

Critical questions for WOLF: an evaluation of the use of a VLE in the teaching and assessment of English Studies

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Introduction

As Jerome McGann has noted, Humanities and English scholars have been slower than some of their colleagues to see the potential of digital technologies, needing to be convinced that 'its tools improve the ways we explore and explain aesthetic works' and that they 'expand our interpretational procedures' (McGann, 2001). 'Critical Questions for WOLF' has aimed to take up McGann's challenge and this article offers an account of online experimentation and innovation that has been taking place in the English department of the University of Wolverhampton, from 2003-05. Using the university's custom-built virtual learning environment (VLE) – the Wolverhampton Online Learning Framework (WOLF) – we have been interested in exploring how and to what extent using a VLE can enhance the teaching of English Literary Studies, focussing on an introductory 1st-year module and two 3rd-year modules. The project team have all taken as our bottom-line that online teaching and activities *only* have value if they allow our students to develop some of the key skills, abilities and interests that we regard as at the heart of university English, and that the use of a VLE must extend the possibilities for the development of these skills in ways that go beyond what is achievable within a more traditional classroom setting.

In particular we have been interested in engaging with the pedagogic and pragmatic issues inherent in moving to a form of English teaching which is, in effect, 'blended learning', where face-to-face and online teaching are integrated into whole modules. As numerous discussions of online learning make clear, 'the key to the success of incorporating . . . e-tivities is the method by which they are introduced and integrated within the module' (Pavey and Garland, 2004, p. 313). This then raises questions about whether and how online learning in English Studies can and should be assessed. While there is a growing general literature on assessment and VLEs (Goodfellow, 2001; O'Reilly and Newton, 2002; Sutherland, 2003; Macdonald, 2004; Goodfellow and Lea, 2005), we are not aware of any other study which specifically considers student assessment within English Studies using a VLE.¹ In addition we have also conceived of VLE assessment functioning as a staged progression across an English course, involving different forms of assessment, some of which is quantitative and some qualitative. As the case studies of Colbert and Wilson's 1st-level work and Miles's 3rd-level work below demonstrate, we have attempted to introduce gradations of complexity into both the learning activities we have asked students to undertake online, as well as into the modes of assessment for judging student achievement at the different levels. But first, some thoughts on assessing VLE work in English.

Assessing online work in English Studies

On the English Subject Centre's web pages on 'Communicating about Assessment' Siobhán Holland writes, 'One of the key functions of assessment is its role in inducting students into the conversation that the discipline is having with itself' (Holland, 2002). What and how we assess tells students, explicitly or (perhaps more often) implicitly, what we value in the university study of English. When we introduced the use of a VLE into our modules in an integrated way and set about assessing the work done online we would stress that *nothing changed* in terms of the skills and talents we were

wishing to develop in our students. We still wanted to see, for example, the same problematising of students' reading, imaginative engagement, appreciation of contextual approaches and independent thinking, etc., that we had done previously, and which we are also encouraging through paper-based discursive forms of assessment.² With Janet MacDonald, in her article on 'Developing Competent E-Learners', '[we] make no claim here that assessing e-learning is really radically different from assessing learning: the same principles apply' (2004, p. 224).

What is important is that online tasks and related assessment are appropriate to the medium in which they are being carried out. Thus there seems little point, or value, in trying to get students to write essays online; a VLE is not suited to that sort of sustained or formal writing. All of the activities we have used with our students online have been directed and focussed in the same way that seminar activities often are, using prompt questions to encourage students to reflect further on the week's set text or topic. We also agree with Diana Laurillard when she suggests that if new learning technologies are only introduced to students on an experimental basis, then they may well not take them seriously. With both our 1st and 3rd-year groups the VLE was first used in precisely such an experimental and 'trial run' way. Laurillard argues convincingly that 'the only real test of any learning material is its use under normal course conditions. This means it must be integrated with other methods, the teacher must build on the work done and follow it through, and, *most important, the work students do must be assessed*' (2002, p. 205; italics ours). Bearing this in mind, we offer below two accounts of our design and assessment of VLE activities, and some reflections on that process.

Case study one: introducing English Literature and VLEs

Introduction to Literature is a core module for students in English, ideally placed to introduce VLE applications. In 2003-04 Colbert and Wilson decided to deliver the module through a combination of traditional classroom-based seminars and WOLF-based e-seminars, the latter replacing face-to-face group work with asynchronous discussion forums. Like class participation, the e-activities were not assessed. Student feedback in a questionnaire proved on the whole encouraging, with the majority of respondents (68%) participating in the WOLF induction exercise and continuing to show creditable levels of interest, although active participation tailed off towards the end. Feedback on e-seminars revealed a similar pattern of initial participation followed by a more passive but continuing interest. The bulk of responses to the question 'I found the e-seminar exercises very helpful' fell in the middle of a scale with 'strongly disagree' at one end and 'strongly agree' at the other. Yet it was also clear that the absence of assessment affected motivation for many: 'Make it part of assessment if you want people to use it!' was perhaps the most candid response. As a result of these findings Colbert and Wilson decided to use WOLF on the module as an integral assessed element, with e-activities designed to introduce new students to learning technologies, supplementing the traditional learning environment (TLE) rather than replacing it.

Integrating assessment in 2004-05

In 2004-05 the assessment regime for Introduction to Literature was adjusted so that VLE activities would be worth 10% of the course mark. Given the small proportion of the weighting to overall mark, the key here was to develop assessment criteria that would encourage students to participate actively without sacrificing the integrity of their contributions. Our solution was to make high grades seem easier to attain (the carrot) while stipulating robust rules of engagement (the stick). Using Wolverhampton's 16-point grade scale, students were awarded 3 points for each activity completed successfully, so that by participating in 5 of 8, they could receive an A15. The qualitative dimension was introduced by articulating within the published assessment criteria by defining a 'successful contribution' as one that:

- focused on the task assigned.
- engaged genuinely and effectively in the activity (e.g. posting a response and a reply to a colleague).
- addressed colleagues, not tutors.
- was published within 7 days of the activity's posting.

Seminar and e-seminar sessions were now offered in tandem; VLE activities now supplemented rather than substituted for TLEs. With Kevin LaGrandeur our ‘aim was not to conduct a completely “virtual” class, but to experiment with ways that our [university’s VLE] might enhance a literature class’ (1996). While closely linked to course content, VLE activities also formed a coherent sequence that offered students a grounding in requisite skills, thus giving the module a dual structure. For example, in week 3, classroom sessions focusing on narrative technique in David Lodge’s novel *Nice Work*, were followed by a VLE activity requiring students to write a collective e-sequel, *Easy Street*. Choosing from several pre-posted ‘beginnings’ representing modes of narration, participants would pick up the narrative thread, add their own contribution to the story in an appropriate discourse and style, and re-post the new version for the next author’s input. In this manner, an exercise in narrative form and point of view also became a practical introduction to the process of constructing a specific strand of discussion within the wider framework of the forum.

Subsequent VLE sessions used WOLF as a vehicle for introducing students to some of the electronic resources that will prove invaluable to them throughout their academic careers. For instance, in the first week devoted to studying poetry, a seminar spent analysing selections from William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* was followed by an activity which incorporated a direct link with the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (www.oed.com), asking the students to discuss how the various contemporary meanings of a few key words in a poem could affect the interpretation of the work. The following week, when Blake was used again to focus on issues surrounding the contextualising of literature, students were sent to the *William Blake Archive* (www.blakarchive.org) to consult electronic versions of the illustrated texts and discuss the interplay between word and image. During the last unit of the module, dedicated to drama through Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, the two VLE sessions required a more ambitious blend of these burgeoning technological and critical skills. In the first instance, students were required to apply their new *OED* skills in conducting linguistic research across the Shakespearean canon using the electronic database *Literature Online* (LION: <http://lion.chadwyck.com>). In the second, they were sent to the website of the Royal Shakespeare Company to familiarise themselves with the issues informing a topical debate on gender, characterisation and contemporary performance, as preparation for extending that discussion into their e-seminar forum.

The one exception to using TLEs and VLEs in tandem was a session devoted to the scholarly apparatus of citation, referencing and the presentation of written work in general. Here the department’s *Style Handbook* took centre stage (based on the MHRA and Harvard systems for literary and linguistic studies respectively), and the VLE was used to assign specific bibliographical exercises, which reinforced principles raised in lecture. This VLE session was unique in terms of the role played by the tutor, both in his/her responding personally to each student’s posting, and in offering either official endorsement or detailed correction of the content of the posting. Other VLE activities were characterised by student-led discussion, with tutor input minimal, directed to the general group, and consciously encouraging in tone. The ‘Style’ session in particular seems to represent an area where the existing VLE activity could be improved, for example, by developing ‘test-yourself’ exercises, or linking to a suitably equipped website such as the ARIES project.

1st year student responses

The WOLF questionnaire generated data from 87 respondents (57% of those completing the module). Students were asked (a) to describe their levels of participation; (b) to evaluate the activities and the resources made available via WOLF; (c) to evaluate VLE as part of their learning experience, especially from the assessment point of view. The overwhelming majority of the group – 80 (92%) of the respondents – did indeed participate in the VLE activities. Of these, 59 (69%) contributed to more than the 2 activities required for a passing mark, and 36 (41%) continued to take part even after they had secured an A grade – a good indication that assessment motivates students to enhance their learning experience. The 7 (8%) who indicated that they did not participate cited a range of reasons, including lack of access to a computer, intense aversion to technology, and child-care issues. Alongside these figures we must place another 69 (79%) who told us that they had observed at least one forum activity without actively posting, and of these as many as 30 (34%) said they had done this on 3 or more activities.

When asked to evaluate the content of VLE sessions, answers were quite evenly distributed. 41 respondents (51%) appreciated the session on poetic form (one of the trickiest areas of first-year English studies) using the *OED Online*, and 24 (30%) selected it as the most intellectually stimulating session. The data records a very positive response towards another challenging area: Bibliography and Citation. The *Style Handbook* was listed as one of the most frequently consulted resources posted on the WOLF topic page. 38% of respondents named the session based on the *Handbook* as the most useful to their studies.

Though most participants were fairly willing contributors to activities, opinion on whether WOLF had enriched their learning was split perfectly, with 26 people minded to agree or disagree, and with very few expressing stronger opinions either way. More surprising, given the data on participation and content evaluation referred to above, were responses on the subject of assessment. 61 (70%) felt that WOLF ought to be worth less than 10% of the final grade, against 24 (28%) who felt strongly that it should be worth more. Some students addressed the matter in their written comments, with lack of access to computers forming the basis of a couple of objections, yet this cannot wholly account for the response, particularly in the light of the vastly different findings amongst third year students in Case Study Two (see below). Contributing factors may be that students are experiencing: 1) assessment fatigue, indicating the need to reduce the number of assessed elements (rather than adding a VLE element to an existing 'load'); 2) resistance to unfamiliar technologies and their applications to learning environments; and 3) a lack of group identity (perhaps related to the high student to staff ratio (SSR) on first-year core modules, and, unlike themed upper level modules, a lack of self-selection through 'elective' choices). These remain hypothetical, however, and will need to be addressed through further research.

Taken as a whole, the data from the questionnaires and module evaluations suggests that students continue to approve of WOLF as a reservoir of course materials and have additionally valued its facilitating access to online databases. Though attitudes towards the value of assessed VLE activities seem more mixed, evidence of 'value added' through frequent participation, both active and passive, would suggest that by the end of their first semester at university most have not only accepted the idea of an online component, but are equipped to exploit it. It is now up to lecturers to establish through active and informed course design what Garrison and Anderson have called the 'community of inquiry' (2003), a total learning environment in which IT and traditional teaching and learning models are integrated and mutually supportive.

Case study two: teaching the Victorians online

In 2003-04 I also undertook a four-week experiment to consider ways in which a VLE could be used to offer opportunities for learning within English Literary Studies (see Miles, 2004). I posted resources on WOLF which related to the course content of a 3rd-year module, *Fin de Siècle Writing and Culture*. These resources developed specific themes and issues considered in class, but were additional to the materials students had specifically considered in the classroom context, thus 'adding value' to their learning experience. Students were then invited to respond to tasks which used the online materials by posting their comments in WOLF's Forum. I also designed a questionnaire gauging students' responses to online work, as it was new to all of them. When asked whether they were in favour of such an online component being assessed, 38% of respondents said yes, 57% said no and 5% gave no reply. However, 86% of respondents said they generally supported an online component as part of the module and numerous positive comments were made on questionnaires as to what it added to the study of English. As a result I decided to incorporate a 10% assessed component covering students' engagement online in future iterations of both third-level modules I teach on the nineteenth century, *Fin de Siècle* and *The Victorian Vision: Literature and Culture c. 1830-1880*.

Activities and assessment on VVO and FOE

VLE activities designed for the Victorian Vision Online (VVO) and the Fin de Siècle Online Experience (FOE) were designed to extend the discussions and debates we had started in the classroom into the following week, thus face-to-face teaching was always the catalyst for online work. Particularly successful

were VLE sessions which exploited what the medium could offer as a learning environment. For example, a *Victorian Vision* session on the Pre-Raphaelites involved a lecture introducing the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and some examples of how to read Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian paintings. For the VVO session which followed this students were asked to find a Pre-Raphaelite painting on the web, and add its URL to a specific area of WOLF. They then had to discuss their chosen painting in the Forum, and also comment on the painting of at least one other of their classmates. In this way the class built up their own bank of resources which were available for everyone to learn from. Also very popular with students were the final sessions on VVO and FOE which involved both critical and creative abilities on the part of participants: students entered the Forum ‘in character’, taking on the personae of each module’s set texts to discuss what the Victorians got up to at Christmas, and to solve a Sherlock-Holmsian 1890s mystery.

Students were aware from the outset of both modules that there was an online assessed component. In the first session on each module students were given assessment criteria as well as brief ‘orienting materials’ such as aims and objectives (see Appendix A). VVO (taught in semester 1 of 2004-05) consisted of 6 online sessions over a twelve-week teaching term; FOE (taught in semester 2, 2004-05) consisted of 4. My assessment criteria involved minimum participation rates: on VVO students had to take part in 4/6 sessions in order to gain a C (2ii) grade or above; on FOE it was 3/4. Participation in VVO and FOE was also mandatory in order for students to pass the module overall. Beyond these requirements for minimum participation my other assessment criteria were qualitative, with different grades depending on whether contributions were ‘limited’, ‘satisfactory’, ‘good’ or ‘very good’.

My assessment criteria were adapted from some created by Stuart Sutherland (2003), and like him I wished to ‘encourag[e] rich, purposeful online collaboration to enhance learning’. Thus I made it explicit that students would be rewarded not just for the quality of their individual postings, but for the extent to which they interacted with the postings of others, and furthered lines of discussion and debate *with* them. I also made it clear in my Assessment Guidelines that ‘what is being assessed here is much more of a *process* rather than an end *product* (such as an essay)’. The online work also functioned throughout the course as a kind of low-level continuous assessment, with the students keen to do well (of which there were many) participating in all sessions: on FOE more than 85% took part in all 4. This also worked to the good (from my perspective) in making students wrestle with texts with which they might otherwise have had less inclination to engage.

‘Brilliant!’ but ‘a lot of work for 10%’: what the students thought...

Once VVO and FOE had become integral parts of modules and students were asked again whether online work should be assessed, the answer dramatically changed: 67% of VVO respondents said a clear yes with 20% ‘not sure’, and 88% of FOE respondents supported being assessed, with 4% not sure. When online activities were presented to the class as ‘how this course is’ students definitely wanted credit for the effort, time and demonstration of learning that they put into their VLE work.

VVO and FOE generated considerable enthusiasm from my students. Several commented on how VLE work was ‘innovative’ and also how it could foster ‘collegiate spirit’; as one student said: ‘it’s been nice to feel involved outside of the classroom’. There was universal appreciation of having online resources made available, and students frequently appreciated how the asynchronous nature of the Forum allows quieter students to have their say too, free from some of the pressures of face-to-face seminars. The accolade of ‘brilliant’ went to the final session on FOE, in which Dr Watson, William Morris, Dracula, Oscar Wilde, and numerous New Women all wandered about the ‘Mystery Forum’ trying to solve a very strange case. The following comment is representative of a number of others: ‘Anything that encourages a healthy exchange of views has to be beneficial. It has certainly broadened my knowledge of the Victorian period and has encouraged me to do further research on some of the material the other students presented.’

The overwhelming majority of students thought an online component enhanced the course: 89% said FOE added to their experience of the module overall. Many students had clearly put a lot of work into VVO and FOE and the general quality of response in some of the Forum discussions surpassed anything I had envisaged. However, students were equally vocal in telling me that they had done a lot of work on VVO and FOE and a considerable number queried the assessment only being 10% of the total mark. Numerous comments told me that the online work should be ‘worth more’. When asked more explicitly what weighting students thought online work should have the results were as follows:

	VVO	FOE
About right — 10%	33%	30%
Less — 5%	0	0
More — 15%	0	15%
More — 20%	7%	11%
More — 25%	27%	33%
Even more	13%	4%
No response	20%	7%

The clear majority think the online work they did was worth more than 10%, with a total of 47% of VVO responses and 63% of FOE suggesting a higher percentage. I attempted to be responsive to the strong feeling that was coming from the Victorian Vision class that online work should have a higher weighting when FOE ran the next semester. However, I was unable to get changes through the appropriate Quality Assurance board in time and thus my compromise was to reduce the number of sessions from 6 to 4. For future iterations, however, I do intend the online component to have a higher weighting as I now recognise that if online work is going to be truly integrated into a course then its assessment must be weighted accordingly. Next time VVO takes place it will carry 40% of the overall marks, alongside an extended essay.

For some students the fact that their online work was assessed acted as a greater incentive to participate. When asked what difference it made to motivation knowing that the work was going to be assessed, responses ranged from ‘I would have taken part anyway but the assessment gave me a spur to contribute more fully’ to ‘if it wasn’t assessed I would be less inclined to participate’. The positive challenge here is to ensure that our assessment facilitates opportunities for the kind of learning we want to see in HE English. O’Reilly and Newton (2002) argue that we teach within a ‘paradigm of learning through assessment’ and that educational uses of IT can offer opportunities to explore new kinds of assessment methods that can be motivational to students. My experiences with VVO and FOE would suggest that this is possible within English Literary Studies.

Conclusion

Sebastian Mitchell has suggested that ‘English literature departments should seek to be at the vanguard of a movement toward electronic assessment, because English, more than any other academic discipline, should be concerned with issues of both literacy and the composition of an argument. If it is the case that the digital revolution will redefine the means of expression, then it is beholden on the English department to reflect upon and contribute to that process’ (1999, p. 127). Our experiences of using VLEs with those just embarking on university English degrees and those heading towards graduation suggest that assessing online work can be used to great effect in the teaching of English Literary Studies. We offer some conclusions from our work:

- VLEs in themselves are neutral in relation to English Studies. It is how they are used – e.g. to offer innovative and relevant learning activities within the context of a given English course or programme – that will determine their success.
- Online activities need to be integrated into English courses and assessed. This integration may well involve a rethink of both course structures and assessment.
- The assessment of VLE work can complement more traditional forms of assessment in English, such as essays, exams, etc.

- It is important to ‘get the balance right’ in terms of the weighting given to online assessment in a course. Being bolder rather than tentative about assessment weightings for online work may well be the way forward.

VLEs have considerable potential to encourage some of the skills that we want to develop in English students, and in addition they can help foster the sense of community and interaction that is integral to the life and vigour of HE English, extending that beyond the traditional classroom. With new learning environments and teaching activities will come new forms of assessment, which bring their own opportunities and challenges.

Notes

¹ Siobhán Holland and Aidan Arrowsmith’s *Practising Theory Online* (Newcastle: University of Northumbria, 2000) is one of the fullest discussions to date of English students using a VLE. This study involved the setting up of an online ‘practice space’ (p. 7) for 1st-year students learning to use and apply literary theories. The learning activities which this generated, however, were not formally assessed. Pam Knights at the University of Durham has also recently undertaken The Duologue Project, which aimed ‘to produce, test and evaluate some of the broader teaching and learning possibilities of VLEs in English across a wide [] range of modules’. Again, there is nothing here that explicitly addresses assessment. See www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/duologue/ There is some discussion of VLEs in Michael Hanrahan’s *English and IT* (London: English Subject Centre, Report No. 5, 2002), but little specifically on assessment.

² These abilities are all taken from the *QAA English Benchmark Statement* (Gloucester: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2000).

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Appendix A

The Victorian Vision Online

Welcome

During this course you will all be taking part in The Victorian Vision Online (hereafter VVO) under this module's topic on WOLF. VVO is an opportunity for us to extend and develop some of the discussions that we start in the classroom, both in lectures, and particularly in seminars.

For 6 weeks of this module (mostly every other week) there will be a VVO session. Resources will be posted on WOLF which will supplement the materials you are given in class. You will then be invited to consider some exploratory questions and tasks related to these materials and to respond to them – and to each other – in the discussion Forum on WOLF.

The kinds of discussions that you'll be having online are perhaps most helpfully seen as an extension of the discussions that we have in seminars, when usually you will engage in various 'close reading' activities in relation to that week's set text(s). These kinds of learning activities are designed as good practice for the type of thing you will be doing on paper when you come to write your assignments.

Aims of VVO

The aims of VVO are broadly exactly the same as those for the whole module, as set out on p. 1 of your module guide for *The Victorian Vision*. However, as VVO is probably a different kind of learning experience from that which you may be used to encountering in your English studies, it is perhaps helpful to have the Aims articulated in more detail:

The Aim of VVO is to provide students with an online study space where they can further their learning about the Victorian period through the use of appropriate resources and discussion and interaction with other students and staff.

Learning Outcomes

At the end of VVO students will:

1. have engaged in discussion and debate online about some of the issues and contexts that arise out of studying Victorian literature and culture.
2. have a hands-on knowledge of how to use the WOLF VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) to further their learning opportunities.
3. have reflected critically on the experience of participating in VVO and its relevance to English Studies.

Assessment

Your participation in VVO will be assessed and will constitute 10% of your overall mark for the module. You will participate in a minimum of 4/6 of the VVO sessions to obtain a C or above.

Assessment Guidelines and Criteria

- To obtain a C grade or above for VVO you will participate in a minimum of 4/6 sessions. We hope you'll take part in all 6!
- You will respond in the Forum as an individual to the various online tasks set, but by its very nature the Forum also enables you to engage in discussion and dialogue with your peers (and with your tutors) and thus in part to construct your learning through that dialogue. Thus the assessment will take into account the quality of your interactions as well as your individual comments. Perhaps unusually within your academic study, what is being assessed here is much more of a *process* rather than an end *product* (such as an essay).

- Below are some guidelines as to how VVO will be assessed, and what your tutors will be looking for in your online responses. They are not meant to be prescriptive in a limiting way, and as with all assessment in English, intelligent and original engagement with the texts and topics under discussion is actively encouraged.

E (Fail): * No postings; no participation.

D (Third): * Did not take part in 4/6 sessions.
 * *Did* take part in 4/6 sessions but very limited contributions. Little evidence of real engagement with the tasks.
 * Limited or no responsiveness to the postings of others.

C (2:2): * Took part in at least 4/6 sessions.
 * Satisfactory individual contributions which show engagement with the tasks and some evidence of critical thinking about the topic.
 * Some engagement with the postings of others, which further the discussion to a limited extent.

B (2:1): * Took part in at least 4/6 sessions.
 * Good quality individual contributions which show evidence of intelligent analysis and critique in relation to the topic.
 * Good engagement with the postings of others, including evidence of new ideas and strands being developed out of previous lines of thought.

A (First): * Took part in at least 4/6 sessions. Likely to have taken part in all 6.
 * Very high quality postings. Original thinking about the topic, and a clear ability to analyse, critique and synthesise ideas.
 * Excellent engagement with the postings of others. Frequent evidence of new ideas and strands being developed out of previous lines of thought as well as evidence of the ability to exploit the capabilities of WOLF as an environment to further learning.

Time on Task

Each VVO session may take between 1-2 hours of your time. This would include the reading of any materials (i.e. an article), your accessing WOLF and the online resources and making some postings.

Rosie Miles

Assessment Criteria adapted from Sutherland (2003).