Unit 6 Coursework and assessment for blended and online learning

This part of the guide is intended to outline the rationale and some possible options for the kinds of coursework that are particularly well-suited to blended and online learning, as well as highlighting some key issues in designing appropriate forms of coursework, and the practicalities of administering it.

1.0   Why is a separate approach needed?

Having a unit titled 'coursework and assessment for blended and online learning' immediately suggests that the way in which tutors need to think about coursework that students are to undertake working in online-supported contexts somehow needs to be different. It does need to be different, and there are many reasons for this that relate to the nature and challenges of blended and online learning, and the issues that arise when there is an over-reliance on traditional forms of coursework and assessment in blended and online courses.

1.1   The reality of online student engagement

So why is it necessary to think differently about the kinds of coursework suitable for blended and online learning? One reason is the reality of how many students have been found to manage their studying and engage with the resources that are available to them in blended and online contexts.

Despite the many benefits of blended and online learning, unless they are explicitly required to do so, only more naturally pro-active students will tend to interact with a good range of online resources in a constructive way.

The temptation for students who are less pro-active, or who are simply juggling many other studying and other commitments, is to only access online resources with a serious intent to learn immediately prior to formal course deadlines. The potential problem with this being that students may not have time to use anything but the core resources, or participate effectively in online discussions.

1.2   Exploiting the opportunities for realistic tasks

Having access to a wealth of information, communication tools, and other technologies and resources that can be freely utilised at any time, means that blended and online learning is particularly well suited to tasks that require students to source information, and develop and use knowledge in many ways

that are similar to the inquiry-based, collaborative ways in which knowledge is generated and used in professional contexts and environments.

The use of multimedia and simulations, where possible and appropriate, adds a further dimension to this by allowing students to view and interact with real (eg a video of a medical procedure) or more realistic (eg an interactive model of the human heart) depictions of objects, processes and phenomena.

1.3   Engagement, collaboration and rich interactions

Related to both of the above is the idea that to get the most out of the benefits associated with blended and online learning, the coursework and activities that students undertake have to play several roles in addition to providing a focus for learning and a basis for assessment. These additional roles include: ensuring the use of a valuable breadth of resources; supporting community building and encouraging purposeful collaboration, allowing the monitoring of progress; and providing a course structure that is conducive to effective ongoing engagement.

1.4   The problem with summative assessment

Although there is no reason why summative forms of coursework and assessment should not play a part in blended and online courses, their use as the main kind of coursework and assessment is very problematic. One reason for this is that the online environment has fewer opportunities for the student to gauge their progress than a 'traditional' course does, in which there tends to be a higher level of regular structured interaction with tutors and peers, as well as more informal opportunities to seek guidance and feedback.

Another reason is that summative assessment, when used alone, does not give the student much incentive to be actively engaged online until the point in time where it is clear that the work must now be undertaken. In this respect, an over-reliance on summative assessment can be a major contributing factor to procrastination, and also poor retention, in blended and online courses.

Consider the following student scenario, based on a genuine student account:

Student scenario

Gary is just entering his second year of an undergraduate programme. He entered university straight from school partly because it was expected, but also partly because he can see the value of getting a degree in the area he would like to work in. Gary attends most of his lectures and seminars, but by how his own admission could also be better motivated and manage his studies more effectively. Although he gets reasonable grades, Gary tends to leave his coursework until fairly late on, sometimes beginning it at the last opportunity, and prefers to be told exactly what has to be done to get through an assessment. He is currently having some difficulty with a group-work project, as his fellow group members feel he is not contributing as he should be. This

---

situation is not helped by his part-time work commitments outside of his course

Aside from using e-mail for contact with the tutor, and having occasionally used discussion boards as part of particular modules, Gary does not have much experience of studying online. One of his core modules for this trimester does not have any lectures and all the basic course material is provided online, along with a rich range of links to further readings and interactive examples available on the web. Students are to study this at their own pace, and will be assessed through submitting an essay mid-way through the trimester, and sitting an exam at the end. Some of the time that the tutor would have allocated to lectures and seminars is being used for individual tutorials that the students can sign up for after viewing the available times online. The tutor has also set-up a series of online discussion topics that he has introduced with key questions for consideration, although the decision on whether to engage in discussion around these questions is being left to the students, and is not mandatory.

Although it is clear that Gary could perhaps be more pro-active in his approach to studying, the challenges he is facing, including getting motivated and balancing his course with other commitments, are obviously not uncommon. Of course Gary is also a campus-based student, with one year's HE experience after having come from school, and has not self-selected to study online.

How then might Gary, or colleagues like him, fare in the module described in the scenario? Is Gary likely to benefit from the increased opportunities for self-paced studying that exist online in this particular module? What use is he likely to have made of the links to readings and other resources provided by the tutor? What are the chances of him participating in the asynchronous discussion, where he would have more time to reflect upon the views of himself and others, and engage in a deeper exchange than might happen face-to-face?

The reality is that Gary only went online a handful of times. Initially he went online out of curiosity as to what he could find in the module's VLE site. Gary then returned online towards the time of the essay being due, when he printed out the essay specification and the basic course notes that related to the question he chose. He also printed out the content of a couple of the links to use as possible references, picking those to print based on their title and a very quick scan of the content. Gary returned again nearer the time of the exam to print the rest of the basic course notes, and a few more of the recommended links. Only once did Gary go into the discussion board, just to see if anyone had said anything that might help him with his essay. He didn't find many contributions there, and had no intention of contributing himself as he wasn't actually required to. The few discussion posts Gary did find he noticed had come from a couple of the more studious folk in his class, who he figured would have contributed anyway as they were always putting in that extra effort.

In the end Gary did OK on the essay and exam – probably about the same as he would have had the course just been lecture-based. The feedback he received made it clear he'd overlooked a lot though, and this made Gary think about how much better he might have done had he made fuller use of the resources that were available, and been more organised in his online studying.

2.0   Key characteristics of good online coursework

Given the above, what are the general characteristics for the tutor to keep in mind when thinking about the kinds of coursework that will engage students with the subject matter and each other, and therefore increase the likelihood of effective learning occurring, in blended and online course contexts?

Before looking at some types of coursework that work well in blended and online courses, let's touch upon some of the main characteristics.

Although there is no one definitive list, there is a consensus on the following:

- **Student ownership and control**. In blended and online contexts, where the increased flexibility offered is ideal to supporting independence in learning, coursework activities that provide students with a degree of choice in what they learn, when they learn, and the resources they use plays to the strengths of the medium. Increased ownership and control can also make learning more motivating and personally meaningful.

  However, it is critical that these opportunities are offered within a course structure that does not allow increased flexibility to translate into increased procrastination, as in the above student scenario.

- **Multiple perspectives**. Exposure to multiple perspectives is important to developing critical thinking ability. This is easily enabled online through access to web-based subject material, the links to which can easily be organised according to competing and increasingly complex views. It is also made possible where effective online communication occurs.

- **Range of relevant resources**. As appropriate, this could include topic overviews and coursework activity descriptors, starter links to relevant online readings and subject repositories, multimedia examples, communication tools and shared workspaces, and physical resources and environments, all of which combined could support learning, and individual learning preferences, in a diversity of valuable ways.

- **Opportunities for collaboration**. To allow students to benefit from sharing their understanding, and arriving at deeper understanding through this process, as well as for developing communication and collaborative skills, and being able to undertake and learn from complicated tasks too challenging for the individual working alone.

- **Space for self-reflection**. Deliberate inclusion of opportunities for students to reflect on their progress, and identify possible shortcomings in their understanding, at pertinent points throughout their learning.

- **Continuous engagement**. Coursework in blended and online contexts should require the student to be active throughout, and reduce any possible temptation to delay learning by having periodic deadlines.

© Edinburgh Napier University

- **Constructive alignment**. Like all well-designed coursework, there needs to be a high level of coherence between the stated learning outcomes, the content of the learning to be undertaken, and the criteria for assessment. For example, if students were required to undertake a collaborative online project on a particular topic, it would not make sense, or provide much motivation to complete the project properly, if they were to be assessed via an individual essay on the topic in question.

- **Task to technology appropriateness**. A particular challenge of blended and online learning is in whether the resources available to the students are suitable to the task they are being required to undertake. If they are to investigate a particular topic to a particular depth, are there the sources of information available to do this? Similarly, if a group of students is to collaborate online on a project that requires rapid decision-making at certain points, then they are probably going to need a mixture of real-time and asynchronous communication options.

3.0   Forms of coursework for online learning

There are many kinds of coursework that work well in blended and online learning, due to being consistent with the general characteristics outlined above. However, the need to be constructively aligned and appropriate to the available technology and resources, it is important to remember that no one coursework activity is likely to embody all of the aforementioned, or be made to where this is not appropriate. Instead, many good blended and online courses use a combination of different kinds of coursework, often including a selection of those described below, to ensure a rich and engaging learning experience.

3.1   Case-based learning

In case-based learning a student, or typically a group of students, is presented with an account of an event that has occurred, or a particular set of conditions. They are then required to apply their knowledge of the concepts and principles they have been studying to explore and debate the situation, before arriving at a reasonable and defensible view or decision. Technology-supported case-based learning is commonly used in medical education. Here, the case material presented includes the medical history and symptoms of the patient, often with visual evidence, information about conditions commonly linked to the symptoms in question, and links to a range of specialist views about the case. The students view and discuss all the evidence presented, before reaching their final view.

Example

A 'part-virtual' case study in office ergonomics. Students read transcripts of interviews with key personnel, view photos of the environment, consult policy documents, then visit the site before preparing and uploading a group report in the form of a digital documentary.

Case-based learning has potential uses in many other disciplines where a range of factors have to be considered to understand and then make an informed decision in particular situations. Because case-based learning tends to require students to have a lot or relevant resources to hand, it is an excellent way of enabling learning in blended and online contexts, after there has been some initial opportunities for students to engage with the subject matter.

Of course the tutor doesn't need to create all the relevant resources themselves, as in any discipline there is typically a lot of good quality material to be found on the web already. This may mean that the tutor needs to create little more than the case narrative itself (the case description and question), and within this simply provide links to further information about the relevant concepts, other similar examples, and possible explanations for what is happening or needs to happen in the given situation (being mindful, of course, that the material you are linking to is cleared for such use). Beyond this, the students will require some means of communicating in a reflective way, which may suggest that an asynchronous discussion board is going to be valuable.
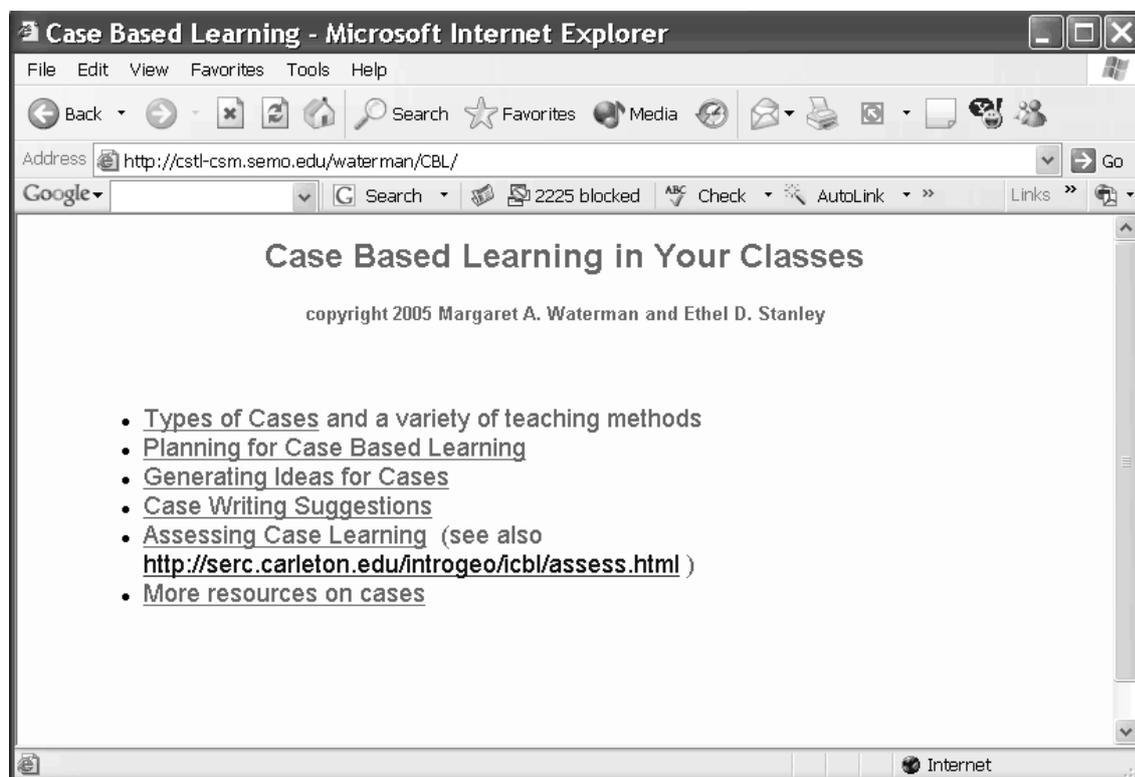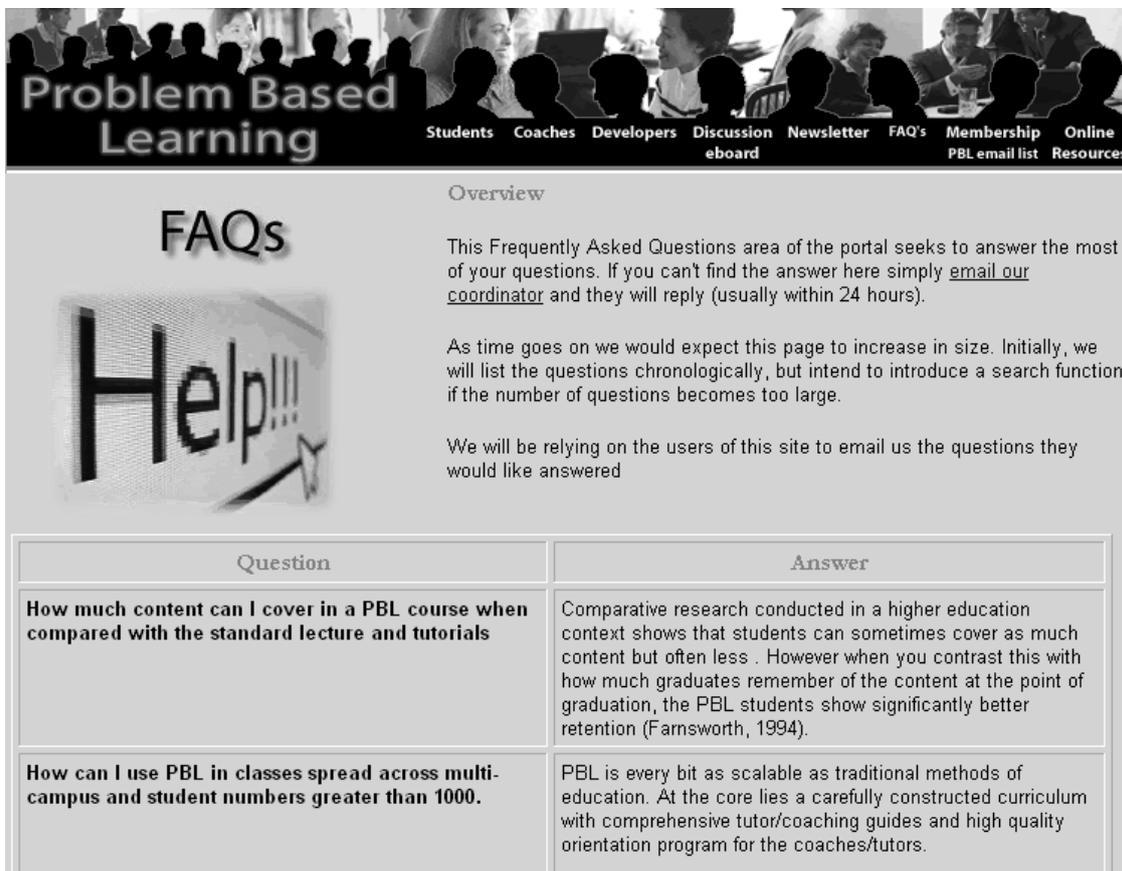

Figure 14: For more information on how to design case-based learning, with examples and assessment tips, see Waterman and Stanley's concise but informative tutorial at http://cstl-csm.semo.edu/waterman/CBL/

3.2   Problem-based learning

Unlike case-based learning, problem-based activities are often undertaken without much prior exposure to the subject matter in question, and do not always require a great deal of resources to be provided for the students at the outset. Instead

small groups are presented with a problem situation or scenario. They then analyse this to identify the key areas to focus upon, investigate these areas, and then apply and debate what they have found out as they work through proposed solutions in order to arrive at the optimum one.

Figure 15: The Problem Based Learning website from Australia's Central Queensland University has links to examples of online PBL approaches, alongside information about designing PBL (http://www.pbl.cqu.edu.au/)

In blended and online learning, problem-based approaches are very easy to implement, with the main requirement of the tutor being to produce the problem scenario, possibly provide some starter links and guidance on how to find quality information online, and ensure students have appropriate online collaborative spaces. Students will need a means to communicate and pool their resources effectively, which means blogs or wikis might be good options here, or group-working and discussion areas established within the VLE.

3.2.1 WebQuests
A WebQuest is a particular type of online problem-based approach that was first developed at San Diego State University, and is now popular worldwide with teachers and tutors working at all levels of education. WebQuests provide students with a task or problem scenario, a starter set of usually web-based resources, task support guidance (eg roles to be assigned within the group, format for the final output), and the criteria against which the students final output

will be assessed. WebQuests often involve the students presenting their findings to the tutor or other groups online, and defending them in debate.

Figure 16: Visit the Searching for China WebQuest by Tom March at Pacific Bell for a good example of what a WebQuest looks like and involves for students http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/China/ChinaQuest.html

For more information on using WebQuests to encourage higher order learning in blended and online courses, see the WebQuest Portal at **http://webquest.org/**, which has a searchable archive of example Webquests for various subjects.

3.3   Student-led seminars and debates

Having students lead, moderate and contribute to online seminars and debates as part of their formal coursework is an excellent means of getting students to engage with their subject early on in blended and online courses, and also to engage with and appreciate the views of others. The asynchronous conference provides a safe environment for doing this, through the opportunity for the student to fully reflect on their own view and those of others before contributing.

Example

Student-led online seminar in second year politics course

Weeks 6 to 8 online seminar

For this week's seminar, the two seminar leaders (see attached list for who is leading which seminar) will work as a pair to research UK political policy on immigration.

By the start of week 6 (Monday 12th March) the seminar leaders, who have received further instructions via e-mail, will have investigated the government stance as well as the corresponding policies of the shadow government and one other opposition party of their choice. By noon on the 12th March they will have posted a short summary of each perspective, including links to further reading about the respective policies, to the discussion board topic titled 'Week 6 Seminar: Immigration policy'.

Your task as participants

Read the seminar leaders' opening contribution. On the basis of their policy summaries and the further reading they provide links to, pick the policy that you most agree with (even if you don't agree entirely). By Friday 16th March, post up to 250 words describing why you opted to side with that view, and why you feel it is more appropriate than the other two policies that were presented.

During Week 7, beginning 19th March, read through the contributions from the class. At a minimum, pick at least one point from a classmate on which you agree, and another point from a different classmate on which you disagree. Reply to your colleagues in the discussion board, explaining why you agree or disagree with their views.

For the start of Week 8, beginning 26th March, the seminar leaders will post a summary of the consensus view on each policy. By Friday 30th March you should post a closing account identifying the policy view you agreed with at the start of the seminar, and what your perspective is now (eg Do you still agree with your original choice? Where do you now see additional strengths or weaknesses in the policy you chose, or the other two policies presented? What points raised by others informed your final view?).

Remember this is a student-led seminar, although the tutor will be online to raise pertinent questions, and comment on the range of views expressed.

Your participation in our 4 online seminars accounts for 20% of your final mark.

However, despite the potential benefits of online seminars, careful thought has to be given to the assessment of online discussion participation for this kind of activity. Assessment will certainly encourage participation, but there is a need for clear criteria that explicitly emphasise the quality of contributions, and the importance of the student engaging with others rather than simply communicating their views. For more guidance see section 5.4.

3.4   Web-based presentations

The visual strengths of the web, along with the ease with which a range of file formats can be shared online, means web-based presentations are a good option to for individuals or groups to undertake. But what might these entail?

It really depends upon the skills of the student(s), and the task in question. Usually the student would first be required to research a particular issue, or undertake a piece of work that they would then have to report back on. The presentation itself could take the form of a PowerPoint® slideshow, perhaps narrated, or perhaps a web page presented in the form of a 'digital documentary'.

Fellow students and the tutor would then have a period of time in which to view the presentation after it has been uploaded, and then ask questions of the student presenter(s) who would then respond online. This may be in real-time or via a discussion board. There are particular advantages to the latter, especially in fully online courses where a number of students might be studying in a second language to that of the course in question.

3.5   Research and report

This can be a variation on, or aspect of, any of the kind of blended and online coursework listed so far. Usually undertaken individually or in pairs, this is a simple but effective form of inquiry-based learning where the student might decide upon, or be given, a particular question or issue to look into before sharing their findings with the rest of the class, or with fellow members of a project group that are undertaking research and report exercises as part of a larger activity. Research and report exercises can be a good precursor to online discussion (as the example in 3.3 indicates), and a good way for new students to get valuable practise in developing online search and retrieval skills.

3.6   Design projects

In subject areas where students are working in a visual medium, for example art and photography, architecture or any subject that uses aspects of computer-aided design, then the online environment is ideal for facilitating the sharing and critiquing of original work and ideas amongst groups of students who may not be able to physically meet at the same time. Even where this is not the case, the web can make the work available to view and discuss at any point out with the classroom environment, rather than simply within it. Where students are working on producing software environments and applications, these can be distributed online for others to easily interact with and feedback on.

3.7   Portfolios

Portfolios are essentially collections of individual work, typically associated with a particular subject or course, and often threaded together with a commentary by the student on the work undertaken and the resulting learning. Portfolios, or individual pieces of the work undertaken for it, are often made available to view by tutors, and sometimes fellow students, while the portfolio is in progress. For the end of a course, or an agreed time, the portfolio is submitted for final review.

Because portfolios are a varied collection of coursework built up incrementally, they are an excellent option to ensure continuous learning occurs in blended and online courses, in which the portfolio might also be submitted electronically and perhaps even include evidence of online discussion participations. WebCT at Edinburgh Napier offers an electronic Portfolio tool which you can learn more

about at **http://www2.napier.ac.uk/webct/staff/resources1.html#portfolio** and
http://www2.napier.ac.uk/ed/portfolio/.

**Figure 17: The ePortfolio Portal at danwilton.com provides a wealth of
information and advice about e-portfolios, and is open to comments and
contributions from those who share an interest in the use of e-portfolios.
You can find the site at http://www.danwilton.com/eportfolios**

In submitting portfolios electronically, simple solutions include the creation of a
CD-ROM, or a simple web page with an overview commentary and links to the
pieces of work. E-portfolios are becoming increasingly popular as a more
sophisticated way of handling portfolios. E-portfolios are more dynamic than CD-
ROMs or web pages. They essentially allow students to load all their work into an
online database that is more flexible to maintain and update than a static web
page. The database of work sits behind and is accessible via a website, but has
the additional advantage of others being able to add comments easily.

3.8   Reflective journals

In blended and online courses, where increased time for reflection exists but the opportunities to do this do not occur as naturally as in face-to-face courses, requiring students to maintain a reflective journal of what they have learned and the issues they have encountered is a simple but potentially effective option.

Example

Excerpt from a reflective journal specification for a Masters level module in palliative care. Note how the final submission comprises different kinds of activities undertaken throughout the module. These included completed self-reflection activities built into the online module, and also contributions to online discussions:

Purpose
The purpose of this portfolio style journal is to assist you to develop a cumulative document which includes the evidence/activities you have been engaged in throughout the module. The journal may be presented in your own style/lay-out-but should follow the sequence of the units-building up the evidence of reflection and learning.

Objectives
To develop critical thinking and a questioning attitude
Enhance reflection, analytical, metacognition and writing skills.
Development of self within the subject matter
Provide a therapeutic purpose by supporting a behaviour change
Encourage creativity
Develop self-expression by promoting the journal as an alternative voice.

Evidence
The Reflective Learning Journal should include evidence of:

Application of theories and concepts
The use of formal and informal resources
Communication strategies/approaches
Group discussions
Observations/awareness in relation to own practice area.

The evidence might include the following;

Additional reading identified beyond the essential websites/reading
Copies of e-mails/discussion threads
Completed activities
Media accounts etc
Unit questionnaires.

It's important that students are required to update their journal regularly, perhaps on a weekly basis, otherwise it will not be particularly useful to them. It will also be important that reflective journals have a clear focus, for example being tied to a specific project they are undertaking online, or their developing understanding of

certain key issues. As for options for keeping these, it could be as simple as a word document, or preferably a running commentary online either in a dedicated discussion board thread, or even a personal blog.

Of course, reflective journals need not just be a simple narrative of the tasks undertaken and the learning that resulted. The reflective narrative can be constructed around a collection of reflective tasks that were undertaken, as in the above example, which combines a reflective journal approach with aspects of the portfolio approach, and results in kind of reflective 'mini-portfolio'.

3.9   Critical essays

The critical essay is well established means of individual assessment, can be very effective at consolidating the students understanding, and can be assessed by the tutor relatively easily. They certainly have their place in blended and online courses, but for the reasons highlighted in 1.4 and 2.0 should not be used as the sole or main method of summative assessment.

3.10   Objective self-tests and exams

Objective self-testing is an excellent means for testing factual knowledge, including understanding of formulae and terminology. It is also ideally suited to the online environment, where the administration and marking of objective self-tests can easily be automated. Short objective self-tests at pertinent points throughout an online course also provide a very good opportunity for students to assess the development of their basic understanding as they go along.

► **See Unit 3 section 3.3 for more examples of online activities.**

4.0   Key issues in designing online coursework

Although there is not scope here to provide detailed guidance on how to design each of the kinds of coursework described above, there are some general principles to follow when designing coursework for blended and online learning.

4.1   Consider what is realistic and possible

In blended and online contexts, it will be critical that the coursework you ask students to undertake will effectively engage them with the online environment and each other, and do so continuously over the duration of a course.

That might imply having a range of coursework activities for your students to undertake and complete at various points, which in turn perhaps suggests more work for you as the tutor to produce, support, and grade this work.

For this reason it's important to consider what is realistic and achievable both for yourself and your students. Here are some tips for ensuring that coursework for blended and online contexts effectively engages your students, but without becoming problematic for you to administer:

- **Think about the kinds of coursework activities that are most appropriate for your students and your subject area**. What level are your students, and what can they realistically undertake if working more autonomously online? Is problem-solving a key skill in your subject? Perhaps a case-based approach reflects how students will be required to work in their chosen profession? Perhaps the need for them to be able to analyse, articulate and defend particular arguments and views suggests graded online discussion participation is the way to go?

- **Don't think you need to assess everything!** Period deadlines are important online, but that doesn't need to mean receiving multiple submissions of several pieces of coursework for assessment. Perhaps you could set deadlines for receiving key parts of a continuous assignment or project for formative comments, with final assessment to come when the completed piece is submitted? Not assessing everything is a particularly important point when dealing with contributions to online discussions and debates. See section 5.2 below for more advice on this issue.

- **Use the subject material that's out there.** You will of course need to write your assignment specifications and assessment criteria, but the fact that good blended and online coursework tends to rely on a rich range of subject material doesn't mean you need to produce it all. Problem-based projects are a great example of this, and can be supported by students actively exploring a range of relevant online subject-related resources (bearing in mind the need to ensure materials are free to use in this way, see Unit 10 sections 1 and 2 for guidance).

- **If the VLE doesn't have the tools, someone else usually will.** Very often the VLE will provide all the tools your students are likely to need to support their coursework (eg a discussion board, a means to link to subject-related resources, and also a means for contacting yourself). However sometimes it might not. Let's say your students would benefit from a way of efficiently sharing and authoring group reports before final submission. Well, perhaps then you might point them towards one of the many reputable wiki hosting services? Want to use a reflective journal approach, then maybe each student could set up a blog to enable this (see Unit 5 section 6 for guidance)?

- **Keep it simple.** There's a need to keep students engaged online, but it can be tempting to try and ensure this by presenting a wider array of coursework activities than are actually needed, or that your students will be able to cope with. If students are overburdened online, that can impact upon the increased potential for them to learn reflectively at their own pace that exists online, as they simply won't have the time and space to do this. Instead have them complete no more than three major pieces of

coursework at the most for a standard module, and ensure that between them they provide good opportunities for individual and collaborative work, and that deadlines are appropriately staggered.

4.2   Provide clear assessment criteria

This is important good practice for any course, but can be particularly critical in blended and online contexts as students may not have as many opportunities to seek quick clarification of requirements as they would in a lecture-based course.

Clear assessment criteria are also particularly important in blended and online courses where students are being assessed on ways of working that may well be new to them, eg producing a web-based presentation, undertaking an online problem-based exercise, or contributing to an online debate or seminar.

Example

In addition to the 80% allocation for your individual project submission, 20% of your final grade will be based on your participation in our online seminars.

Your participation in the online discussions will be assessed by the overall quality of your <u>four</u> best contributions (selected by yourself) to <u>one</u> of our online discussions (selected by myself). Contributions will be assessed against the following criteria:

Relevance: Relevance of the points made, issues raised or questions asked to the topic under discussion, and for which a good understanding of the subject material should be evident. Originality of contributions is important in this context, and so where an individual has attempted to introduce new ideas, or offer alternative perspectives and interpretations on previous points, this will be noted.

Elaboration: Based on the extent to which contributors go beyond simply stating opinions or asking questions, and include an explanation of why the point or issue raised is an important one. Where appropriate, explanations should be backed up with reference to other sources (eg print or online articles and essays) to give credence to the points being made. Where references are used, source details including author, title and publication should be provided - including full URLs for online sources.

Interaction: Based on the extent to which contributors acknowledge, where appropriate, the views of other participants in the discussion (for example, making reference to a colleague's or the tutor's point where you want to indicate your agreement or disagreement with what they said, or where you want to expand upon their original point).

Clarity: Of written content, including grammar and spelling.

Timeliness: Within the parameters of the formal discussion activities, whether opening and any follow-up contributions are made prior to the specified deadlines.

Consider the above criteria, which emphasise the basis on which students will be assessed on the quality of their contributions to online discussion.

4.3   Provide clear guidance

This should be seen as separate to the assessment criteria, and is concerned with clearly communicating the kind of guidance that your students will require to undertake the task that they have been set. This could cover:

- The assignment specification itself
- Problem or case scenarios to be presented
- Allocation of group roles and responsibilities
- Deadlines for completing the coursework or parts thereof
- Where to find any required reference material or documents
- Information about required tools and where to find them (which could include guidance about accessing a private group discussion area, or for setting up a blog or wiki using a reliable hosting service).

This list is indicative not exhaustive, but provides a good idea of what to cover.

4.4   Make support options explicit

What means of support will you provide for your students when they are undertaking their assessed work in blended and online contexts, and more importantly how can they access it? Perhaps you'll have a problems forum for handling general queries about what the coursework involves, and reserve e-mail for direct contact regarding more sensitive problems and issues?

If your students are undertaking collaborative coursework online, then you might decide to provide them with a link to a set practical tips for doing so on a reputable study-skills website? If they are working on a project in a format that's likely to be new to them, for example if they are producing an online presentation or digital case study, then perhaps you might decide to provide access to a couple of illustrative examples produced by the previous class?

Whatever support options you are providing to assist students in undertaking their assessed work in a blended or online course, make these transparent.

4.5   Think inclusively

When dealing with online courses, or indeed in blended approaches where there is collaboration between different student cohorts or which involve part-time or CPD students, there is an increased likelihood that you will be dealing with quite a diverse group of students. This has particular implications for the coursework you design for blended and online learning contexts.

With this in mind, consider the following when thinking about online coursework:

- **Don't use examples in coursework that are culturally biased** (eg in a fully online distance course in marketing, students should not be asked to critique television campaigns that have only run in the UK)

- **Avoid provincial language and abbreviations** (eg non-UK students might be more familiar with the term 'truck' than 'lorry' or 'HGV', or at least find it easier to translate the term 'truck' if they are not familiar with it)

- **Define key subject-related terms and abbreviations.** Actually, defining key subject-related terms will benefit all students, but particularly those studying in a second language. Consider defining terms when they are introduced in coursework specifications (especially if you are presenting a problem scenario to enable students to explore a particular issue and produce a solution on which they are assessed). Also, try and avoid abbreviations in coursework specifications. Access to a good glossary of subject-related terms will be of benefit here.

- **Don't assume students have the IT they need.** If students are required to use specific software tools or programmes to produce a piece of work, be sure from the outset that they either already have these resources, or that you can provide easy access to them. This is particularly important in fully online distance courses where students are working from home.

► **See Unit 8 section 5 for further guidance on supporting the international student.**

5.0   Practicalities in submission and assessment

Let's assume that, mindful of the general advice above, you've set your students coursework that you are confident will effectively engage them with one another and the rich range of subject resources they have access to within your blended or online course. You've also made the support options that are available to them in undertaking the work very clear. So what next?

There are a number of issues for the tutor to think about in relation to the submission and assessment of coursework in blended and online courses.

5.1   Electronic submission issues

If it's a predominantly or fully online course, and many of your students are at a distance, you need to think about the best way for your students to submit their coursework, as well as what is convenient for you. Key considerations are:

- **Collating and storage** How will they receive the work? Conventional post is impractical over long distances, and may reduce the time that those

further afield have to produce their work in comparison to less-distant classmates. E-mail is an option, but you would need to think carefully about keeping track of submissions particularly if you have large cohorts.

Most VLEs, including WebCT, have very good assignment tools. These can be used to make assignment specifications available for download by the student, and to allow students to upload their completed work. The advantage here is that all the coursework is collected at one central point. The tutor can easily retrieve it from here, and also readily see who has yet to submit and who submitted beyond the deadline.

- **Digital format** When receiving work electronically, what format will be most appropriate? This will depend upon the type of work students are producing (eg if they are using a specialist application), as well as what applications the students are expected or likely to have access to. If it's written work then perhaps you can specify Word as the acceptable format, or PowerPoint$^{®}$ where students are to produce an online presentation. Once you've considered these issues, make the format requirements clear to the students to avoid any problems later.

- **Time zone differences** Are something to be mindful of, especially if you've got students who are distributed over the globe. Be clear in stating the time for deadlines, eg Friday 16th June 4.00pm GMT. You can even usefully provide a link to the Greenwich Mean Time website within assignment specifications or elsewhere on your VLE site, as an aid to those overseas. **http://wwp.greenwichmeantime.com/**

5.2   Handling increased marking load

In section 4.0 above, the prospect of being faced with handling an increased marking load in blended and online courses was discussed, along with the need to be mindful of not necessarily having to assess all aspects of the formal work your students undertake online. Providing formative feedback at key points in the completion of coursework was mentioned as one option here, but there are other options that are worth considering if you feel an increased marking load might result from taking a blended or online approach to your courses.

One is to think about whether help might be available from a colleague or a graduate assistant. If you are assessing contributions to online seminars and debates, a good option here is to assess only a selection of contributions from each student. You might ask them to submit their best four or five contributions, with the proviso that the examples they submit are from different discussions.

Peer assessment, though it needs to be used carefully and be supported by clear peer assessment criteria, is another possibility. It is certainly one that makes sense where collaborative projects have been undertaken, and to avoid the possibility of collusion within groups, it may be that you can get one group to review the work of another group (eg an online presentation, collaborative report

or problem solution). The following example provides the peer review criteria for a group digital documentary project, which the tutor in question found to work well.

Example

Peer review criteria for a collaborative digital documentary (abridged)

Aim
The purpose of the digital documentary is to enable you to present the key issues for your case study in an electronic form within the module's learning environment.

You are required to present the issues which your group has identified as being of particular importance to the organisation you have studied. The digital documentary should be presented as a case study for use by future users of the online learning environment. In presenting the case study "human factors issues" must be taken into consideration, and the documentary should be presented in a professional style.

Peer assessment of digital documentary
To ensure that you have a look at the human factors issues in organisations other than the one you studied, you are to assess the digital documentaries of the other groups.

Criteria for assessment are as you will already have seen in the specification, but are summarised below as a reminder:

Content
Presentation of the issues
Comment and analysis of the issues
Structure and presentation

Clarity
Usability
Must incorporate text and relevant images

Innovative developments
eg links to external WWW sites, multimedia aspects, aesthetics of design

We want you individually to rank the documentaries rather than giving an actual mark (the final marks will be determined by the tutor based on a tally of ranking positions). Print out this page and fill in the table below. Put 1 for the best documentary, 2 for the second and so on. No ties please.

Organisation/case study name	Authors	Ranking	Comments
Marked by:			

(Originally written by Kathy Buckner and Mark Gillham for a module delivered at Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh)

5.3   Assessing originality of coursework

Assessing the originality of coursework has become an increasingly important issue due to the ease with which subject material can be accessed on the web, and the proliferation of essay repositories and writing services that are to be found online. The use of text matching services like Turnitin®UK provide a valuable means by which students can ensure, and if required to, demonstrate the originality of their own work, and the accuracy of their citations. If necessary, the tutor can also use services like Turnitin®UK to check the validity of work submitted (see Unit 10 section 3).

5.4   Assessing online discussion participation

Tutors who are new to teaching in blended and online contexts can often see the potential for more reflective, inclusive exchanges of views that asynchronous online discussion offers, but are sometimes unsure of how to assess participation. Assuming the discussion activity is appropriately set up and the focus and any key deadlines for participating are well understood by the students, the concern is with ensuring that students understand they are being assessed on the quality not quantity of their contributions, and that this message is reflected in the grading scheme they are presented with.

The example in section 4.2 above illustrates the kind of general criteria that might be used to explain the basis on which students will be assessed for their participation in online discussion. The example also indicates that a selection of their contributions (remember, you don't have to assess everything!) will be evaluated against these criteria to account for up to 20% of the final grade.

In the previous example, the actual marks awarded by the tutor are based on their judgement of the overall quality of a sample of contributions. Another way of approaching the assessment of online discussion participation is to use a points system to assess individual contributions. The example below is a good illustration of how qualitative criteria can be aligned with a clear points system:

Example

Sample online participation grading guidelines

There will be a total of 10 online discussion activities which you are expected to engage in 2-3 times/week. You receive maximum credit not for a right or wrong answer to the assigned question, but rather for the critical analysis, research depth, engagement and insight of your topic related responses-this requires a lot of reading and critical thought!

In addition you are expected to respond to at least one other student's post. Your online participation is worth a total of 60 pts (max. of 5 pts awarded/week).
You are reminded of maintaining a professional and cordial tone at all times.

Grading Criteria

- **0 points:** Student either does not participate or repeats and/or affirms statements made.
- **1-2 points:** Student introduces and summarises assigned readings related to the questions posted.
- **3-4 points:** Student analyses questions, identifies patterns and engages fellow learners
- **5 points:** Student consistently challenges existing theories, researches new ideas and engages and is responsive to fellow learners.

(Originally written for modules delivered for University of Maryland University College, UMUC, USA.)

6.0 Further reading

Bryan, C. and Clegg, K.(Eds) (2006) *Innovative assessment in higher education,* Ch. 5 Rethinking technology supported assessment practices in relation to the seven principles of good feedback practice by D. Nicol and C. Milligan. Routledge. Available at Edinburgh Napier library in print and as an e-book via MyiLibrary.

Conrad, R.M. and Donaldson, A. (2004) *Engaging the online learner: activities and resources for creative instruction.* San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.

Lee, M.J.W., McLoughlin, C. and Chan, A. (2008) Talk the talk: learner-generated podcasts as catalysts for knowledge creation. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, (39)3, 501-521.

Lockwood, F. and Gooley, A. (2003) *Innovation in open & distance learning: successful development of online and web-based learning*. London: Kogan Page.

Palloff, R. and Pratt, K. (2010) *Assessing the online learner: Resources and strategies for faculty*. San Fransisco-California:Jossey-Bass. Available at Edinburgh Napier library as an e-book via Dawson Books.

Race, P. (2009) Designing assessment to improve physical sciences learning. HEA Physical Sciences Centre. Available online at **http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/physsci/resources/detail/publications/practice guides/designing_assessment_to_improve_physical_sciences_learning**

Roberts, T.S. (2006) *Self, peer, and group assessment in e-learning*. Hershey, Pa: Information Science Publishing. Available at Edinburgh Napier only as an e-book via MyiLibrary.

Savin-Baden, M. and Wilkie, K. (Eds) (2006) *Problem based learning online.* Maidenhead:Open University Press. Available at Edinburgh Napier in print and as an e-book via Dawson Books.

Watkins, R. (2005) *75 e-learning activities: Making online learning interactive.* San Fransisco, California: Pfeiffer.