

# Reflections on ICT Innovations of an Online Literature Course

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses the ICT innovations implemented in an online literature course. The course, ENGL 228.599: American Literature Civil War to Present, was taught by Professor Amy Earhart at Texas A&M University for three semesters – from spring 2012 to spring 2013 – and during the last two semesters the author served as her TA. ENGL 228 was a joint project of the Department of English (DoP) and University Writing Center (UWC) with the aim to convert a face-to-face course into an online course. In addition, the goal of the course was to improve students' collaboration and research skills synchronize with UWC tutors. Using an analysis of results from the spring 2012 semester, combining it with the author's experiences as a TA during the following two semesters and providing a closing report by DoP and UWC on the successfulness of the project, the research provides valuable information on improving online courses through best practice and writing center tutors.

**Key words:** ICT; innovations; online course; developing student skills; course development

**Abstrakt:** Tento článek popisuje ICT inovace a jejich obměny a úpravy při převedení kurzu americké literatury na Texas A&M University do jeho online podoby. Článek vychází z podrobné analýzy po prvním semestru výuky, autorových osobních zkušeností během dalších dvou semestrů kurzu a následné závěrečné zprávy o úspěšnosti kurzu, čímž umožňuje komplexní vhled do provedených inovací a jejich efektivity.

## 1 Introduction

Due to the constant development of new teaching tools and methods, information technologies are steadily increasing their presence in teaching. As Bärenfänger notes (2005), employing ICT in teaching is a pedagogical practice that has benefits for both students and teachers, as it improves the quality of the learning experience as well as improve the quality and re-usability of the teaching content. Importantly, the development of new technologies makes it possible to study a subject without ever setting a foot on a university campus. One such course was English 228.599 American Literature Civil War to Present (ENGL 228) taught by Professor Amy Earhart at the Texas A&M University. The author served as a teacher's assistant for two semesters of the course's three-semester run and as a result gained valuable insight into online teaching.

This paper will first provide a brief introduction to the course and then discuss the various ICT implementations used during the course. In addition, since the evaluation of the course's success was made available to the author, the outcomes of the course will be also mentioned. Ultimately, the research should provide not

only useful information about ICT innovations of an online course but also inspiration for implementing changes at the university level.

## 2 Course Overview and Purpose

The course was an American literature survey lecture covering important texts from the second half of nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century. While it was previously taught as a regular face-to-face course, from spring 2012 to spring 2013 it was offered as an online course. This iteration, a joint the Department of English (DoP) and the University Writing Center (UWC), was based on best practices and the experiences of a pilot course to transform the traditional large section lecture course into a web-based class. The goal was to further improve the support of online tools in order to promote individual and collaborative student writing and to develop software that could be used in future web-based courses. Setting up an online course should be meticulously planned; as it has been noted, using new technology as a pedagogical tool is only effective when the advantages of the technology are used to the fullest, otherwise the outcomes may not meet expectations (Olson et al., 2001). Ultimately, the course innovations aimed to “use best practices in the delivery of an online course by providing students with appropriate technical support throughout the semester, by maximizing immediacy of feedback and by encouraging and enabling dialogue within the online course” (Report of results). The following outlines the goals of the project as set out by the collaboration between DoP and UWC:

- Create online content (video lectures, course materials, assessment of student performance)
- Establish a group research project using multi-media or digital scholarship
- Provide interactive activities and discussion groups
- Involve University Writing Center tutors and graders
- Develop synchronous tutoring (focus on easy integration with frequently used course management software such as Moodle or Blackboard and online accessibility)

In other words, the course was envisioned to be a working replacement of a traditional face-to-face course, and the ICT innovations applied in the course aimed at significantly improving student engagement, collaboration and writing skills. Importantly, the collaboration between DoP and UWC had one more goal – to create a successful template for future online courses.

The course itself was supervised by Professor Amy Earhart, two TAs and several UWC tutors. To facilitate collaborative work, various assignments comprised the course; while there were minor differences between the iterations of the course, the general requirements were the following:

- Reading quizzes (10% of the grade)
- Blog and discussion assignments (15%)
- Digital literary studies project (10%)
- Keyword project (group project) (25%) (individual/group grade)
- 2 exams (20% each – 40% total)

The reading quizzes contained five random questions about the texts scheduled for the given week. Blog and discussion assignments were essentially two different activities running on a bi-weekly basis: the blog assignment tasked the students to individually and critically assess a prompt regarding a class text, and the discussion assignment was a group project aimed at facilitating discussion within student groups, therefore providing material for their keyword projects (see below). The digital literary studies project was an individual activity aimed at developing, analyzing and evaluating skills of the students in academia through providing an evaluation of a digital resource. The keyword project was a group project tasking the students with tracking a selected keyword (such as ‘citizenship’, ‘race’, or ‘women’) throughout the assigned texts and commenting on how the keywords evolved throughout the texts; the keyword project culminated into a group essay and since it comprised a relatively large part of the grade (25%), each student received two grades from the project – a group grade and an individual grade – and the resulting grade was an average of the two grades. Finally, a mid-term and a final exam were required. On average, around 250 students registered for the course each semester.

Video lectures narrated by Professor Earhart and accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation were provided for the students to view and download. Importantly, the course tasked to students to meet on a regular basis with their UWC tutors through Google Hangout video conference application. While serving primarily as help for the keyword project, the tutors also helped with student writing in general.

All the materials and all the assignments were available in Moodle, since Moodle has the advantage of being open-source and not requiring any special skills in creating the course page or adding content (Nozawa, 2011). However, Moodle is not entirely user-friendly to a novice user, as it can be difficult for teachers to properly set up all the materials for the course (Soule and Kleen, 2012). Furthermore, the effectiveness of Moodle hinges on the computer literacy of the user, which might lead to reduced participation of the students (Naddabi, 2007). Interestingly, while university faculty finds Blackboard to be easier to use than Moodle, students seem to prefer Moodle to Blackboard (Payette and Gupta, 2009). Since the intuitiveness of Moodle user interface increases with use, it should be the preferred course management software. Nevertheless, the short discussion above

makes it clear that some issues might arise when starting a Moodle online course, and the sections of the paper only confirm this notion.

### 3 Spring 2012 Evaluation

Since the author became a TA for the course after the spring 2012 semester, he cannot provide any personal commentary regarding the effectiveness of the methods chosen in that period. However, Candice C. Melzow and Rene H. Trevino, two PhD students helping at that time with the course, conducted a thorough evaluation that compared the PICA evaluations (Personalized Instructor/Course Appraisal System, an online course evaluation tool used at Texas A&M University) for the traditional ENGL 228 face-to-face course from the spring 2011 semester, with the evaluations for the online course from the following spring semester. In addition, Melzow and Trevino analyzed the data provided by Moodle, focusing on grade distribution, Moodle usage patterns and peak access times. Therefore, this and the following section of the paper rely extensively on the information provided by Melzow and Trevino.

Compared to the classroom iteration of ENGL 228, the online course in its spring semester had a slightly lower GPR, that of 2.85 compared to 3.18, which is a decrease of 10.25% (Melzow and Trevino). The suggestions mentioned later in this section of the article – and the slight modifications employed later by Professor Earhart, the author and Soha Chung, the other TA working on the course – aimed at closing the GPR gap between the traditional and online course using best practice and slight ICT modifications.

A comprehensive account of the PICA evaluations and Moodle data must be provided before moving to the suggestions made by Melzow and Trevino to improve the general performance of the students. First of all, it must be acknowledged that online and distant courses usually have a higher attrition rate than regular courses (Carr, 2000; Moody, 2004). In addition, the same number of Q-drops (four) occurred in the spring 2012 iteration of the online course as in the three times the course was taught by Professor Earhart in a physical classroom (Melzow and Trevino). Thirdly, the responses to the provided online material were overwhelmingly positive. For instance, 81.6% of students who answered the PICA evaluations with ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ that “[t]he instructor’s presentations added to [their] understanding of the material”, with 42.5% option. Other students also commended the use of PowerPoint presentations and video lectures.

However, there were also a few issues evident from the evaluations and the Moodle analysis. First of all, students were concerned with the inability of the instructor to convey ‘care’ and ‘enthusiasm’ in the course: while a majority still agreed with the statements that the “instructor seemed to care whether the students learned” and the “instructor seemed enthusiastic about the material that was pre-

sented” (72.4% and 75.6% respectively), a relatively significant number of respondents were ‘undecided’ about each of the statements (20.7% and 19.8% respectively). One of the comments in the PICA evaluation answered the first statement mentioned above in the following way: “Online course. One-way communication makes it difficult to judge her level of care.”

Secondly, the survey showed that students unfamiliar with online courses were often puzzled by the online course format. For instance, 37.2% of respondents marked ‘undecided’ as their answer to the statement “[t]he instructor adequately answered questions from students”. Some students even commented that the way the online course was set up clearly hindered their ability to answer some of the PICA questions such as the one above. In other words, a significant portion of the students felt that course policies and assignments are not explained clearly enough, a puzzlement stemming from the format of an online course.

Thirdly, the Moodle analysis of student behaviour in the online course showed that students often did not use all the material provided in the course. As Melzow and Trevino write, “[o]n average per resource, nearly 33% of students did not access” the given resource. Furthermore, Melzow and Trevino add that “64.4% students did not access the least accessed resource”. As can be seen in Tab. 1, tracking the access of materials proved invaluable because a comparison of student’s Moodle use and his or her final grade revealed a direct connection between the two data. Therefore, it became clear that increasing the access rate of materials should have a positive impact on the class GPA.

Tab. 1: *The correlation between the final grade and average resource use among the students with the same letter grade*

	<b>Average Resource Use</b>	<b>% Above/Below Class Average</b>
A Students	847.0	32.6%
B Students	643.3	0.7%
C Students	534.5	-16.4%
D Students	335.6	-47.5%
E Students	250.1	-60.9%

Next, the keyword group project proved to be the least popular assignment among the students. Over 17% of students chose ‘disagree’ (and additional 8% chose ‘strongly disagree’) as their answer to the question if the assignments were presented and graded fairly, and the PICA comments made it clear that this strong dissatisfaction was due to the group project. Out of the 13 comments that mentioned the group project, five students complained about the difficult communication with other group members, and 10 students noted the lack of clarity in the group project assignment. One of the students explained the following: “There were are [sic] 20 people in our group and among all of us we have had a very

difficult time communicating the project over the internet.” Another student mentioned that the idea of a group online project which determines 25% of the final grade was completely ‘ridiculous’.

Lastly, the Moodle analysis showed another problem in the initial application of the UCW tutors – the students preferred to be online in the evening and night hours, that is when the UCW tutors were mostly disconnected. The analysis showed that the students were the most active between 8 and 11 pm, the 10 to 11 pm timeslot being the most popular. When limited to regular working hours, students preferred to access the course between 2 and 5 pm.

#### **4 Spring 2012 Recommendations**

After going through the five problems above, Melzow and Trevino provided the following recommendations in order to solve the issues. Firstly, they addressed the issue of personal approach (or rather a lack of thereof) by advising the course support team to provide introductory profiles in order for the students to become better acquainted with the course staff. More importantly, they also suggested that the students should be able to contact Professor Earhart and the two TAs through Google Hangout in addition to the UWC tutors. To facilitate this, online office hours were set up so that the students were able to contact the lecturer and the TAs in case they had a question about the course requirements or about one of the assignments; however, the video conferences were also made available for general troubleshooting purposes. The video conferences aimed at creating a more personal connection between the students and the teaching staff, thus simulating some of the aspects of a face-to-face class in an online course.

In order to prepare students for the different environment of the online course when compared to a traditional face-to-face lecture, it was suggested that course designers create anew material that would explain the nature of the course in more general terms. In other words, the collaborative nature of the course (that is collaboration between students and support staff and between students themselves) as well as the general guidelines to the online course (what was expected of the students and what should students expect) were to be discussed in more detail in the proposed material. The use of profiles by the support staff was also brought up and it was emphasized that the profiles should explicitly state the role of each support staff member – the lecturer, the two TAs and the UWC tutors – in the course.

Regarding the access rates of the material, a few suggestions were made, the following two being the most important: firstly, the Moodle headings should be changed from ambiguous labels (e.g. ‘Reading Support Materials’) to direct commands (‘View Lectures and Notes’), as it was expected that renaming the headings would contribute to more hits per a given resources. Secondly, instead of

providing all the materials and lectures from the very beginning, it was advised to make material accessible on an appointed day each week so that students are not overwhelmed from the very beginning of the course by the sheer number of material provided.

The keyword group project underwent significant revision. In addition to providing more explicit instructions regarding the project, a schedule containing small activities for every week was provided in order to present the groups with more direct guidelines. Furthermore, the group size was decreased significantly – from 15–20 students to 8–10 students – and each student was made to choose his or her appointed role in the group early in the semester.<sup>1</sup> To make sure that the students are on the right track, UWC tutors were integrated into the keyword project to provide feedback on the newly established keyword activities. Lastly, since students were separated into groups according to the keyword of their choice, each tutor was given a small number of keywords to supervise so that the communication and relationship between the course staff and students is further emphasized.

Finally, in order to address the peak access times of students, it was decided that the instructor's and TAs' virtual office hours should take place on weekdays between 8 am and 5 pm. Furthermore, the students were given an opportunity to decide the office hours themselves by completing a short survey at the beginning of the semester. And lastly, UWC tutors' online hours were rescheduled so that they were available during peak times with the possibility to schedule individual evening video conferences.

## 5 Changes to Recommendation

While the recommendations made by Melzow and Trevino were extremely useful, following them did not stop several other issue from appearing. Some of these issues were connected to user interface and there was an effort to solve them after they became apparent, while other issues arose from the online nature of the course.

First of all, some of the environment chosen for the course appeared to be relatively difficult to use. For instance, several students had difficulties setting up their Google Hangout video conference. Secondly, while Moodle allows one to track student behavior with ease, some of the assignments were rather difficult to finalize and subsequently grade. The keyword project, for example, required the whole group to work with the same text; however, Moodle is not able to track individual changes when an assignment is set up as a new page rather than

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, a 'drafter' was responsible for providing the first draft of the final essay while the 'editor' was responsible for the final corrections.

a document, which made evaluating the group project dependent on honesty of the students when it came to highlighting their individual contributions. Because of Moodle's relative clumsiness for first-time users, students also tended to work outside of Moodle on their keyword project, which again made it difficult to evaluate each student's individual contributions and therefore grade them correspondingly. Seeing these difficulties in the fall 2012 semester, we have decided to switch to a more user-friendly environment in the following semester. Therefore, we replaced Google Hangout with the WebEx conference application while Moodle was replaced by Google Docs for the purposes of the keyword project. Even though WebEx required a file to be downloaded to the computer and then using a general account rather than a personal one in order to use the application – therefore presenting a possible complication from user perspective – it solved a few issues raised after the fall 2012 semester concerning Google Hangout, mainly issues regarding privacy and online security. Conversely, Google Docs has a user-friendly environment that closely resembles applications that students are usually familiar with (word-processing software such as Microsoft Office or Open Office), therefore resulting in fewer problems for both students and the course staff.

Nevertheless, even the spring 2013 semester was not without problems related to ICT. For instance, some students used different names in Moodle and Google Hangout than those present in Howdy, the Texas A&M University's official student and teacher portal. While most of the different names were simply more familiar versions of the students' full names, a few students opted to use their middle name instead of their first name or their married name instead of their maiden name in the course interface. This naturally presented slight complications since the grades had to be transcribed from Moodle to Howdy.

Secondly, while the user interface can be improved, user behavior can be difficult to influence in an online course. User behavior is especially important in a group project, where maintaining effort throughout the course towards the same goal affects the grades of the individual as well as the group as a whole. Several students Q-dropped in the middle of the semester without letting anyone in their group know, therefore often causing the whole group to fall behind in their work. Other times a more pragmatic reason – laziness – affected the overall quality of the group project and while the group member who filled in for the missing role was compensated by obtaining a better individual grade for the assignment, it hardly makes up for the increased effort and frustration that the group had to experience due to one individual being unable to meet set deadlines.

Finally, it should be noted that students only rarely used online office hours to make video conference calls with the lecturer or the TAs. Instead, it seemed they strongly favored more traditional means of online communication – email. A few students even decided to see the author in the author's physical office at the Department of English rather than using the online office hours. In contrast, the



expanded online presence of the UWC tutors was a large success; the continuous feedback on the keyword project during the writing process seemed to be especially praised by the students.

## 6 Undergraduate Office Report

In July 2013 the Undergraduate Office finalized a Report on results which concludes by explaining that “the project was successful in providing a tested tool for synchronous online tutoring as well as a training protocol for tutors” and that “[t]he project was also successful in testing best practices in providing a support structure for research-oriented, active and interactive online learning”. The report shows that the course provided an enhanced learning experience, lead to expected results (that is producing a viable online course, using writing center tutors to provide feedback in a writing-intensive course and providing writing center staff with training for ICT technologies), and improve student learning and academic abilities. More specifically, the most important statements of the report are the following:

- the percentage of students who agreed that technical support was readily available rose from 83% in spring 2012 to 93% in spring 2013.
- on average, 82% of students in each of the iteration found secondary keyword assignments (such as discussion forums or wikis – databases relevant to the chosen keyword) useful in increasing their level of interaction with the course
- the combination of week-by-week modules, consistency in assignments and deadlines (e.g. material being available on Mondays, reading quizzes on Wednesdays), active headings and video lectures should become the standard of all large-section online courses
- current software was successfully modified to allow synchronized conferencing and course staff was properly trained in this software
- on average, the percentage of students in all the three iterations of the course who described themselves as ‘very skilled’ or ‘expert’ at working in teams in order to conduct a research increased by 29% after the course
- on average, the percentage of students in all three iterations of the course who described themselves as ‘very skilled’ or ‘expert’ at locating, critically evaluating and sharing academic sources increased by 38% after the course

Simply put, the course was considered a success both for its web-based innovations for future use and for the improvement of student academic and collaborative skills. While the Report noted that the success was partially due to the presence of *embedded* UWC tutors – tutors familiar with the course material before the course started – it also clearly stated that similar results should be expected with non-embedded tutors as well.

## 7 Reflection and Conclusion

The discussion above shows that ICT innovations of online courses are meaningful and worth the potential investment. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the online presence of the course staff and the readily-available feedback significantly affected the success of the course. Since ENGL 228 was a writing-intensive course, it is hard to imagine that the student experience would be so overwhelmingly positive without the course support. While the various assignments or collaborative approach certainly helped in setting the course apart from other, less innovative online courses, the constant availability of certified UWC staff was the aspect that truly made the difference.

The above might sound rather pessimistic in the context of Czech and Central European learning. After all, Czech or other regional universities only rarely have a large writing center – if they have one at all – as the one at Texas A&M University. Nevertheless, this should be seen as an opportunity rather than a hindrance. A similar, albeit smaller course should provide the basis of future cooperation between departments and their graduate students or students in teacher training. These courses would then serve as an important teaching experience for both the students and the supervising student-teachers – while the former would learn collaboration and independent research, the latter would gain additional expertise that are extremely valuable when entering the job market. The institution adopting courses with layout similar to ENGL 228 would then produce well-rounded students used to teamwork and independent studying and, at the same time, provide future teachers with the much-needed teaching experience. Simply put, creating an online course using best practice and online tutors is an educational opportunity that is beneficial to all sides of the teaching process.

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