

## Interim Project Report

<b>Project Name</b>	<b>Thema: University of Oxford</b> <a href="http://thema.oucs.ox.ac.uk">http://thema.oucs.ox.ac.uk</a>
<b>Report compiled by</b>	<b>Dr Liz Masterman, Oxford University Computing Services (OUCS)</b>
<b>With contributions from</b>	The Thema project team and advisory group
<b>Reporting period</b>	2: 16 <sup>th</sup> October 2007 – 15 <sup>th</sup> April 2008 Revised version: 24 <sup>th</sup> April 2008

### Section One: Summary

The Thema project is investigating how Master's students at Oxford University use digital technologies in their academic and social lives. We are now following the experiences of 76 Master's students on taught full-time (one-year) and part-time (two-year) programmes in the Departments of Education, Medical Sciences and Continuing Education from October 2007 to September 2008. The full-time programmes are face-to-face and mediated by technology, primarily the institutional VLE. One of the part-time programmes is face-to-face with fortnightly meetings and makes extensive use of digital technologies for archaeology, while the other is a blended online-F2F course with students studying as far away as Hong Kong and New Zealand.

At the start of this second reporting period all 76 students have responded to an initial "profiling" survey, which is one of two online surveys framing the main study. Twenty-three of them have since been contributing to the case studies that form the centrepiece of the project, by sending email responses to specific questions from the research team. So far, three rounds of "pen-pal" correspondence have been conducted with the full-time students, two rounds with the F2F part-time course and one with the blended course (which only began in January 2008). These 23 students will be interviewed over the summer, and will be narrowed down to the final 10-12 case studies envisaged in the project plan.

Also during this reporting period the project team has received a second visit from the Support & Synthesis project, and has participated in the third and fourth Learner Experience programme workshops. We have also been involved in another two dissemination events within Oxford University and have selectively made portions of data available to OUCS to inform discussion and decision-making regarding the institutional provision of technology (in particular a proposed groupware solution). The project Advisory Group has met to review the overall progress of the project, using a draft version of this report as a starting-point for its discussions.

### Section Two: Activities and Progress

#### Activities:

Student recruitment (work package 4) has straddled the previous and current reporting periods. We experienced minor attrition on the initial survey, but since our policy was to over-recruit participants, in part to accommodate such an eventuality, this did not cause concern. We limited our recruitment of students starting in January to just one programme – the blended course in International Human Rights Law (IHRL) – and, thanks in large part to endorsement of the Thema project by the course director, we secured the participation of ten students, four of whom are contributing case studies.

The initial survey (work package 5) was conducted via SurveyMonkey in October and February, in accordance with the differing start dates of courses. It was modified slightly for the IHRL students in view of the online setting. Both versions of the survey questions are publicly available on the project Website at <http://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/thema/THEMA+Home> (under "Project Resources and Outputs"). The data from students who started in October has now been analysed, and the report (by Kate Lindsay) is also available on the Website.

The survey data from the IHRL students are currently awaiting analysis and integration into the initial survey report (both tasks scheduled for completion in May 2008). As part of that task we will also integrate data from the baseline survey (work package 2) into the report for comparative

purposes.

The collection of concurrent data (work package 6) using our “pen-pal” methodology is proving very successful, with no attrition of participants to date. The pen-pal method of corresponding with students by email roughly four times over the first two terms of their course was developed in part to address the risk of attrition among participants. Email was chosen as opposed to video or audio diaries as we are focusing on reflection, not students' immediate reactions. The methodology is based on the principle that sustained participation will be maximised by adopting a personalised approach: i.e. one which involves a) individualised, personally "signed" messages from a single named researcher throughout, and b) questions that take the student's specific course and own individual experience as a starting point.

Although the length of contributions varies from student to student, the quality of data is generally good, and we are building up a picture of each student's evolving experience – both holistic and in relation to technology – which will enable us to target our interview questions very specifically. In our most recent round, we have collected students' logs of their activities over the course of a single day, which give a picture of how technology fits into their daily patterns. More information about the pen-pal methodology and the kinds of question that we have been asking students can be found at <http://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/thema/Thema+Pen-Pal+Methodology>.

Our overall approach remains unchanged, although a) we have reduced the number of pen-pal rounds to 4 (5-6 were originally envisaged), and b) the format of the part-time courses means that we may rearrange our schedule in order to capture data from significant moments that occur after the planned data collection period (e.g. the F2F summer school in Oxford for the IHRL students).

#### **Data analysis:**

Data from the baseline and initial surveys have been analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Statistical analysis of selected data from the baseline survey yielded some significant demographic differences between taught Master's students and undergraduates (e.g. in terms of age, gaps in studying, native language and additional commitments). However, both sets of students appeared broadly similar in terms of IT skills and disposition towards digital technologies. Qualitative data from the surveys were coded independently by two researchers who then negotiated agreement on the categories to be used.

Data from email responses sent by the case-study contributors are undergoing formative analysis (both manually and in Atlas-TI), and we are sharing the emergent themes among ourselves on a private page of the project Website.

We acknowledge the valuable contribution to the data analysis made by two probationary research students from the Department of Education during a two-week internship with Thema in January. However, our plan to involve the MSc E-learning students in analysis of some of the concurrent data has been shelved for ethical reasons.

#### **Reporting schedule:**

The timetable for reporting currently remains as per the project plan. However, with the current high number of case studies and the possible prolongation of collection from part-time students into September, we are keeping this schedule under review and will inform the programme management of any changes that may have an impact on the current completion date.

### **Section Three: Outputs, Outcomes and Deliverables**

#### **Outputs:**

The intended outputs remain largely the same as those listed in the project plan: i.e. 10-12 case studies, project report, methodological report, recommendations re technology (both within Oxford and generally), guidance re teaching and learning (both within Oxford and generally) and data collection instruments. However, since we have 23 students contributing case studies, we may revise the planned total upwards. Criteria for short-listing the final case studies will be decided on in due course, with due reference to the expert literature and consultation with appropriate members of the Department of Education.

#### **Preliminary findings:**

Preliminary analysis of the initial survey and three rounds of “pen-pal” correspondence has yielded,

inter alia, the following findings:

- Students' experience – at least, initially – can be substantially affected by demographic factors. Non-native English speakers encounter difficulties with reading materials, and students from countries where the “information transmission” model of pedagogy predominates may find that it takes time to get used to small-group learning and the emphasis on analytical thinking. Superficially, such problems are unrelated to their use of technology, but since they impinge on students' learning as a whole, they must be taken into consideration in a research study such as this. Moreover, it may also be that technology can help them to address such problems (e.g. online dictionaries, podcasts of lectures that can be played and replayed). Specifically in relation to technology, students' provenance may also influence their reaction to institutional provision: e.g. US students used to blanket wireless coverage back home struggle with the patchy provision in Oxford, while those from developing countries are more likely to be content with the existing institutional support for technology.
- Although most Master's students appear to arrive in Oxford reasonably adept in their use of technology (e.g. >90% have laptops), a small minority do not, and with heavy workloads lack the time to learn even essential tools such as PowerPoint and Excel.
- Use of Web 2.0 tools centres on Facebook, but peer-support groups which were set up early in the courses (e.g. for exchanging resources) had degenerated into purely social groups by the end of the second term. Worryingly, some students had joined Facebook reluctantly, feeling under pressure from their peers. The low usage of online calendars, social bookmarking and RSS suggests a low awareness of the potential role of Web 2.0 in managing their learning, and this should be explored further at interview.
- Students' attitudes towards institutional provision (e.g. expectations that lecture notes and PowerPoint presentations should be uploaded to the VLE, and that lectures should be podcast), together with a widespread concern with the methods and quality of teaching independent of the use of technology, raise implications for initiatives by the e-learning community to promote teachers' engagement with technology in their teaching. This is of particular interest to Liz Masterman in view of her involvement in the JISC Design for Learning programme and, in particular, the “Phoebe” pedagogy planner project.

#### **Contributions to programme themes:**

We envisage making contributions to the following themes of the programme:

- How learners personalise their learning environments (little data gathered so far: more may emerge from the interviews)
- Beliefs and expectations at start of course (we surveyed all 76 students on this question, but the data are slightly skewed by the prestige of Oxford as an institution)
- Effective e-learners (little data gathered so far: not clear to what extent we will be able to contribute to this theme)
- Social software (currently, the evolving use of Facebook)
- Change and transition (i.e. in students' holistic experience of learning as well as in their use of technology)
- Specific learners/contexts (i.e. Master's students, with non-UK students as a subset)
- How learners' preferences and practices are supported (or not) by the institutional context
- Significant moments in learning

#### **Section Four: Dissemination**

##### **Dissemination activities:**

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

05/03/08: OUCS “Digital Projects in Oxford” series. Presentation: *Thinking and imagining – or staring at screens?: News from the Thema project*. Audience included departmental colleagues, students on the MSc E-learning course and interested staff from elsewhere in the University.

27/03/08: Oxford University Library Services Conference: Web 2.0: Libraries Creating New Connections and Communities. Presentation: *Thema: researching the experiences of Master's*

*students in a digital age*. The audience consisted of staff from Oxford University's many libraries.

The documents associated with the above events are available at <http://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/thema/Thema+Dissemination+Materials>

Project team members were actively involved in organising the "Shock of the Old: Web 2.0 and the Connected Future" and "Beyond Digital Natives" events at Oxford University on 03-04/04/08, which gave us an opportunity to talk informally about the project with delegates.

Summaries of the project have been published in the OUCS Annual Report and the newsletter of the Learning Technologies Group.

Paul Davis, Acting Manager of the LTG, mentioned Thema in a workshop which he ran at the 2007 Educause conference.

#### Forthcoming events:

Jane Shuyska has been invited to participate in a panel discussion on a learner experience theme at the JISC Innovation Forum 2008 (15/07/08).

We have had a paper accepted at the Greenwich E-learning Conference 2008, which has the specific theme "Learning from the Learner's Experience" (08/07/08).

We are not entitled to present a short paper at ALT-C 2008 as Liz Masterman is co-editor of abstracts; however, we remain alert to other opportunities and expect the bulk of dissemination effort to take place after the end of the project.

#### **Expected dissemination outputs:**

We are focusing primarily on text-based (printed and online) rather than multimedia outputs. While complying with the primary requirement of Phase 2 to produce a number of accessible (in every sense) case studies for the teaching and learning technology communities, we also aim to produce academic papers for publication in peer-reviewed journals..

As noted, we are not yet certain how many case studies we will produce. Within the university, they will probably be disseminated through the OUCS Website, and we await with interest the proposals of the Support & Synthesis project for a programme-wide online dissemination platform.

Liz Masterman is meeting the Oxford Learning Institute (staff development unit) at the end of April to discuss how we might take forward the outputs from both the Thema and the Phoebe Pedagogic Planner projects within Oxford.

### **Section Five: Evaluation**

#### **Students' experiences:**

The evaluation plan (section 16 of the project plan) envisaged two evaluation measures during this period:

- a) *The collection of data from a minimum of 50 students on their levels of engagement with technology and expectation of technology use during their course.* This figure was exceeded by 50%, although qualitative data on the second of these themes were less rich than the (mainly quantitative) data on their existing levels of engagement (perhaps because the students found it hard to think in terms of their expectations in relation to technology). Those levels of engagement broadly accorded with the university-wide baseline survey of May 2007.
- b) *At least 4-5 specific episodes of data collection from 12-20 students yielding their evolving study choices and strategies, and the "significant moments" (note: we now use this term in preference to "critical moments") in their university lives.* We are currently working with 23 students and have lowered the number of pen-pal rounds to four, in part because of the brevity of Oxford terms (eight weeks) and in part because we have had to space out the rounds to accommodate deadlines and significant learning activities on the courses. With the IHRL students we may only carry out three rounds, as our experience with the other part-time cohort suggests that four rounds may be too many. Data on significant moments shows that many such moments are unrelated to students' use of technology or, even, to their actual studies.

#### **Formative evaluation of project:**

The project team has continued to meet according to need and availability rather than on a regular monthly basis. The project manager has also continued to review work accomplished in relation to

the work packages and has recorded progress in the work package document. Continued pressure from other commitments means that we have not yet caught up from the slippages affecting the baseline survey report (work package 2) and a systematic review of related literature (work package 3). However, the completion of other projects has made it possible to set a completion date of 23/05/08 for a short report on the baseline survey (with qualitative data to focus on responses from Master's students) and to follow up the many links and references which we have been collecting in our del.icio.us (<http://del.icio.us/Oxthema>) and RefWorks accounts.

The meeting of the Advisory Group on 09/04/08 provided an opportunity to reflect on the progress of the project over its first 12 months. The principal areas of concern were:

- The process by which we will select our 12 case studies. This has always been acknowledged as an issue and was already due to be addressed at our next team planning meeting on 14/04/08 (see also Section Three).
- Dissemination of the project within Oxford. Members of the group made a number of helpful suggestions, which the team will follow up in due course.

## Section Six: Issues and Challenges

### Issues/challenges:

The project has no immediate major issues or challenges, although an important test will be the numbers of "non-case study" participants who respond to the second (reflective) survey in May. This will be crucial to the contextualising of the case studies themselves.

Timetabling the interviews over a busy period for both the project team and the participants – some of whom may be researching for their dissertations abroad – will also be a challenge. However, we have already taken steps to ascertain students' whereabouts during June and July.

A longer-term issue of concern is providing a legacy, not only to the community of teachers and learning technologists (cf the link to the interests of the pedagogy planner projects noted in Section Three), but also to the wider research community involved in investigating the learner experience: for example, through the construction or adaptation of an appropriate conceptual/analytical framework that might be of benefit for designing, conducting or analysing this kind of research.

### Unexpected achievements:

In addition to sustained participation by, and the quantity of lengthy high-quality contributions from, the students contributing to the case studies since October, a major coup has been the recruitment of the ten students who are currently studying the first online component of the IHRL course. Based as far away as Hong Kong and New Zealand, they are bringing an additional dimension to our research.

Two approaches from the University's Department of Education have been particularly pleasing: one was a request to provide work experience for graduate students (see Section Two) and the other was an invitation for the project manager to attend an invitation-only series of five seminars over the next 18 months, "The educational and social impact of new technologies on young people in Britain," organised by the Department of Education and LSE, and funded by the ESRC.

## Section Seven: Support

### Support workshops:

We commend the work by the Support & Synthesis project to ensure consistency (as far as is possible!) in the themes addressed by the individual projects, as well as in the essential demographic data. The first two workshops were undoubtedly helpful in getting us started and building confidence. However, from our perspective the value of the third and fourth workshops in terms of taking the Thema project forward, as well as advancing the programme as a whole, has been less clear. It is possible that three, rather than four, programme meetings might have sufficed, with the final meeting taking place nearer the end of the programme (cf. the timings of the Design for Learning programme meetings).

### Other contacts:

The individual meetings between the Thema and Support & Synthesis teams have provided a useful opportunity to reflect on our achievements so far and to obtain an external perspective both

on the data already collected and on the kinds of question that we might usefully ask of our participants in later rounds.

We have had no substantial contacts with other projects in the Learner Experience programme (mainly through lack of time), although STROLL's presentation at the Shock 2008 conference provided an opportunity for an informal conversation, and BLUPS has indicated that it would like a Thema team member to attend its next meeting with the Support & Synthesis project. However, there are now at least three other projects on a similar theme in Oxford with whom we plan to make contact, in addition to the Isthmus project (TALL, Department of Continuing Education) in which Liz Masterman is already involved.

It is important to acknowledge that every day spent attending meetings is one day fewer for real work on the project: i.e. planning the next round of data collection, analysing the latest set of data so that we have something to share with the community, reading the relevant literature etc.

Therefore, we are being somewhat selective about the number of "learner experience" events that we attend. Moreover, contacts with other, seemingly unrelated, communities can be equally beneficial to the project.

**Specific requests for the Support & Synthesis team:**

In the previous interim report we expressed a desire for guidance on conducting interviews. Since we will be starting this phase of the project in early June, that need is acquiring urgency.

**Section Eight: Financial Statement**

Removed.

**Please note the interim reports, including attachments, will be made available on the JISC website and on the programme wiki with the budgetary information removed.**