

# Teaching Portfolio Extract

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### Online Teaching

I am fairly sure I was the first person in UCC to teach a course entirely online.

I had a long record of wasting time on the internet. I surfed the web, I was on one of the earliest History mailing lists, I designed the first History Dept Website, I discovered 'chat' long back when it actually required a bit of technical savvy to connect to a chat sever, and actually half wrote a novel with someone from Canada whom I never met outside of the Internet.

I may not have got to Canada, but I got Hi2002 to Clogheen. Hi2002 is the Second year History 'case study' course. In it, small groups of students work through a major text in history with a member of staff. Staff members pick a text in their area of specialism, and use it as a vehicle to teach history, historical methods and historiography to small groups of students. It is primarily a reading and discussion course- the students are expected to engage with the material actively, and come to some understanding of how the historian who wrote the text worked, both in practical and in philosophical terms.

I was already thinking about the possibilities of online teaching. I had already considered how to adapt an Irish History Survey course for online, distance education. (I also had experience of distance education tutoring from *Oscail*). That particular plan had not worked out – it got some positive feedback but only one actual student. Hi2002 however, seemed an ideal opportunity to experiment with online teaching in a safer environment.

The environment was safer because all of the students were regular second year undergraduates. If it didn't work out, individual students could come to my office for face to face help. If it really didn't work out, there was a room booked and a timetabled period to which we could fall back. In practice, this never happened – the course worked.

The course text I used was *The Face of Battle* by John Keegan. *The Face of Battle* is accepted as a seminal text in modern military, even though it has many flaws. It deals with an important issue –

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how military historians recount what happens in a battle, and does so using three case studies – Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme, - about which a great deal has been written. There is therefore a wide range of supplementary reading.

Since it was a discussion course, the method chosen to deliver it was using a simple message board. Since this pre-dated Blackboard by several years (1996) the message board ran on my own personal server. As a result, I had complete control over the technical aspects of the course.

It was made very clear to the students during the first week of term that this case study was primarily online. It was advertised as such in the course handout, distributed at the first core lecture. The class met face to face for an introductory session in the first week of term. That meeting took place in my office, and the students were shown all the technical skills they needed to access the message board, read and post messages. In fact, the level of technical skills required very quite minimal – if you could connect to the web and use a browser, you could participate. Since the scheduled time and venue for the class were in the same building as my office, and I was always in my office at that time, it was very easy for students to see me 'in real life' In practice, few did.

Once the students registered their choice of case study at the end of the first week, I had a self-selected group of students. They were usually interested in the subject area and also mostly 'tech geeks' who wanted to try this type of experience.

From there on, the course proceeded fairly simply. Each week, the students were required to read a section of the set text (which was available as a cheap paperback), and respond to discussion topics posted on the forum. Supplementary readings were distributed by leaving photocopies for collection from my office. Students were told in the introduction that there were expected to participate actively in the discussion each week, and most did. This is, in fact, a higher level of participation than that required by other courses with an online element, which only require 2-4 postings per student in the course of the term. However, those courses are ones which are using online discussion as a supplement to normal lectures rather than as the primary mode of delivery.

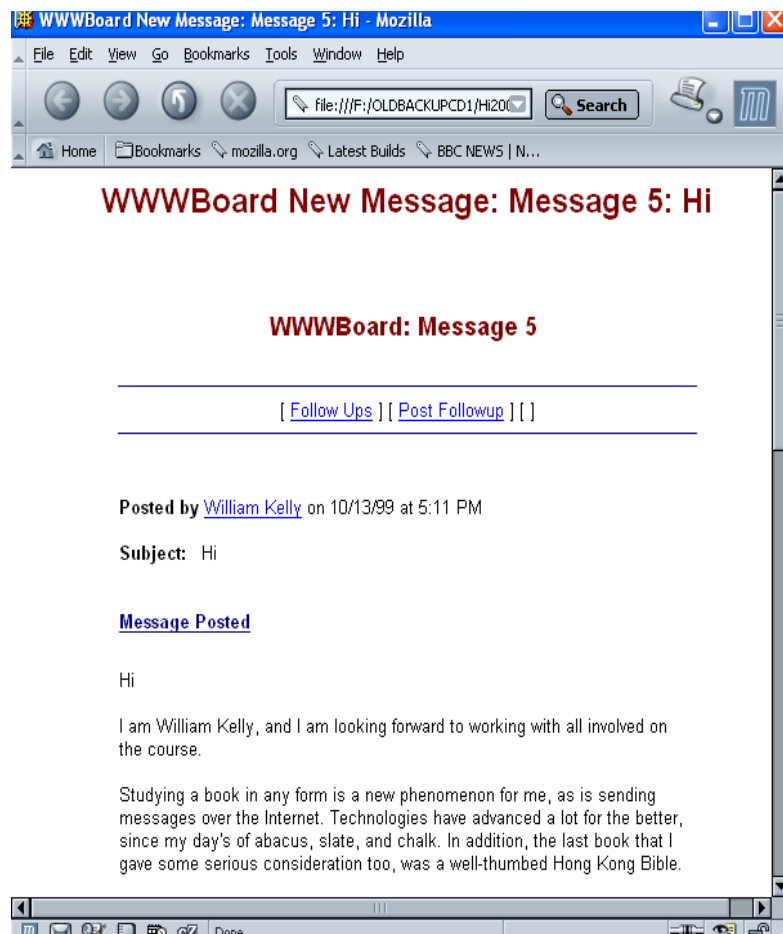
There were some skills that I had to learn. In a face to face discussion, the moderator uses a great range of non-verbal cues to respond to students and manage the ebb and flow of discussion. Online, all of those were not available, and had to be replaced by 'verbalised' interactions on the forum. In fact since I had some experience of online interaction, I found this easy to manage

Since the case study class was intended as a discussion class, and some students do not feel

comfortable speaking out in small group classes, I had hoped the online format would be attractive to students who wanted to explore an alternative way of participating in a discussion based class. I am not sure this aim worked out in practice. My feeling was that while everyone in the class did 'speak', some were not very enthusiastic participants in the discussion. Some contributions were short, and some students were not willing to be drawn out while others were not only voluble but also willing to interaction with each other as well as through me as a focal point.

Two aspects of the course which did work were participation from off campus, and participation by disabled students. I had expected students who had Internet access from home would log in and post from home, and out of 10-12 students each year, 2-3 regularly posted from home rather than college. Those students tended to be mature students, with whom the course was popular because of the flexibility it allowed. I had not only expected this, but had used it as a 'selling point' for my case study over conventional case studies.

I had not anticipated that the course would be useful for disabled students, but of course it was. Disabled students were familiar with using ICT as a tool to overcome their disabilities, and had good access to computer facilities which made it easier for them to take the course. Since access to small teaching rooms was much less developed when I offered the online case study, the fact that they could 'take' the course without having to overcome problems of physical access. During the period that the course was offered online, several disabled students took it.



*Illustration 1: Sample forum posting from the 1999 run of the online Case Study*

Assessment for the course was in two parts – a written essay and an oral presentation. While I

initially was willing to allocate the oral presentation marks to participation, I changed later to requiring an explicit oral presentation. To accomplish this, I got students to prepare a short list of points, and then met them and recorded their 'oral' presentation directly to computer. I then converted their points to a web page, and attached the sound file to it. All the students were then able to hear each other presentation, and respond to them in the last week of the course.

Overall, the online course was successful while it ran. It is no longer on – teaching load and departmental needs mean that I no longer teach in HI2002. However, it was a valuable experience, both for me and the students, and meant that now that most students use the Discussion board on the Blackboard server, I have more online experience to apply to moderating online discussions.