

ICT for the Teaching of Language and Literature

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Abstract

This article compares approaches to the use of ICT for teaching language and literature at Northumbria University, UK, and University of Ottawa, Canada. It applies many of the findings within a small-scale project at Northumbria University to provide a web-portal for European visiting students studying Shakespeare and Milton. Comment from colleagues in the academic community is particularly sought.

Approaches to ICT have been surveyed through observation of practice at the two universities. Located within two countries and within different academic frameworks it may be expected that the two would show contrasting approaches to ICT. At Northumbria University informal interviews with a dozen ICT practitioners were carried out 2002-4; at the University of Ottawa eleven interviews were all conducted in January 2004. The survey at the University of Ottawa was supported with reference to a body of internal written material outlining their thinking, including *Proceedings of the First Annual Forum on Teaching and Learning, University of Ottawa, May 2002*.

Neither university claims to have a sure answer to questions concerning ICT in language and literature teaching. Rather, at both there is a great sense of uncertainty. This is expressed by practitioners in terms of a series of reservations. The use of ICT is seen as raising as many questions as it answers, and not as an automatic solution but as a possible solution. Practitioners, even the most enthusiastic, proved resistant to the idea that ICT is best practice for learning and teaching. Rather it is seen as a possible practice in certain contexts. At Northumbria University staff are engaging with ICT, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. At University of Ottawa, though use of ICT seems more common than at Northumbria University, staff demonstrated a remarkable unease with its use, well summarised by their negative diction. ICT is perceived as

"hazardous", "recalcitrant", "unreliable", and there is "technophobia". The technology is "unfriendly", "unstable" and "largely ineffective". Both universities recognise possible benefits, though most practitioners at both Universities seem to perceive these benefits as lying mainly in the future. Several times expressed was the idea that ICT may be a gimmick and that it may create more work for academic staff.

Despite this negativity, arguments for the use of ICT emerged, based on the needs of academic staff, students, and the University.

Academic staff are in general the least enthusiastic of these three groups in both universities. There is reasonably wide acceptance of the idea that tasks better performed by machines should be performed by machines. For example, academics do feel that MCQ exam scripts should be machine marked. This is far from new, and cannot be seen as an ICT development. Both universities had their share of ICT enthusiasts, who had generally not managed to transmit their enthusiasm to their colleagues. Both universities noted reasonably extensive use of University-wide ICT packages - *Blackboard* at Northumbria, *WebCT* at Ottawa – though both had their share of reluctant users of these packages.

Far more enthusiastic at both universities are students, who expect ICT to be part of their educational experience. In an age where every student uses a computer on a daily basis and for study and non-study tasks, it seems very strange if the new technology is not used in their courses. In Britain many students entering universities are from schools that have successfully integrated ICT into their teaching. In Canada an on-line application form is the only way of applying to University of Ottawa. The University of Ottawa has gone as far as to think out the role of ICT within its teaching philosophy. They North American studies of students' needs (for example, Richard Light's "Students Speak their Minds", Harvard UP 2001) which clearly identify students' wants, including: to learn independently, to learn outside the class, to have greater course structure. In all these areas ICT can help meet students' stated.

Universities' managements are the biggest enthusiasts for ICT. Both at Northumbria University and at University of Ottawa it is difficult to identify a simple statement of ICT policy from the

perspective of the executives of the universities. The level of investment the universities hand out in in terms of both equipment and staff time hints at the importance attached to the area. The University of Ottawa sees ICT as a tool which may empower staff. ICT has the potential to reduce contact hours while maintaining or enhancing quality of learning and teaching, and therefore has real attractions in potentially facilitating a reduction in the teaching budget. Implementation is for the future.

Northumbria University and University of Ottawa demonstrate a parallel development in their implementation of ICT projects.

In the 1990s efforts to use ICT were in the form of a few big and expensive projects. In general these have been worthwhile for the few academics involved in the project. However, there are few examples of success, measured in terms of projects which are actually used. Thus Northumbria University with partner universities in Europe (Darmstadt Technical University and Sevres CIEP) produced a body of on-line teaching materials for English, German and French as a European Union LEONARDO project, called FOLLOW – Foreign languages on the world wide web. The project was a success in terms of meeting its goals, and approved by the European Commission's LEONARDO office, yet because of developments in technology was out of date almost before it was complete. At University of Ottawa the problem is described in terms of the pilot-revise-repilot-obsolete scenario: "le cours, apres quatre trimestres d'essai, reste dans un etat experimental". Tentative conclusions are that big projects only work when they are supported by a process of on-going revision, and where there is effectively no pilot.

Today the approach at both universities is bottom-up with hundreds of teachers empowered by the new technology and lots of small projects rather than a few big projects. ICT has moved into the "small is beautiful" world. At both universities ICT is being supported across the institution, with an expectation that all academics will use it.

ICT is part of the future. Within the learning environment ICT cannot exist as an isolated project supported by a few enthusiasts. Rather, it has to be a part of the ecosystem, part of the everyday expectation of students and staff. At Ottawa this idea is conceptualised in terms of a "tip" point.

Before this point ICT will be financially supported and used by a minority of staff and students. After the tip point it will not need much financial support, and will be used by all staff and academics as a matter of course.

Support for ICT at Northumbria University has taken into account the development from large-scale top-down projects to small-scale bottom-up. The result has been support for numerous small projects, and an enthusiasm for academics experimenting with the medium. Within this context the authors offer a small-scale project for the learning and teaching of Shakespeare and Milton, on-line at <http://www.northumbrialiterature.com>.

Characteristics of the project are as follows:

- It is small.
- It addresses the needs of a specific group of students – exchange students from France, Germany and Spain – though elements will be of use to students elsewhere.
- It is technologically simple. It is the tried and tested format of a portal.
- It is a complete and working unit as it is. It needs no pilot.
- It can be added to as required by students and as the technology develops.
- Costs to Northumbria University are tiny.

Advantages include the following:

- It meets student wants to be able to work independently and out of class.
- It supplements library resources.
- It promotes learner autonomy.

There are disadvantages:

- Much material relating to the study of Shakespeare and Milton is not available on-line.
- The portal may encourage too-much dependence on the www, and inadequate use of library resources.

However, lecturers can address these disadvantages.

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