In the UK the educational sector faces an almost unparalleled period of change, including reforms to the National Curriculum, GCSEs, A Levels, the accelerated growth of academies and free schools and the massive impact of the funding changes to Higher Education. Like all revolutions, it is surely too early to predict what the long term implications of these changes will be. Much of my thinking in recent months has been based on a report released by the Institute of Public Policy Research entitled ‘An avalanche is coming: Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead’ (Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013). Although the report is an evaluation of the future of higher education, the dramatic title is apt for the educational sector as a whole.

My intention in organising a panel on e-learning at the Classical Association conference in Reading in 2013 was to showcase some of the innovative practices developed by Classics teachers and lecturers. At the outset, it is worth affirming my stance that e-learning will never completely replace traditional face to face teaching and learning, nor indeed should it do so. However, e-learning offers fantastic possibilities for new approaches to supporting and enhancing teaching and learning. I believe strongly that there is an opportunity for Classics as a discipline to take advantage of the emergence of new technology to act as a source of pedagogical innovations of use to the educational sector as a whole.

One of the great challenges we currently face is the need to create and embed useful e-learning resources. Both the content and delivery of these resources needs to be appropriate for their target audience, namely students who can be classified as ‘digital natives’ in that they are unable to remember a world in which the internet was not a part of their daily lives. The innovative use of technology is ongoing across the educational sector with measurable impacts on teaching, learning, assessment and the student experience.

The focus of this article is on the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) to enhance teaching and learning. It will suggest where VLEs work well, where they do not and, perhaps controversially, recommend how Classical subjects can take advantage of the latest advances in educational technology. It is hoped that this article will promote wider discussion of a topic which is of critical importance within the educational sector.

Although currently employed in a HE research role, my previous post involved teaching A Level Classics within an inner city FE College. The learner profile consisted of students of a range of abilities and backgrounds (including a significant number from disadvantaged areas) with no prior experience of Classical subjects. Numbers were robust, with typical classes up to around 25 students.

To support my teaching, I developed two VLEs using the Blackboard platform: one for AS and one for A2. There is a real danger that, unless they are actively refreshed and revitalised, VLEs can swiftly be abandoned by students and teachers alike. I therefore structured the VLE across four categories of activity linked to the learning cycle. The first stage consists of preparing students for learning. Many readers will be familiar with the concept of the ‘flipped classroom’, developed in the US to maximise the efficiency of contact time with students by delivering learning activities electronically prior to class sessions. Whilst not going this far, I used the VLE to post initial reading or images associated with forthcoming sessions. Of course, not all students took the opportunity to prepare for classes in advance, but providing unusual or controversial stimulation material tended to encourage greater participation, mainly through word of mouth.

The second stage consists of consolidating learning by presenting taught content in different formats to appeal to a range of learning styles. YouTube videos and podcasts are particularly useful in this regard. I would particularly recommend Guy Jonathan Eaton Using VLEs to Enhance Teaching and Learning in Classics
de la Bédoyère’s YouTube tours of sites in Pompeii and Herculaneum.\(^1\) I developed a series of podcasts based around Classical texts, which provided a translation and a commentary focussing on how the text could be analysed in exam responses. It was particularly interesting to note that the students who utilised podcasts included those who rarely visited the library or seemed to do any external reading, leaving me to wonder whether it was the delivery method rather than the content of further reading which discouraged them.

The third stage consists of assessing learning. Obviously, for A Levels, summative assessment cannot be adequately replicated through a VLE. However, it is possible to develop short multiple choice tests to assess the retention of names, dates and key spellings. In my experience these were particularly the elements which students tended to worry about. Although developing these online assessments took a significant amount of time, once in place they removed the necessity for marking individual tests and stored student results automatically. In this particular context, it is worth noting the research conducted by Polly Low and Peter Liddell at Manchester University and funded by the HE Academy, which studied the use of online assessments for undergraduates in Greek history (Low & Lidell, 2012). Their results indicated a link between performance in the online tests and across the module as a whole. Further research is needed in order to understand the quantitative impact of regular online tests for student performance. In my experience, such assessments do seem to boost student confidence in approaching a new subject for the first time and provide them with a regular method of self-assessment to chart their progress.

The final stage of VLE activity consists of extending learning through providing stretch and challenge activities for high achieving students. Given the current pressures in education which are often manifested in decreased contact time with students, this can often be an area of concern in traditional classroom-based teaching. The nature of VLEs allows them to function as a repository of further reading and examples of past work on particular topics. This is likely to be an area of real growth over the coming years as open access academic publishing becomes the norm.\(^2\)

The major benefit of this structured approach to the use and development of a VLE can be found in the motivation it afforded to the students to engage with it on a regular basis. It became more than simply storage space for PowerPoint presentations, and instead became a useful support to students who often lacked confidence in encountering a new subject for the first time.

It is clear that VLEs have the potential to offer scaffolded support to teaching and learning. Yet we should not be lulled into a false sense of security by the benefits offered by e-learning, but rather must critically assess their suitability and appropriateness. There are significant problems with our reliance on VLEs in their current form.

The first issue I would like to highlight with regard to the current form of VLEs can be classified as their ‘walled garden’ approach to e-learning. For the most part, VLEs are self-contained environments accessible only to staff and students at the relevant institution. Whilst there are very good reasons for this exclusive approach to online learning, namely issues relating to safeguarding and digital security, this does not promote the spread of best practice and innovation across the sector. Serious thought needs to be given to making the creation, development and sustainability of VLEs a collaborative endeavour.

The second issue with VLEs relates to their current format, usually a section of the institutional website which users access through their own unique login. We must ensure that VLEs maintain the pace of changes in technology. Many users access Facebook and Twitter through apps on their smartphones rather than through the conventional website. The benefits of this approach are manifold - one of the major ones being that the mandatory login is no longer required. It has been calculated that each ‘click’ on a website loses around 50% of the audience. More VLEs should move into new formats, particularly through the development of android and iPhone apps.

I have already alluded to the frequent role of VLEs as repositories for PowerPoint from class sessions. This role should not be disparaged, as it can be of vital importance in supporting students who struggle in completing notes in class. Yet VLEs can emphasise a transmission style method of teaching, with students as the passive receivers of knowledge in the form of resources stored in the online environment. I am a firm adherent of the quote widely attributed to W. B. Yeats: ‘education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire’. There is a vital need for e-learning to promote opportunities for students to take ownership of their educational experience through the formulation and reformulation of their own knowledge. This is particularly important in ensuring that students are adequately prepared as autonomous learners for the academic rigour of undergraduate and postgraduate study. The use of blogging software through VLEs should be encouraged to allow students to develop their understanding of the subject through writing their own blog posts on particular themes and topics. This contributes to the digital literacy of students, as well as encourages them to collaborate in the reformulation of knowledge.

The final issue with the current utilisation of VLEs consists of their lack of alignment with the current state of e-technology, in particular the growth of social media. For good reason, the use of social media
for educational purposes has been approached with caution in the past, not least for safeguarding reasons. Yet it is no longer possible to ignore the importance of social media in the daily lives of students for communication, entertainment and information gathering purposes. When creating my first VLE, I embedded an online discussion board for students to help each other with queries and problems relating to the course. Although this was initially popular, over the following years usage dwindled to nothing. Discussion with students indicated that this decline in use was due to the conversations moving to social media, in particular through Facebook student groups. The growth of The Student Room website is also noteworthy, where students from across the country post questions relating to their courses, providing a supportive and mostly student-led online social space. The value of peer conversations through social media is, of course, not limited to students. The use of Twitter hashtags to tweet papers live from a range of recent conferences, including the Classical Association’s in 2013, demonstrates the value of social media within academia. There is incredible scope for the integrated use of social media within VLEs to promote collaborative discussion between students and, where appropriate, staff.

Perhaps the most significant change in e-learning over the past couple of years has been the emergence of MOOCs, or massive open online courses in higher education. MOOCs offer free access to HE courses through online teaching. Three leading MOOC providers currently lead the field, namely Udacity, EdX and Coursera. The Open University has recently announced that they will also be joining the MOOC market in partnership with a number of other UK HEIs. Until recently, MOOCs have tended to facilitate courses in maths, science and computing, which naturally lend themselves to online assessment. However, there has been a recent increase in courses offered in the humanities. The Coursera site is currently advertising courses in archaeology, Egyptology, Greek history and Classical mythology. There are issues with MOOCs, particularly in terms of assessment, which I am uncertain can be resolved. However, it is clear that their growth and popularity have implications for anyone concerned with Classical education.

One of the great advantages of the MOOC model is the sheer scale of learners involved in the courses. Coursera, for example, currently offers over 200 courses from 30 universities and boasts 1 million registered learners. The attraction of MOOCs lies in their economical approach to HE, ease of access, professional format and teaching provided by leading experts in their fields. Indeed, a study conducted by the United States Department of Education suggests that online students perform modestly better than those in the traditional face to face teaching model.1 Whilst we must be cautious in using this initial finding, it is clear that the initial success of the MOOC model should provide guidance for the future development of VLEs.

Perhaps controversially, I believe that the next stage in the evolution of VLEs should take the form of a national MOOC for Classical subjects. This is an opportunity for teachers, lecturers and Classical organisations to work collaboratively in developing a MOOC environment for students studying Classical subjects at GCSE, A Level and undergraduate level. This would not only promote the benefits of Classics but also significantly contribute to widening participation in our discipline. I envisage a Classics MOOC which will not replace face to face teaching nor offer assessment, (both of which will continue in their traditional formats), but rather will act as a valuable source of support and resources for learners, in effect a national VLE. This would eliminate the ‘walled garden’ approach of current VLEs and facilitate the spread of best practice. It would particularly support learners in small groups or institutions which are new to offering Classical subjects. Access could be provided to online sessions with leading scholars. This platform would, inevitably, be of interest to the wider public at a time when there is considerable public interest in the Classical world. Such an online site could easily be linked to Twitter and Facebook, to provide a supportive social environment for Classics students. Most of what I have outlined already exists in various forms. Only the MOOC setting is particularly innovative. All that is required is the will of Classics as a discipline, including colleagues from schools, colleges and universities to pursue a cutting edge programme which will place us at the forefront of e-learning developments nationally.

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References


1 Accessible via http://www.youtube.com/user/KSHAClassCiv?feature=watch


3 See http://www.breining.edu/USDEDistLearning.