal learning experience. The classes took place as synchronous online video seminars between the four participating institutions. Pre-readings were circulated, initial discussion points were posted on a class blog, and each class was started with short 5-10 minute introductions by a pair of staff acting as a team. In each of the four institutions, the students then broke into groups of 5-6 for 10 minutes to discuss the readings and introduction.



Image 2 breakout sessions - locally in each institution

When the groups reconvened for further engagement with each other and the material, each institutional group reported back to the combined seminar. This cycle was repeated several times in the 2 hour seminar. In addition to this, which resembled a videolinked version of the normal graduate

seminar, both staff and student participants could comment on the discussion points posted on the class blog page and/or make notes and comments on Twitter using a class hashtag. As result, the discussion proceeded in three modes - traditional seminar discussion with one participant speaking at a time, short comments on Twitter, and longer contributions through comments on the blog page which was continuously refreshed and updated.

Students had the option of contributing through whichever medium they felt most comfortable with.

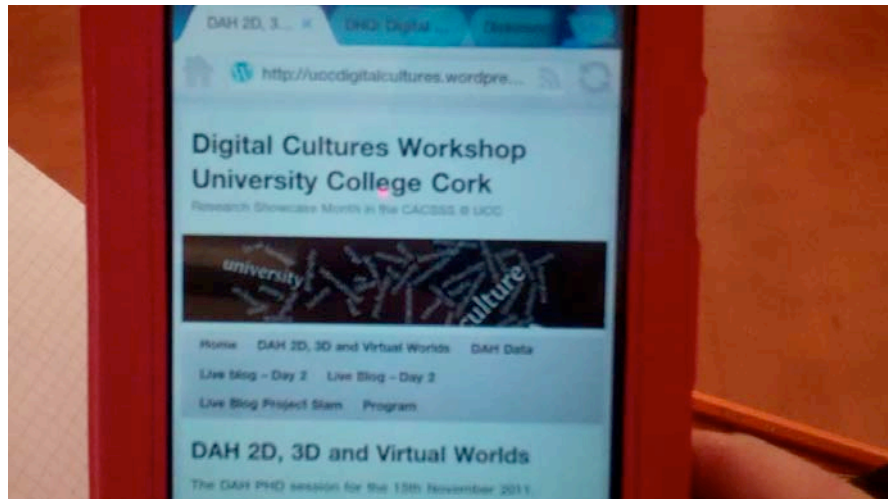


Image 3 – Screen grab of live blog

Contributions were not lost in the queue of people waiting to speak as points could be made through twitter and the blog comments.

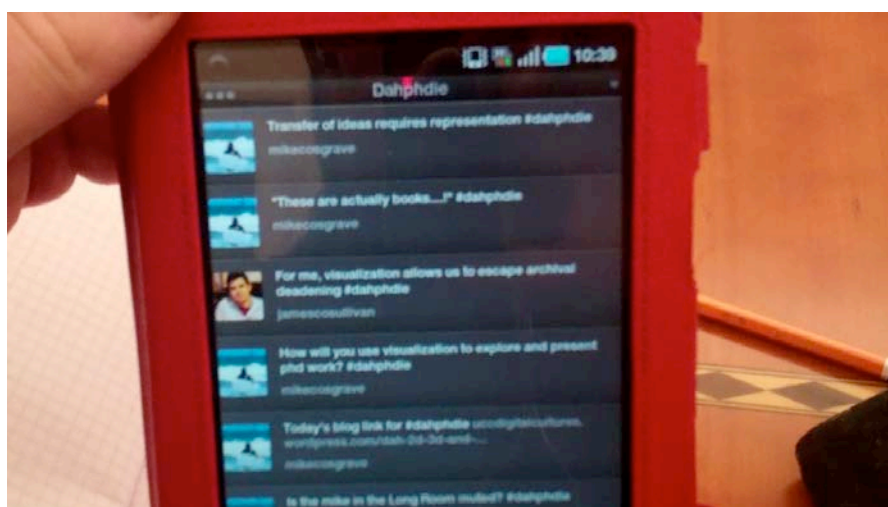


Image 4 - # DAHPHD hashtag bringing comments together

Seminar leaders could read the blog comments and twitter stream, and pick up significant comments from those media, either echoing them electronically or inviting the commenter to take the floor and expand on their contribution.

Questions arising from the discussion could be posted in multiple modes; it was immediately clear where a point raised multiple questions and seminar leaders could draw together parallel comments. Seminar leaders had a better view of the range of views on a point across the class, and could opt to explore a topic in more detail or flag the comments for online follow-up after class.

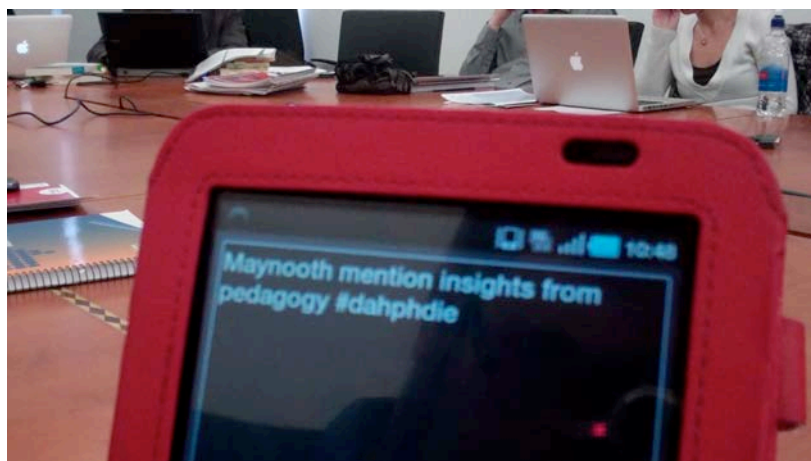


Image 6 – Capturing a point made over the video link in a tweet

The discussion was not solely dependant on the quality of the video conference, where audio quality can be problematic, but also had blog comments and twitter stream as backup.

Mediating several different strands of discussion is demanding - three academic staff were involved in each session. While one spoke, the others monitored and contributed to the blog comments and twitter discussion. While roles rotated between the three seminar teachers, in practice each played to their own presentational strengths. Contributions from one member of the team were mostly traditional discussion, another working between discussion and blog comments and the third mainly working on the twitter discussion. Multiple modes of discussion in the seminar do allow both staff and students to operate in whichever mode they are most comfortable with, but do require moderators for each channel. Sustaining a multi-modal discussion during a live class requires some of the teaching team be able to span several modes, and, clearly, requires a team of 2-3 academics who can work together as a team. While technology problems can be overcome relatively easily, the soft skills needed for effective team teaching are probably a bigger obstacle to this style of delivery.

Significantly – the topic was exposed to external discussion outside the class group on twitter, comments continued after the class on the blog, and remain there today as a paradigm for the incoming PhD cohort.

3 STUDENT FEEDBACK

All students completed an anonymised survey of the module. The students were asked a range of questions on course content, delivery, and the quality of the teaching and learning experience. The majority of students responded well to the online, blended, workshop approach. They preferred it to the traditional lecture mode, and welcomed the opportunity for interaction, and for their voices to be heard in the group. With their response in mind, we have augmented online provision in this, and other courses.

4 DISCUSSION | CONCLUSION

It is clear that blended online delivery, integrated well with engaging and participatory activities was a successful mode for PhD education. Traditional lecture modes do not sit as well with remote, multi site video conferencing. Efforts must be made to include students in active learning throughout the sessions – and the easiest way to do this is to use technology, in particular in this case – live blogging with an integrated twitter feed.

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