Direct action to reinforce the autonomous study of students taking a degree in English studies through the creation of an interactive webpage for the subjects dealing with culture and civilization

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Abstract

Our second cycle students have achieved a high level of spoken and written English, but they have serious gaps in their knowledge of cultural and historical events in the English-speaking world. They are obliged to cover a great deal of material in a relatively short period of time in the core subject *History and Culture of the English-speaking Countries*. There is a dearth of suitable textbooks for adult foreign students as few of the books available on the market provide enough information and intellectual depth for non-English speaking university students. By means of the construction of a webpage for the subject we have tried to motivate the students to search and contrast information. The enormous amount of information available on internet has obliged us to establish guidelines so the students can distinguish between sources and learn to question all the data that appears on the web.

General area of interest of this innovation

The market is saturated with dozens of useful books on British and American history but these texts fail to meet the requirements of students studying a degree in English in a non-English-speaking country. The challenge therefore is to try to balance the menu between traditional surveys in history and a more visual approach, using internet sources, taking sufficient care to encourage the students to use these sources critically and not as a substitute for the written text.

1. Objectives

The project undertaken is an attempt to improve the students' learning abilities in the subjects dealing with culture and civilization of the English-speaking countries. We can divide the main objectives into two sections, ongoing objectives and achievement objectives. First, the ongoing aims of the project are the preparation of study guides for the students together with original material specifically designed for the needs of students taking these subjects. Second, and closely linked to the former, a vital aim is the efficient collection and contrastive study of online sources of British and American history. The achievement objectives of this project are the improvement of the way students can handle material connected with the subjects. It is also very important for the students' autonomous learning to increase so they do not rely so heavily on class notes. Finally, the project aims at improving students' capacity to understand, analyze and synthesize texts. The improvement of their written and oral communication skills and their capacity to reason and develop ideas is also crucial to a successful project. The construction of a webpage for the subject is a combination of the three elements described in the ongoing objectives: study guides, original material and a selection of reliable internet sources.

2. Description

During the self-evaluation process undertaken during the academic year 2000-2001, the degree of English Studies (*Filologia Anglesa*) detected a series of weak points, in particular a rather high rate of students not sitting exams in certain subject areas. One of these problem areas were the two compulsory subjects devoted to British and American culture and civilization. It's deduced that the low academic performance in the area of culture and civilization is due to the fact that these subjects are enormously challenging for our students. They reach the second cycle with a good level of spoken and written English but they lack a basic grounding in general knowledge about British and American culture and history. They are obliged to cover a great deal of ground in a relatively short period of time, one academic year, and the textbooks available on the market are not geared to the necessities of adult foreign students. They tend to fall short of the intellectual depth required of non-English speaking university students. Therefore the main aim of this project was seen to be the need for a drastic improvement in the learning conditions of the students in the English Studies degree once they reach the second cycle and are obliged to take two compulsory subjects in the area of culture and civilization. One of the subjects is a core module (*History and Culture of the English-Speaking Countries*) and the other one is obligatory (*American Civilization Through Texts*). The core module is an annual subject, worth nine credits and the obligatory subject is semester-based and is worth six credits. For many years these subjects, both in the present university curriculum and in previous ones, have been approached through standard methods, that is lectures with

students taking notes and the recommendation of one or more textbooks. The traditional university lecture has its strong points as the teacher provides a clear outline of the main points he or she believes the students should know. However, this style of teaching does not encourage student participation, especially with large groups as is the case in the English Studies degree, nor does it promote autonomous learning as students tend to presume that the teacher's notes will be more useful for the purposes of passing the examination. Written examinations are a helpful resource for assessing large groups of students when it is extremely difficult to attend to everybody satisfactorily. Bearing this in mind, it is essential to have a method of teaching that can serve as a guide for the students and at the same time encourage them to compare and contrast material from other sources. The obvious solution to the problem seemed to lie in the choice of a more suitable textbook as a straightforward survey of British and/or American history would provide the students with the stimulus to read further. However, this was in fact the root cause of the problem.

When designing the syllabus for the forthcoming year's civilization subjects, the teacher is inevitably faced year after year with a yet unsolvable dilemma: which text(s) to propose as compulsory reading and/or textbook for the survey courses on history and culture of the English-speaking countries. Obviously the market is saturated with literally dozens of useful books on British and American history but these texts fail to meet the requirements of students studying a degree in English in a non-English-speaking country. The majority of these, invariably scholarly and well designed, textbooks tend to overload the student with statistics, dates and names that end up confusing the non-native reader. American students have received instruction in history at high school and are already familiar with the key events (such as the causes of the American Revolution), leading historical figures such as Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln) and understand the symbolism conjured up at the mention of the Boston Tea Party, the frontier, the Old South and similar cultural references. History books such as George B. Tindall, & David E. Shi's *America: A Narrative History*, while providing an extremely comprehensive picture of the future United States from its so-called discovery by Europeans, cover far too much material for a course that students have to digest in one semester. Likewise, the somewhat misleadingly entitled *The Brief American Pageant* (2004) fails to cater for the more modest needs of foreign language university students as they are both mammoth volumes containing an extraordinary amount of historical information. Naturally there is a danger of leaning too far in the opposite direction. Textbooks especially intended for non-native speakers of English do provide concise outlines of American history by highlighting just the major events, but at the expense of sacrificing intellectual depth. This kind of book fails to stimulate the adult student as the more restricted content seems to go hand-in-hand with a superficial analysis of major historical changes.

From the above diagnosis of the situation, it seemed obvious that we had two options, either to write our own textbook or else design a course that would combine

the advantages of using standard texts by reputed scholars together with the stimuli provided by digitalized material, previously selected by the teachers, and presented in the form of study guides for each session. Students nowadays are regular consumers of internet, which can be both positive and negative for our purposes. The fact that students are perfectly capable on their own of finding a webpage that deals with, for example, the Irish Famine, does not necessarily mean that they will read it critically. There was a serious danger of an abuse of material readily available on internet as it is obvious that reading a webpage is more entertaining and less time-consuming than reading an article in an academic journal. This urged us to make very careful selections of the sources we would recommend and the websites we would use as examples in class. We needed to prepare our materials very carefully and make a balance between factual content and the analysis of the narratives of historical events. This is not to suggest that we are in any way trying to impose any censorship on our students. In actual fact, we suggest they look at certain websites, such as http://www.omdurman.org/ to see another version of history, albeit in this case a rather Islamophobic one in order to develop their analytic skills. The incorporation of visual elements such as maps, pictures, chronologies and so forth, were intended to show the students that there are several possible historical narratives, not just the written account. With this in mind, we prepared our sessions as PowerPoint presentations so students were exposed to visual material, which was backed up by a series of written texts that they were asked to read in order to compare and contrast the narratives. The webpage we have designed for the subject provides a summary of all the areas covered in the subject together with recommended texts, maps, chronologies, pictures, links and, in some case, music.

3. Methodology

The preparation of study guides for the students formed the basis of this project. An outline of the contents of each lecture was prepared beforehand and posted up on the virtual campus. The study guides were prepared as PowerPoint presentations and contained the following items:

1. Brief summaries of the topic of the lectures e.g. an outline of the main events that triggered the Reformation of the Church in 16th Century England
2. Pictures of the major figures involved e.g. portraits of Henry VIII, Oliver Cromwell, Benjamin Disraeli.
3. Maps featuring the geographical areas under discussion e.g. a map showing the decisive battle fields in the American Revolution
4. Short quotations from relevant literary, cultural or religious texts to illustrate the social repercussions of the event in question e.g. Samuel Pepys' diary entry on the Great Fire of London, W.B. Yeats' poem on the Easter Rising
5. Contemporary issues that can be interpreted differently in the light of early historical incidents e.g., Margaret Thatcher's 1989 poll tax and the 1381 Peasants' Revolt

The students were then encouraged to go to the internet sources and complete their readings. Students were asked to submit essays discussing the interpretation of certain events. The fact that they had been exposed to various different narratives (pictorial, discursive, literary etc) helped them to obtain a global vision of British and American history and not become overwhelmed with data and statistics. We are very much aware of the pitfalls of misusing internet as a teaching and learning tool as students may not take the sessions seriously and feel they are being entertained rather than being taught anything. However, following the guidelines of Wang and Swanson (2005) we believe that the advantages of integrating internet into our regular teaching far outweigh these fears.

3.1. Specific example: The Abolition of the Slave Trade

The methodology used in the preparation of this project can best be illustrated by a specific example: the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. The interested student can find numerous web pages devoted to this subject especially recently as 2007 was the bicentenary of the abolition. The problem we are faced with is that, however interesting and worthy this topic is, we cannot devote more than one or, at the utmost, two sessions to it, bearing in mind the nature of the subject in hand. History and Culture of the English-Speaking Countries is a survey subject that covers the whole of British history from the Roman invasion up to the 20th century plus some notions of Britain's role in the creation of an overseas empire in places such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa. Thus we are faced with the task of dealing with an extremely important event in British domestic and overseas history, which has repercussions in the multicultural society of contemporary Britain. It is a vital part of British history which should be dealt with in a rigorous and objective manner but the problem is to provide the students with enough basic ideas to understand how the abolition movement evolved and why Britain eventually took the decision to abolish the slave trade in its Empire without losing sight of the cultural importance of this event in Britain nowadays. For this reason, we used a variety of sources to present the topic: an outline of the events that led up to the passing of the abolition bill in Parliament, the work of the major abolitionists and their adversaries, maps of the triangular trade, portraits by well-known artists showing how young black servants became the status symbol of the rich in the 18th century, a painting by the 19th century artist Turner illustrating the dark side of the slave trade, and finally a poem by a black British poet recalling her ancestry and her roots in the Atlantic slave trade [see example]. The combination of discourses helps the students to view the material globally and to make valuable links between economic, political and social histories and to understand the importance of such events in the construction of a British identity. A traditional teaching method often fails to make these useful links as it tends to focus on a linear narrative in detriment of a wider, more comprehensive view.

4. Results

The results of this innovation in the method and content of culture and civilization courses have shown that the students needed guidelines when dealing with internet sources. Despite the fact that they are familiar with the internet they lacked the necessary criteria for making selections and developing a critical attitude towards all the information that is available on the net. This critical capacity has enabled them to carry out class assignments more efficiently as they do not rely too heavily on the first source that they come across. The original material that we have designed specifically for our students' needs has allowed them to filter much of the information that is available in traditional textbooks on British and American history. We needed material that suited the age and intellectual level of our students. It is true that they are not familiar with many cultural and historical references but, at the same time, they are university students who need to find an intellectual stimulant in their reading. Finally, the construction of a webpage which includes the study guides, the internet sources and the original material we have prepared will allow our students to focus more clearly on the areas they need to be familiar with as future specialists in English Studies.

5. Conclusions

With the construction of a webpage for the subject of *History and Culture of the English-Speaking Countries* we have achieved a great improvement in the learning skills of our students. In comparison with students from previous years, we can conclude that the progress of the students who have been exposed to the material and study guides we have prepared is much greater. We have also noticed that the ability to question sources, written and virtual, is much higher and the capacity of the students to analyze specific questions has vastly improved. The preparation of the material, designed with the needs and profile of our students in mind, has encouraged a greater degree of autonomous learning as the dependency on class notes has diminished notably. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the use of visual material in the classroom has proved a stimulus for the students to make connections with current events and understand the utility of this subject in their degree.

References

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TINDALL, G. B. and DAVID, E. (2000). *America: A Narrative History*. New York: W.W. Norton.

WANG, Y. and SWANSON, C. (2005). «University Classroom Uses of the Internet». In C.
Crawford et al. (Eds.), *Proceedings of Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education International Conference 2005*, Chesapeake, VA: AACE.

Interesting links

- http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/abolition/ This is a model for any teacher of history and a website we strongly recommend to our students. [2008]
- http://members.aol.com/scothist/scotland.html [2008]
- http://www.scottish-history.com/ These are the kind of websites that students enjoy reading and both have contributed to the format of our own webpage. [2008]
- http://antalya.uab.es/history_culture/ accessed 29-1-2008. This is the webpage we have built up for the subject. It is still in a preliminary phase. [2008]

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Culture, history, English Studies, Autonomous learning.

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Presentation of the working group

The teachers involved in this Project have been teaching culture and civilizations courses for several years. Felicity Hand has specialized in the survey courses in British and American history, Sara Martin in contemporary cultural studies and Laura Gimeno in American civilization. All three members of the team are lecturers in the English Department of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

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