

# A Survey of Small-Group Teaching in the Humanities

## The ASTER Project

*In February and March 1999 the ASTER Project (Assisting Small-group Teaching through Electronic Resources) ran a survey of small-group teaching practices in a range of universities across Britain. This paper outlines the results for the Humanities disciplines involved in the survey.*

The ASTER Project (Assisting Small-group Teaching through Electronic Resources) is funded by the TLTP (Teaching and Learning Technology Programme) to explore how communication and information technology (C&IT) can assist students and lecturers to maximise the effectiveness of small-group teaching. The project itself covers a wide range of subject disciplines: Classics, English, Film and Media Studies, Literature, Mathematics, Philosophy, Physics, Psychology and Theology. It is a collaboration between the universities of York (lead site), Oxford and Surrey, and University College, Northampton. At Oxford, the project is based in the Humanities Computing Unit.

Small-group teaching is defined by the ASTER Project as including all teaching and learning situations where methods other than formal lecturing are involved, and where discussion plays an important role. Class size is not an important factor. The use of electronic resources may vary from general tools such as email and web resources to specialist programs and tutorials. They may be used within classes, or consulted outside formal classes to support and meet teaching and learning requirements for the individual course concerned.

While this article only deals with the results of the 1999 survey which relate to Humanities disciplines, the full report is available for downloading (ASTER 1999). The survey was carried out in two stages. Initially, a questionnaire was sent out via email to hundreds of university departments in the UK, asking for basic information about small-group teaching. It was followed by a set of structured telephone interviews (a call was sent via email for participants in this second exercise). Attempts were made to ensure that the survey included participants from a range of Higher Education institutions ('old' and 'new' universities and colleges) and subject areas. The call for participation in the survey was sent to thousands of individuals through email. Although most of these were drawn from contact lists used by the CTI Centres involved in the ASTER project, the response was disappointingly small. Two important factors behind this failure may be the anonymity of email, and the unwillingness of academics to fill out formal questionnaires. The relative success of the telephone interviews suggests that this more direct, and time-consuming, approach is a more effective means of petitioning the views and practices of the academic community.

The survey asked for information across a wide range of issues. As well as obtaining details about the course being taught and the organisation of lessons, we sought contextual information on how courses came into being and developed, the underlying incentives behind changes, and the challenges and rewards associated with the course. Responses were obtained from 13 lecturers across a range of disciplines: Classics (2), English (5), Fine Art (2), History (1), Philosophy (2) and Theology (2). The majority discussed teaching practices in 2nd and 3rd year courses. Because of the small number of responses, the results discussed in this article should be seen as a review of varied practice rather than a definitive study of teaching in higher education.

### Small-group teaching

Small-group teaching makes a valuable contribution to teaching methods in all the departments surveyed. Many terms are used to describe these classes (seminar, tutorial, practical). Our results suggest that a distinction is being made between tutorials and seminars based on class size, the former associated with smaller classes (between 1 and 15 students as opposed to up to 30 in seminars). However, there is overlap between the two. Workshops and practicals are also widely used, particularly to introduce students to digital resources. These are most commonly held in computer labs, though one respondent (in Fine Art) held practical sessions in the studio. Classes vary from 30 minutes to over two hours, with workshops tending to have longer scheduled timetable slots. Teaching in most cases is led by the lecturer. In addition, many departments involve students in taking classes (in most cases by giving presentations), showing extensive practice of student-centred learning.

Information was given about the aims and objectives of small-group teaching. Responses show how these classes relate to other areas of the course, and can be summarised as follows:

- To support issues covered in lectures and coursework. Seminars/tutorials offer students the opportunity to explore topics covered in lectures in more detail. Lecturers often lead these discussions.
- To analyse source material in more detail. Discussions focussing on primary sources form an essential role in most departments.
- To review assessed work. Tutorials in particular are used to oversee dissertations and other project work.
- To demonstrate practical techniques (Fine Art).
- To support general skills (literacy, writing CVs, references etc.).
- To teach transferable skills (group working, collaborative working, presentation/oral skills, C&IT skills, information retrieval, data handling).

### Using C&IT

The survey identified a wide range of electronic resources and tools in use for teaching and learning. These are summarised below. Resources are often used in combination. For example, web pages created for a course may direct students to CD-ROMs held in the department or main library; computerised tutorials may be supported by additional online information. One common statement was that electronic resources were selected on the same basis as resources available in other media—their quality and relevance to the course.

#### Web pages:

- Primary and secondary source material is digitised and available for students to consult outside formal teaching. Links may be made to resources created elsewhere (Classics, English, Philosophy, Theology).
- Lecture outlines and course notes are provided for consultation outside formal classes via a course homepage (English, Fine Art, History, Philosophy, Theology).
- Support materials on study skills is provided either by the department, or links made to central resources (English, Fine Art, Philosophy).
- Students create web pages which are added to existing course material, and previous students' work is made accessible in other formats (English).

#### Email:

- Email lists and bulletin boards are used by the tutor to disseminate information about the course. They are also used to initiate discussions to be continued in face-to-face seminars, which can be continued after the class (Classics, English).

#### Software:

- Students prepare assessed work using a range of common word processing, spreadsheet and database programs (common to all departments).
- Commercially produced CD-ROMs are available either within the department or library (bibliographic databases, collections of literature and art images—Classics, English, Fine Art).
- Final year students' work is archived on CD-ROM and used as a teaching resource (Fine Art).
- Greek driller developed in-house (Theology).

#### Multimedia applications:

- In-house multimedia teaching packages are used within the department's computing laboratory (English, the STELLA project—resources are also available for outside use).
- TLTP courseware is used alongside a web page directing students to those parts of the courseware relevant to the course (History).

#### Other:

- Video-conferencing was used to deliver a course to students split between two institutions. Half of the teaching is carried out through video-conferencing, tutors from both sites sharing the teaching load. Although the medium of delivery is novel, the teaching methods are the same as used for face-to-face seminars (Classics).

Some of these uses of C&IT may not be genuinely unique to that discipline. This extensive use of a wide range of C&IT tools implies that students must acquire a basic level of competence in C&IT. Support and training may be provided in the department, or through central bodies such as the library or IT services.

## Reasons for innovation

All respondents had modified their courses with the needs of students foremost in mind. In addition, the following reasons were given:

- Teaching in small groups is a traditional and important element within the department, and something to be maintained.
- Changes introduced to the course aimed to increase student involvement, particularly in discussions.
- The C&IT element was introduced to increase the resource base for the course.
- The C&IT element (in English) was modelled on innovative teaching first developed for Modern Languages.

The rationale underlying developments in small-group teaching was expressed in very general terms, with no reference to learning/teaching theory. The one exception took his theoretical stance from his subject area (Philosophy), specifically, the Socratic process of learning through dialogue, and applied this to all his small-group teaching. Decisions to change courses were based on the aims and objectives listed above—most significantly to increase student involvement and access to resources.

## Evaluating the success of innovation

The majority of respondents had carried out some form of evaluation for their courses, either as part of ongoing exercises within the department, or specifically established for new modules. In the majority of cases this took the form of a feedback questionnaire handed out to students at the end of teaching. One participant ran the evaluation in the last seminar of his course, students breaking up into groups of two or three to work through questions and meeting up for a plenary session to critique the course and their evaluations.

The most commonly cited problem faced with using electronic resources was the reliance on computer access. In some cases this was a significant barrier to the success of the course; for others it was a problem for only one or two students a year. Students were faced with two problems: availability of computers, and the IT skills to use them effectively. It may be necessary to queue for access and work in noisy communal areas. Printing facilities may not be immediately available. Some departments provide introductory courses on IT (and sometimes this is standardized across the institution), but not all. From the survey returns, there is a strong correlation between access to this sort of basic training and the success of C&IT in teaching. However, this does not mean that students can use the information contained in electronic resources—for this they need skills specific to their discipline.

In subjects like English, Classics, History, Fine Art, Philosophy and Theology, small-group teaching focuses on primary sources. The case studies in the ASTER survey show that the C&IT element is often to increase use of such material, but with mixed success. Reasons for this are largely due to difficulties in accessing computers, but also students' reluctance to work with primary sources, which can be unfamiliar and challenging texts. This second issue is not confined to electronic resources alone, demonstrating that providing access to material does not necessarily mean that it will be used. Additional support specific to the subject and even course is vital to ensure overall success. In addition, staff may not be aware of available quality digital resources.

A valuable tool for collaborative learning and group-work is email, and several participants had set up email lists for their courses specifically to increase participation in discussions. In all cases, email greatly facilitated student and tutor interaction, and had a very beneficial impact on face-to-face encounters. Tutors felt that discussions were more intensive with contributions from more students.

One participant explained how he used TLTP courseware for teaching one module (History). To maximize their potential, he wrote additional support material pointing students to relevant parts of the tutorials where they contained information appropriate to his course. Without this additional information, he felt that students would not have appreciated their relevance and would have skimmed through the tutorials. Feedback from students was very positive about the organization of the course and range of resources used, but this was reliant on the tutor spending time familiarizing himself with the tutorials and embedding them in the course.

On a more general level, information was gained about the attitudes of colleagues in the department and support staff (in the library and computing services) to teaching with electronic resources. These of course shape the rate and nature of teaching developments within institutions. Participants identified themselves in most cases as 'champions' of C&IT within their departments; some of these departments are recognized for their excellence in innovative teaching and creating quality resources. Four respondents stated that their departments had strategies for C&IT in teaching and learning, though this in itself does not mean that all staff are supportive of these kinds of innovation. In the other departments, attitudes of individual colleagues ranged from willing collaborators to those unfamiliar with and unwilling to adopt new practices. A major factor behind this was the extent to which colleagues were already using electronic resources for their research; a second was the availability of suitable quality resources.

### **Saving time?**

Although the survey showed that the use of C&IT could be very beneficial to small-group teaching, its use does not necessarily free up staff time. In most cases the reverse was the case. Almost all respondents stated that building in a C&IT element made designing the course more time-consuming, and there was overwhelming agreement that creating digital course materials was a lengthy process (particularly when new skills had to be learnt). However, when the course is delivered a second time updating is quicker. Student contact time in some instances was reduced as much basic information was available online. Queries were in general more detailed and informed, though also accompanied by requests for assistance with general IT problems.

### **Training and support**

Most staff interviewed had received very limited training in general teaching methods, or guidance on how to integrate C&IT into teaching. One had attended staff development schemes run by his institution. Two others are involved in staff development as trainers themselves. Two had attended workshops run by DUET (Development of University English Teaching) and NetSkills. A different picture emerges for the support available to use C&IT to create new resources. Five respondents had a computing officer either within their department or provided centrally. A sixth had help from the university's Audio Visual Unit (for classes delivered through video-conferencing). Another had clerical assistance. On the basis of this small group, it would seem that assistance is available to develop the

C&IT component for new or modified courses, but not for teaching methods in general nor guidance on how to integrate C&IT into teaching. Staff development units within individual institutions may provide support and guidance, but academics may be unaware of this service or feel that it is not tailored to the needs of their subject.

### **Discussion**

Amongst all respondents, small-group teaching was seen to be an important and valuable element of a university education. A range of C&IT resources are used, though the complex multimedia tutorials seem to be the least popular. These were developed for 'mass-market' appeal and generally targeted at first year undergraduate teaching. However, the ASTER survey suggests that lecturers want material and tools that can be tailored to suit the subject matter and level of teaching required. The most commonly used externally produced resources were web-based. The major advantage is that most of these are free, though locating relevant material can be very time-consuming, and resources are apt to 'disappear'. Where a course is directly related to the research interests of an individual lecturer more time may be devoted to finding suitable resources. Numerous factors are behind the limited adoption of electronic resources for teaching, namely low awareness of available resources, uncertainty surrounding their successful implementation within courses, lack of support staff and constraints imposed by local IT resources. Training and support need to be an ongoing process:

'Empowering staff to use learning technology does not necessarily mean reaching a situation where staff do not need technical or expert help. Rather it means that staff come to know what support they want and need to be able to achieve the teaching and learning goals which learning technology makes possible.'  
(Strang 1995)

### **Future activities**

The ASTER Project will be building on the results of this survey through a series of detailed case studies, to be carried out over the next academic year. In addition, we will continue to disseminate our work, raising awareness of good practice. In the first instance one should consult the ASTER Project web pages (URL given below). We will also be running a series of workshops around the country, and information will be broadcast closer to these events.

### **Acknowledgements**

Although this paper relates to the results of the survey as carried out from Oxford, other ASTER staff have helped to develop and write the survey reports. Project officers: Sylvia Hogarth, Dr David Wonnacott; and also Dr Dick Bacon, Dr Chris Colbourn, Dr Michael Fraser, Dr Nick Hammond, Heather Matthews and Annie Trapp. I would also like to thank those participants who gave valuable time and expertise to the survey: Jean Anderson, Dept of English Language, University of Glasgow; Tom Davis, Dept of English, University of Birmingham; Dr Helen Dennis, Dept of English, University of Warwick; Dr Jeremy Duff, Theology Faculty, University of Oxford; Allen Fisher, Dept of Art, Roehampton Institute; Dr Mark Goodacre, Dept of Theology, University of Birmingham; Dr Ken Hay, Dept of Fine Art, University of Leeds; Dr Tim Middleton, English Studies, College of Ripon and York St John; Hugh Robertson, Dept of English Language, University of Huddersfield; George McDonald Ross, Dept of Philosophy, University of Leeds; Prof. Bob Sharples, Dept of Greek and Latin, University College London; Dr Donald Spaeth, Dept of History, University of Glasgow; Richard Wallace, Classics Dept, University of Keele.

## Notes

The ASTER Project web page can be accessed at <http://cti-psy.york.ac.uk/aster/index.html>

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## The Don Fowler Memorial Fund

On 15 October 1999, the world of classical scholarship lost one of its most exciting and colourful figures with the tragically early death, at the age of 46, of Don Fowler. Don's work was characterised by a rigorous grounding in traditional scholarly values, combined with the eager adoption of new methodologies and new approaches in classics. Don was an early exponent of the use of new techniques in textual studies, a champion of modern theoretical movements in literature, and an exciting and revolutionary teacher. Boundaries, for Don, were there to be crossed.

It is to honour Don's memory, and to further his wide-ranging and interdisciplinary approach to classical scholarship and teaching, that his family, friends, colleagues, and students wish to institute an annual lecture. Rather than suggesting that the lecture should be given within the range of subjects in which Don was interested, we have decided to entitle it *New Approaches to Latin Literature*. Don would be the last person to want his legacy fossilised, and this year's new approach might not be so new in five years' time. Don himself constantly changed and grew intellectually and he would have wished that the subjects which he loved should also change and grow.

In order to establish this lecture, we need support from a wide range of organisations and individuals. Substantial funding will be needed if the lecture is to have the stature and impact which Don deserves. It is intended to invite as lecturers not only professors of long-standing name and reputation, but young and rising scholars—the group that Don himself delighted to foster. Any surplus moneys would be applied primarily to the advancement of Latin studies within Oxford University and of Classics within Jesus College.

Jesus College is very happy to provide the necessary administrative support for the appeal for this Memorial Fund. Anyone who would like to contribute to this endeavour should send a cheque made payable to Jesus College, Oxford, to:

The Estates Bursar,  
Jesus College,  
Oxford  
OX1 3DW

indicating that it is a contribution to the Don Fowler Memorial Fund.

*Obituary, p.39.*