

Project Completion Report

Project Name	Thema: University of Oxford http://thema.oucs.ox.ac.uk
Report compiled by	Dr Liz Masterman, Learning Technologies Group, Oxford University Computing Services (OUCS)
Project team members & current roles	<p><i>List the key staff members who were involved with the project and briefly summarise their current/future professional roles:</i></p> <p>Dr Liz Masterman: continuing to work as a senior researcher in the Learning Technologies Group; investigator in the “Learning Design Support Environment,” a multi-institutional project funded by the ESRC/EPSC TLRP, TEL Phase 2.</p> <p>Jane Alexen Shuyska: continuing with DPhil research; also assisting in a Becta-funded project, “The learner and their context,” at the Department of Education.</p> <p>Fawei Geng: continuing to work as Learning Technology Support Officer, OUCS.</p>
Acknowledgements	<p><i>List the project partners and acknowledge any person or organisation that was helpful.</i></p> <p>Our greatest thanks go to the students who participated in the project, especially our 23 “pen-pals”, who contributed data over a period of 8-9 months. We also thank the course directors of the 9 MSc and MSt programmes involved in the project for giving us permission to approach their students.</p> <p>In terms of data collection and analysis, we acknowledge the contributions made by the following people:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kate Lindsay, OUCS: compilation of the initial survey report and assistance in conducting interviews ▪ Peter Robinson, OUCS: assistance in running the baseline survey ▪ Dr Gabriel Hanganu, OUCS: compilation of data from the baseline survey ▪ Yuen-Yi Lo, Mitsuko Matsumoto, Helen Woolley (student interns from the Department of Education): analysis of survey data <p>Although the project Steering Group met only twice, we received valuable guidance and encouragement from its members: Dr Chris Davies (Department of Education), Dr Paul Davis and Dr Paul Trafford (Learning Technologies Group, OUCS), and Marion Manton (Technology-Assisted Lifelong Learning, Department of Continuing Education).</p> <p>Finally, we acknowledge the funding received from JISC under the Learner Experiences of e-Learning Phase 2 programme, and thank the Programme Manager, Sarah Knight, and the Support and Synthesis team (Ellen Lessner, Rhona Sharpe, Helen Beetham, Greg Benfield and Eta De Cicco) for their advice and encouragement.</p>
Date of report	6 th April 2009

Section One: Executive Summary

Summarise highlights of the project, including aims/objectives, overall approach, findings, achievements, and conclusions.

Aims & objectives

The Thema project set out to investigate the experiences of taught Master's students at Oxford University in 2007-8, with specific reference to the role of digital technologies in supporting their academic and social lives. Our objective was to undertake a longitudinal exploration of their holistic experience in order to uncover their learning strategies, the relationship between personally-owned and institutionally-provided technologies, changes in their use of technology and their significant learning experiences.

Overall approach

We considered Master's students to be of particular interest because of their heterogeneity in terms of educational history, age, country of origin, life situation and disposition toward, and extent of, IT experience in comparison with undergraduate students. This heterogeneity was largely confirmed by a baseline survey which we conducted in May 2007 in order to establish the landscape of technology use by students across the whole University. An exception was in the sphere of IT, where differences between the undergraduate and taught postgraduate populations were negligible.

The primary outputs from the Thema project were 11 narrative case studies of students' experience of learning over the first nine months of their course. To set them within their institutional and pedagogical context, we adopted a mixed-model design and framed them within two online surveys gathering data from a larger sample of students on the same programmes. The qualitative data for the case studies were collected using a "pen-pal" technique, a variant of the e-interview which we devised to meet the challenge of eliciting data from busy students over an extended period with minimal intrusion, and using a simple and robust technology. Our premise was that sustained participation would be maximised through adopting a personal approach and asking questions that took the student's specific course and own individual experience as a starting point (although some "common" questions were put to all students).

Within our correspondence with the students, we primarily adopted a holistic perspective: viz. foregrounding their general experience to see how technology fitted into it (or did not fit into it), rather than making technology the starting point of all our enquiries. We felt that this approach was more appropriate, both for the quasi-longitudinal nature of the study and for students at this level.

Findings

Our fundamental finding can be summarised as "students learn; they don't e-learn." Technology plays an important role in postgraduate study, but this role must not be exaggerated and must be seen within the context of their overall study experience.

Key findings in relation to students' experiences of digital technologies:

- Students know when to "e-" and when not to "e-", blending the affordances of tools and interactions in the online and real worlds. They also recognise the special atmosphere engendered when students and lecturers are co-present in the classroom and feel that the learning experience may be diminished if lectures are offered as podcasts.
- Students' perception of their proficiency in their use of digital technologies may be at variance with the behaviours that they actually display in terms of the range of tools used and their curiosity in finding out what is available.
- Postgraduate students consider social networks inappropriate environments for formal learning. However, they acknowledge lecturers' right to a social presence there and may even form Facebook "friendships" with individual tutors.

Key findings in relation to students' holistic experience of learning at Master's level:

- Study at Master's level can entail major adaptation on the part of students in terms of a) the transition from structured, teacher-directed undergraduate studies to a more autonomous approach to their learning, and b) the emphasis on analytical thought. This adaptation is

particularly marked in overseas students who have come from different educational systems.

- Although many students at Master's level are adept at managing their own learning, a number are not and acquire the requisite skills the hard way (through difficult experience).

Achievements

The Thema project recruited students from 7 full-time courses in the Medical Sciences Division* and the Department of Education,[†] and 2 part-time courses in the Department of Continuing Education[‡] (one of which was a blended course). It exceeded its target in terms of the number of participants, and retention levels were extremely high: nearly 100% among the "pen-pals" (see Section Seven), and 78% among the students who took the surveys only. The pen-pal methodology enabled us to compile a rich, yet manageable, volume of qualitative data from 23 students which yielded 11 narrative case studies.

During the course of our work it emerged that taught Master's students are a relatively under-researched population, and so we believe that the project has made a substantial contribution towards uncovering the needs and preferences in general of students at this level, not just their usage of digital technologies.

Conclusions

While taught Master's students may not differ greatly from undergraduates in terms of their disposition towards, and capabilities in, digital technologies, they appear to be more mature in their use of those technologies: e.g. online data sources (particularly Google and Wikipedia) and social networks.

Adopting a chronological, activity-driven approach, and working without the benefit of an extensive literature on previous research into taught postgraduates, meant that a substantial portion of our data collection has related to their overall experience of learning. This means, therefore, that we can both contribute to the burgeoning literature on the student experience of technology-enhanced learning, and fill some gaps in the literature on learning in general among taught postgraduates.

* Integrated Immunology, Neuroscience

† Applied Linguistics & Second-Language Acquisition, Comparative & International Education, Educational Research Methods, E-learning, Higher Education

‡ Applied Landscape Archaeology, International Human Rights Law (online + 2 5-week residential sessions in Oxford)

Section Two: Project Outputs

List the project outputs and indicate where they can be accessed. Account for any variance between this list and the intended outputs listed in the project plan.

If appropriate, include a statement regarding third party permissions and licences for accessing outputs.

Outputs listed in the project plan

The following outputs are, or soon will be, available:

- 11 case studies describing students' different experiences and the role technology plays in them: <http://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/thema/Thema+Case+Studies>
- Methodological report. *In progress: to be uploaded to project website by 4/05/09; drafts available on request.*
- Recommendations and guidance for practitioners, support staff, institutional managers, learners and technical developers. *Input has been provided to the documents being produced by the Support & Synthesis project; internal documents for practitioners and technical staff at the University of Oxford are envisaged for May 2009.*
- Questions and data from the three online surveys (baseline, initial and reflective): <http://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/thema/Thema+Surveys>. This also includes a) instructions to the students who piloted the baseline survey, b) instructions to students for completing the surveys themselves, and c) a report on the initial survey data collected from the face-to-face

students in October 2007.

- Project website: <http://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/thema/THEMA+Home>

The following outputs listed in the project plan have not been produced:

- A project report detailing how the research questions have been addressed and drawing out lessons learned. *Replaced by this report and by reports on students' use of technology and on their holistic experience of learning (see "Additional outputs").*
- Interview protocols. *Each interview was designed separately, so there is no common protocol. However, a sample protocol will be included as an appendix to the methodological report.*

Additional outputs

- 23 case records: approved qualitative data from the pen-pals in addition to the 11 narrative case studies. *Together with the survey data, these records have been used as the primary data sources for project reports, presentations, publications and the programme-level outputs prepared by the Support & Synthesis project. Although the case records themselves are not being made publicly available, data from them can be obtained for research purposes from Liz Masterman.*
- 9 "Day in the Life" accounts. *These were developed on the suggestion of a project team member and were used to inform an activity in the dissemination workshops organised by the Support & Synthesis project. The instructions sent to the students, and a table for them to complete, are available at <http://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/thema/Thema+Day+in+the+Life>. Although the accounts themselves are not being made publicly available, data from them can be obtained for research purposes from Liz Masterman.*
- Report on students' use of technology. *In progress: to be uploaded to project website by 4/05/09; drafts available on request. Addresses some of the areas originally envisaged for coverage in the project report.*
- Report on students' holistic experience of learning. *This need for this report has emerged from the extensive data gathered on the general experience of studying at Master's level, which was not envisaged at the outset of the project. In progress: to be uploaded to project website by 4/05/09; drafts available on request.*
- Guidance on the pen-pal methodology: <http://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/thema/Thema+Pen-Pal+Methodology>. *This was made available to the Support & Synthesis project for incorporation into the dissemination workshop packs.*
- A list in Delicious of online resources gathered during the project: <http://delicious.com/Oxthema>

Permission for use

All 23 "pen-pal" students have given us approval to use their contributions in our reports and publications. The 11 students for whom we compiled narrative case studies have given permission for those case studies to be made publicly available. Pseudonyms have been used for all students, and additional identifying information such as nationality and course title have been removed at the request of individual students.

Section Three: Project Outcomes

Briefly summarise the main outcomes as a result of the project activities. Specify the contribution the project has made to each of the program level themes. Refer to the outputs from the previous section as appropriate.

Outcomes in relation to the project plan

This section is discussed in relation to the intangible outputs and the outcomes envisaged in sections 4.2 and 5 respectively of the project plan.

The principal outcomes of the project have been a deeper understanding of how students at Master's level experience their learning and engage with digital technologies. Because data collection ended later than intended, we have not yet had time to make recommendations to teaching staff and to technical developers. However, plans are under way to compile reports for

academic staff and to give a seminar at the Oxford Learning Institute (see Section Four). To an extent, our ability to make innovative recommendations regarding the institutional provision of technology has been limited in view of parallel independent developments within OUCS a) to migrate the institutional VLE to a new software infrastructure with a different user interface (Sakai), b) to implement a new groupware system (including email), and c) to extend wireless coverage. However, data from the online surveys has been made available to inform decisions regarding other developments within OUCS (e.g. responding to an increase in students' ownership of Macs).

We have also considerably expanded our expertise in the methodology (data collection and analysis) for investigating learner experiences. The "pen-pal" method proved a highly effective means of collecting data over an extended period in a controlled manner, and was also praised by the students themselves.

Contribution to programme-level themes

Personalisation (personalising tools and environments):

Although over 90% of students have laptops, they tend not to take them to classes for a range of reasons that include the weight and/or poor condition of the equipment, fear of theft and preference for taking notes by hand. This raises implications for designing class-based learning activities that assume students have their own technologies to hand.

Students' perception of their proficiency in their use of digital technologies may be at variance with the behaviours that they actually display in terms of the range of tools used and their curiosity in finding out what is available. It would appear that they equate being "tech-savvy" with advanced computer-science skills, when in fact what counts more is curiosity and the ability to find and evaluate what's useful.

Effective e-learners:

"Effective" learning is challenging to define, and difficult to measure without triangulating students' self-reports with their actual grades. However, participants were – or became – adept at accessing and evaluating information in digital environments, in using specialist (domain-specific) tools needed to support their learning, and in finding online tools either themselves or by asking friends. Facebook was used as a tool to share academic resources as well as to co-ordinate social activities. Students also implemented their own strategies to resist distractions from social tools while they were working.

In summary, students know when to "e-" and when not to "e-", blending the affordances of tools and interactions in the online and real worlds (for example, to manage their learning they tended to use paper-based, rather than digital, planning tools.). They also recognise the special atmosphere engendered when students and lecturers are co-present in the classroom and feel that the learning experience may be diminished if lectures are offered as podcasts.

Social software:

Facebook has emerged as the dominant medium of informal peer communication, both for academic support and for social purposes. However, individual students' preferences for a more private online lifestyle are respected by their peers, who take pains to maintain dual-channel communications (i.e. email as well as Facebook) in order to include these students.

Technologies such as Skype and Facebook play an important role in enabling overseas students in adapting to an unfamiliar academic and social environment through keeping in touch with friends and family at home.

Postgraduate students consider social networks inappropriate environments for formal learning. However, they acknowledge lecturers' right to a social presence there and may even form Facebook "friendships" with individual tutors, taking care to restrict the tutors' access to their profiles.

Change and transition and Specific group of learners (taught Master's students):

Study at Master's level can entail major adaptation on the part of students in terms of a) the transition from structured, teacher-directed undergraduate studies to a more autonomous approach to their learning and b) the emphasis on analytical thought. This adaptation is particularly marked in overseas students who have come from different educational systems. Technology does not feature as a major issue, apart from among those students who have been used to campus-wide wireless access in their previous universities and are therefore dissatisfied with Oxford's

incomplete coverage. Conversely, students from countries where universities lack a sophisticated technological infrastructure have appreciated the facilities available at the University of Oxford.

Students who adopt a flexible approach to their new environment appear more likely to succeed in making the adaptation than students who expect a continuation of their undergraduate experience (at least, in the taught component of the course).

Although many students at Master's level are adept at managing their own learning, a number are not and acquire the requisite skills the hard way (through difficult experience).

Course-level practices:

A tension exists between course pedagogies that expect students to take control of their own learning and students' need for regular formative feedback.

Reading lists are a necessity, and students appreciate it where key texts are clearly indicated. Students expect to obtain the bulk of their reading materials online, although for convenience they may print them before reading in depth. However, online catalogues enable students to make their visits to libraries for printed materials more efficient. They want photocopies of essential texts to be made available where there are insufficient copies in the libraries to go round.

Students prefer tutors to make judicious use of PowerPoint, using it to illustrate their lectures, not as the "script". They want animations and graphics to be used more to convey complex concepts.

Students want training in the use of library services and required digital tools to be "just in time" (i.e. available when they need it) as well as "just in case" (i.e. given during the induction period, when students are overwhelmed by a volume of information, and many have only just arrived in the UK for the first time).

Institutional-level practices:

The transience of Master's students' sojourn in Oxford may deter them from using institutionally provided technologies and services including data back-up, referencing tools and, even, email addresses. However, most students do make use of their "@ox.ac.uk" addresses, although they may automatically redirect messages sent to these addresses to their personal accounts.

Although OUCS sends information about its IT training programme to students, this tends to be lost in the welter of information that students receive when they arrive in Oxford. As a result, they are often unaware that a) courses in different IT applications are available to them free and b) materials for these courses are available on the VLE for self-led study. Where students do know about these courses, they are often unable to attend them as they are run at the same time as academic classes.

Section Four: Dissemination

List the dissemination that has taken place and is planned, about project findings and outcomes, e.g. workshops, journal articles, conference presentations. Attach or provide URLs for any appropriate dissemination or presentation materials.

We have taken part in a number of events, both in the research community at large and within the University of Oxford. We have been unable to contribute to the ALT-C Conferences in 2008 and 2009 as Liz Masterman is co-editing the book of abstracts. However, we have received permission from JISC to hold over funds in order to attend one more conference after the end of the project.

** denotes that materials are available on the Thema project Website at

<https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/thema/Taking+Thema+into+the+Community>

Dissemination within the wider community

27/06/07: JISC Learning & Teaching Experts' Group meeting. Liz Masterman gave a brief overview of the project **

15/04/08: JISC Conference 2008. Jane Alexen Shuyska took part in the session *Changing Student Experience and Expectations of ICT* and presented some findings from the Thema project.

08/07/08: University of Greenwich E-learning Conference, "Learning from the Learners' Experience". Presentation (Liz Masterman & Jane Alexen Shuyska): *Masters of the digital age? A study of the (e-)learning experiences of taught postgraduate students and the implications for scaffolding teachers' engagement with technology.*

09/12/08-11/12/08: SRHE Annual Conference 2008, "Valuing Higher Education".

Paper (Liz Masterman & Jane Alexen Shuyska): *How can case studies inform our understanding of the study-work-life balance among taught postgraduate students? ***

26/03/09: JISC Learner Experiences of E-learning Dissemination Workshop, Bristol. Presentations by Liz Masterman and one of the student "pen-pals".

02/04/09: Shock of the Old Conference 2009, University of Oxford: "Digital literacy: the role of new media in the HE curriculum". Poster (Liz Masterman, Jane Alexen Shuyska & Fawei Geng): *Digitally Mastered: Aspects of Digital Literacy among Taught Postgraduate Students at the University of Oxford. ***

Dissemination within the University of Oxford

21/09/07: OUCS "Friday Talks" series. Talk (Liz Masterman): *Thinking and imagining - or staring at screens? ***

08/10/07: Department of Education annual poster conference. *Thema: Capturing the experiences of Master's students in a digital age ***

05/03/08: OUCS "Digital Projects in Oxford" series. Talk (Liz Masterman): *Thinking and imagining - or staring at screens? *** (Same title as the previous talk, but different content)

27/03/08: Oxford University Library Services Conference, "Web 2.0: Libraries Creating New Connections and Communities". Presentation (Liz Masterman): *Thema: researching the experiences of Master's students in a digital age ***

29/07/08: Round Table. The Thema team hosted a "round table" of five projects at Oxford which were investigating different aspects of the learner experience, including the JISC-funded "Isthmus" project and "The learner and their context," a 3-year study funded by Becta and conducted at the Dept of Education. This provided an opportunity to share methodologies, preliminary findings and challenges.

02/12/08: Presentation to the MSc E-learning students. Part of a showcase of e-learning projects at the University, we used this opportunity to rehearse the SRHE presentation.

Forthcoming:

04/06/09: Oxford Learning Institute. Research seminar (Liz Masterman): *"There isn't anyone hanging over us": the experience of studying on Master's programmes at Oxford*.

Dates to be confirmed: OUCS Research Forum: talk; E-learning Research Group (Department of Education): seminar.

Section Five: Key Messages

Briefly outline the key messages from your project which you would like to see inform future work.

Future learner experience research

- Conduct more qualitative research into the needs and preferences of taught postgraduate students at other universities.
- Investigate in more depth whether demographic factors exercise an influence on students' experience of digital technologies (the Thema data were inconclusive in this respect, but suggested little or no influence).
- Investigate the "emotional" aspect of learning which we have uncovered in data from a number of Thema participants, and which is evidenced through the direct articulation of pleasure or dissatisfaction over their experiences, particularly in the contrasting ways in which that different students may respond affectively to the same phenomenon. The "emotional" dimension has also been alluded to in other studies of the learner experience.

Other JISC projects

- Research topics: The role of technology in pre-course induction and familiarisation programmes, the role of technology in providing formative feedback, development of tools for learning that have Web 2.0-like features and functionality as an alternative to seeking to appropriate "general purpose" Web 2.0 tools into an educational context.

Policy and practice in further and higher education sectors

- Greater recognition of the needs of taught postgraduate students, making the institution's expectations regarding the level of autonomy/self-direction explicit and providing subtle support as students adjust to the new way of learning.

Section Six: Synergy & Sustainability

List and briefly describe any links established with other Learner Experience projects, programmes, projects or services.

Explain how the outputs and outcomes of the project will be taken forward and how these synergies could be built on in the future.

Synergy

We attended the third visit of the Support & Synthesis project to the PB-LXP project. Liz Masterman was also invited to join the advisory group for the BLUPS project, but unfortunately that project was curtailed before the group was able to meet.

Within Oxford, there have been a number of projects researching learners' experience of technology ranging from the major Becta-funded study "The learner and their context" to an individual DPhil thesis. In July 2008 the Thema project organised a "Round Table" at which five projects presented their research and shared methodological issues. Team members have also been involved with the Becta-funded study: Jane Alexen Shuyska as a researcher and Liz Masterman as a participant (in her capacity as parent of children using digital technologies).

Sustainability

With the project finishing so late in the JISC Learner Experience programme, we are not yet in a position to report on the potential for carrying the methodology and findings of the project forward within the University of Oxford. However, we are taking every opportunity to make the data available where it might inform policy and practice: for example, to aid decision-making regarding the provision of support and training for the growing population of Mac users and to contribute to a proposed initiative within OUCS to promote students' awareness of online privacy and security. We also intend to capitalise on newly-formed links between the Learning Technologies Group and the Oxford Learning Institute (the University's staff development arm), particularly in order to bring to academics' attention the needs and preferences of Master's students both in relation to their learning in general and their perspectives on the current and potential role of digital technologies in that learning.

Section Seven: Issues and Challenges

Report on issues or problems that impacted on the development and implementation of the project. What advice would you give to others embarking on learner experience projects?

Recruitment and retention

The major issue that we identified at the start of the project was the recruitment and retention of students. To encourage recruitment, we gave introductory presentations to the face-to-face cohorts with the approval of their course directors, and "wrapped" the invitation to the online students in a message of support from their course director. In recognition of the levels of participation required over an extended period, particularly from students in full-time employment, we set a higher level of remuneration than we would have done for undergraduate students. This strategy risked attracting participants who were motivated primarily by the financial reward – something which is, of course, impossible to determine. (Interestingly, some of the "survey-only" students failed to claim their fee, so clearly payment did not appear to be a major incentive for them.)

We guarded against attrition in two ways: i) over-recruitment and ii) the personalised approach of the "pen-pal" method (see Section One). We expected to lose roughly half of our pen-pals, and the same proportion of our survey-only students. In the event, retention of the "pen-pals" was almost 100%: one person withdrew from their course temporarily after two terms but allowed us to use their (incomplete) case record. Of course, over-recruiting makes it difficult to calculate a budget for

student remuneration: if all of the “survey-only” students had responded to both surveys and claimed their payments, we would have had a budget shortfall.

Controlling the volume of data

In projects of this kind one risks generating an enormous volume of data that proves impossible to analyse in its entirety. In Thema we kept to written and interview data only, although our targeted approach (i.e. asking specific questions) risked cutting off opportunities to uncover the unexpected.

Staffing levels

Staffing proved to be our greatest challenge, as the project depended on three individuals working part-time with other competing commitments: respectively, another substantial research project, doctoral study and regular staff duties. One person was removed from the project at short notice in summer 2008, leaving the remaining two to conduct all the data analysis, compose the case studies and write the reports. In projects of this kind, it is essential to have one full-time researcher – something which was not possible in Thema, for reasons which have been discussed confidentially with the Programme Manager and Support & Synthesis project.

Section Eight: Support

Please comment on the value to your project of the Support and Synthesis team, workshops, visits and activities.

A balance has always to be struck between allowing projects to develop in the directions indicated by their particular contexts and ensuring that the interests of the programme are met (in terms of collecting data that is consistent with the over-arching themes), and we congratulate the Support & Synthesis team on achieving and maintaining this balance over the two-year life of the programme.

The first two workshops (March and June 2007) were excellent in terms of getting started and building confidence, and the final one (March 2009) was particularly fruitful as it gave us our first opportunity to share our data with the rest of the programme.

Individual visits from the Support & Synthesis project were much valued, and also reassured us that we were heading in the right direction at times when we felt we were going against the general flow. However, we were a little disappointed by the response to a request, made in two successive interim reports, for guidance on designing and conducting interviews. We were hoping for some direct personal assistance, but instead were referred to information on the project wiki which did not fully meet our needs. It is possible, though, that our expectations were overly high in this respect.

Section Nine: Financial Statement

Provide a final financial statement, accounting for any variance from the agreed budget.

Total Grant	£79,329	Duration of project	25 months
Reporting Period	1- Mar-2007 – 31-Mar-2009		

Budget Headings	Total budget allocated £	Expenditure this reporting period £	Total expenditure to date £	Further information
Staff				
Travel & Subsistence				
Equipment				
Dissemination activities				
Evaluation activities				
Transcription				
Remuneration of Students				
Directly Allocated Costs				
Indirect Costs				
Oxford Contribution				
Total:				

* As agreed with Sarah Knight (emails dated 14-Jul-2008 and 9-Feb-2009)

Please note that the Completion Reports, including attachments, will be made available on the JISC website and on the programme wiki with the budgetary information removed.