# Critical Digital Literacies in Human Geography

Brief Summary

This case study describes the design and delivery of a third year module in Human Geography. Students were required to work in groups to produce web pages that were publicly visible for reading and comment. The web content concerned the material production, transportation and commercial transaction of artefacts, including digital devices, and students were asked to write in an theoretically-informed but personal and accessible way. Module materials and support were largely delivered through blogging by the lead tutor.
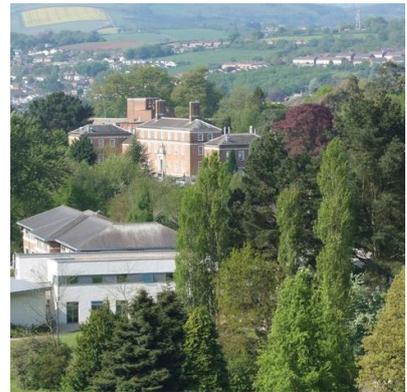
Case study completed by:
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Resources available:
Followthethings.com

Teaching materials on followthethings.com

The Making Money project from Geographies of Material Culture 2011

Context and Background

'Geographies of Material Culture' is a third year, first-term module available to anyone taking a geography programme at the University of Exeter. It has occasionally been taken by non-geographers with an interest in the field. It is devised and led by Ian Cook. In 2011/12 the module had a cohort of 65 including 10 international students (a high proportion for the department). The module is assessed by coursework, which is untypical of third-year modules in geography, and includes a high proportion of group work, again something that students find unusual and potentially risky at this stage in their studies. Contact hours consist of lectures in first two weeks, thereafter discussion in groups of six supported by the lead tutor (partly through a blog) and a postgraduate Teaching Assistant (GTA). A previous student also supports these sessions.

Since 2010 the module has been linked with another taught at Brown University, with students doing collaborative work that appears publicly on the website followthethings.com.

The Challenge or Motive

Ian Cook designed this module to encourage students to think 'out of the box', both about their subject area and about wider issues in their educational experience, using a critical pedagogy approach. A key principle was that students should work collaboratively to produce something of public value with a public audience (Freinet).

Students were asked to be critical of the ways they were learning and the role of the teacher and institution, as well as reacting critically to other issues explored in the module e.g. commodity culture, the production history of consumer goods, the meaning of money, activism and protest.

Students in geography tend to learn and be taught in rather similar ways across the programme, with the majority of modules delivered by lecture series and assessed by examination. This was an attempt to get them learning and thinking in a new way, but inevitably it was experienced as risky by some students at the outset. You can find out more about the educational thinking behind this module in the interview transcript and video with Ian Cook (see additional resources).

The Digital Literacy Agenda

As well as requiring students to engage in debates about digital devices and in public digital spaces, a secondary motive was to get students authoring web pages and being able to add those skills to their Cvs. Relevant Intended Learning Outcomes included:

- An ability to communicate ideas, principles and theories effectively and fluently using a variety of means

- An ability to identify, acquire, evaluate and synthesise data from a range of sources

- An ability to teach and learn as a participant in a group

- An ability to use C&IT effectively and appropriately to select, analyse and present information.

The Project in Practice

This module is distinctive in the geography department in the following ways:

- Critical pedagogy approach: students are invited to be critical both of consumer culture, the financial system etc, and of how they are learning and how they relate to the university and its structures/demands

- Emergent learning activities: the creative projects worked on by students are to some extent determined by opportunities arising as the programme goes forward

- Personal/creative projects: students work on their own deliverables, inspired by the discussions that take place; to some extent this is more typical of learning in a context of creative production e.g. art, design

- Learning in small groups: two or three weeks of lectures are followed by 10+ weeks learning and supporting one another in small groups

- Learning in public: students know from the outset that their learning outcomes will be publicly available and are encouraged to engage with their potential audience

- Emergent and collaboratively generated content: the basic reading list is continually enhanced by requests and suggestions from students and by the tutor reacting to student work

- Reflective and personal: students keep a journal and are encouraged to make connections between course discussions/activities and other aspects of their lives.

In the 2011/12 iteration of the module there were several new features, inspired by reflection on previous years and by new opportunities arising at the University. These included:

- Largely web-based content production and course discussion

- Students worked in tandem with students at another university (Brown University) on an anthropology module.

- Students created and publicly exhibited materials in direct response to an activist movement (Occupy Exeter).

The lead tutor spent more time in class and on the blog explaining *'the kind of writing I wanted in detail'* and showing examples from previous years. This was in response to student feedback that they were unsure what was expected of them.

Issues and Challenges

Getting students to engage with the reading can be challenging. They are asked to respond to issues personally and creatively but from an informed perspective.

Students perceive this module as 'risky' in a number of ways. It relies heavily on groupwork, they are assessed on coursework rather than an examination, and they are asked to write in unfamiliar ways, including personally and creatively, and in public spaces. At present there are few modules offering alternative learning experiences, though redesign of the first year around a more active learning approach may change students' expectations.
These issues are explored with students as an aspect of the module process and ethos.

The module is highly dependent on the enthusiasm, energy and commitment of the lead tutor. It is difficult to see how the module could be handed over to another member of staff because it is so dependent on responding to issues as they arise.

Benefits and Impacts

At the close of the 2011/12 iteration of this module, students gave feedback about their experience both publicly to the whole cohort, and in small groups to an independent interviewer. Their comments are recorded in more detail in the notes from the feedback session (see additional resources).
There was definitely a sense of risk and discomfort during the early weeks of the module.... *'It's so far out of the box you don't know where the box is any more.'* *'We had a consensus this has been the most engaging and interesting module, but also the most terrifying.'...*

However, students invariably felt that the risk had been worthwhile – several volunteered that it was the best experience of studying geography that they had had – and they were aware that their initial uncertainty had been heightened by the lack of variety in other modules: *'If we did this one first, that would change your expectations of how you were going to study'.*

The benefits students experienced included new digital skills. None of the students in the two focus groups had created a web or blog page before this course: now several were using twitter and blogging for themselves. The blog and web site, around which course activity revolved, were also seen as a highly positive aspect of the learning experience.

> *'It worked because you were so active with it. Because it was so regular the posting and responding to us... I followed it many times a week because there was always so much new information. And I also got some outsider comments that said oh that's cool that you have a different learning environment, not just some kind of ELE, something boring. Because we had all the text and videos and artworks and everything there, it was also quite visual.'*

However, the most significant benefit was in finding new ways of writing and expressing academic ideas. '*We're used to being spoon fed and suddenly we have to think for ourselves, we can't just write in a structured way. That's been a big change, learning a new way of writing.*'

All said the course engaged them in ways that other courses didn't, for example making links between their politics, personal life and study.

> '*This course is very different because it follows you out, you can't close your file on it. It is everywhere. All the others you want to forget about. Like I've just done an essay for another module yesterday and... I can't remember much of it.*'

> '*It's ongoing and personal, it's your relationship with the stuff you're learning rather than it being taught at you, it's learning through experience. It's rather like one of those camps in the mountains where you go to and you learn stuff.*'

The benefits to the staff teaching on this module should also be noted. The lead tutor found that running the course online using wordpress allowed him to be very transparent about the module process and expectations. He could answer student queries and concerns in a way that was visible to all students, saving him time. He also appreciated the capacity to respond very immediately to students' work and to provide resources in relation to their emerging interests and ideas.

> '*It's much more exciting for all of us to get involved with what is really happening around us. The artists/activities we worked with are still there every day and we can go and say hello. When something happens that's really relevant you have to jump at it. It's a 'teachable moment'.*' (Module leader)

Since writing this case study, the lead tutor has been voted [Innovative Teacher of the Year](#) in the Exeter Students Guild teaching awards.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Producing publicly visible outcomes of their learning is motivating for students and helps them see their learning in a wider context.

Using non-university-hosted software and services is generally unproblematic. Security issues were not a consideration as the work was intended to be publicly visible, and students were vocal in finding the interface more attractive and intuitive than ELE. However, it would not have been possible to track students or to share the outcomes of their learning with other university systems.

Learners need careful, structured guidance and examples if they are to apply *academic* criteria to web-based materials and if they are to write in an intellectually credible manner for the web.
Students can experience non-standard forms of assessment as risky. It is important to be clear about the process, criteria and expectations, and to provide examples.

The benefits of challenging, innovative learning methods may not be felt immediately by students. Following up further in the future may have yielded even more positive feedback.