

Geography Education Online: A Formative Evaluation

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Abstract

In 2001, an online version of the well-established Masters Geography in Education course at the Institute of Education, University of London, became available to the English-speaking world. This paper outlines the principles underlying the course, its curriculum, and assessment approaches used. It is a formative evaluation of that course. The evaluation is described and implications drawn.

Key Words: *distance learning, geography education, e-learning, distributed learning*

Introduction

The practice of 'distance learning' has been developing and evolving in many different forms in recent years, so that the phrase is now routinely applied to a very wide spectrum of activities. Distance learning is increasingly being looked to by many institutions as an economical way of expanding their activities, widening opportunities for students around the world, and making effective use of the new technologies which are rapidly emerging (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 1999, p. 1).

In October 2001, the long established Masters (MA) course in geography education at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University of London, become available for English speakers throughout the world. The first cohort of 16 students from five countries is currently enrolled. This paper presents a formative evaluation of this curriculum development.

Usually 'distance learning' is taken to be a form of education whereby the resources for study are transferred to the student's location rather than the student having to be in residence at the location of the resource provider. A

large literature on networked learning and its various shades, including distributed online and flexible learning, has emerged, but two recent examples will suffice. *Distributed Learning: Social and Cultural Approaches to Practice* (Lea and Nicoll, 2002) was adopted as a reader for the Open University's¹ course 'Understanding Distributed and Flexible Learning' and sketches out some of the main theoretical issues underpinning the design and analysis of distributed learning. Steeples and Jones (2002) address the key issues and current thinking about networked learning in higher education and offer an important set of theoretical and methodological perspectives. It is not surprising then that universities consider these developments as ways of 'extending their markets' and are investing accordingly. A good example of a global alliance of higher education institutions was announced in February 2000 when the UK universities of Leeds, Sheffield, Southampton, and York linked up with four research-led American institutions – the University of California at San Diego, Pennsylvania State University, the University of Washington, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The new alliances have led to talk of e-universities and global educational alliances.

The particular course of study under review – the MA Geography in Education course of study – is based upon the campus-delivered course at the London Institute of Education. The *raison d'être* was to make it more available to the world of geography education – or at least the English-speaking world. Approximately two years of discussions and research led to planning this distance geography education Masters degree. Leaders of distance courses were interviewed and a panel of national and international advisors was consulted. Two major working principles were followed. First, wherever possible and appropriate (given the worldwide audience), the future course should mirror the successful campus-based course. Second, the technology and means of delivery should be stable and robust and where there was a doubt about meeting these criteria, we agreed start off with 'lower tech' solutions. The two years of research and development were made possible by a seed grant from the Institute of Education.

The Course

The general aims of the course are to:

- introduce and encourage a critical understanding of the literature and concepts of geography education
- help stimulate interest and enjoyment so that students continue their personal and professional development beyond the course
- contribute to the development of autonomous, reflectively thinking individuals, capable of taking a leading role in education

- to prepare students for the successful completion of their coursework assessments and thus the achievement of a valued and widely recognised further qualification
- help provide professionally relevant elements of knowledge, understanding, skills and values
- enable geography educators to interact with colleagues from all over the world.

The overall course objectives include:

- providing opportunities for increasing knowledge and developing understanding of concepts involved in geography in education
- providing opportunities for the consideration of the above in relation to a number of themes
- contributing toward the development of social, intellectual and study skills
- providing opportunities for students to clarify and develop their own feelings, values and attitudes in relation to themes and issues in geography education
- providing opportunities for critical reflection and analysis during a period of professional development.

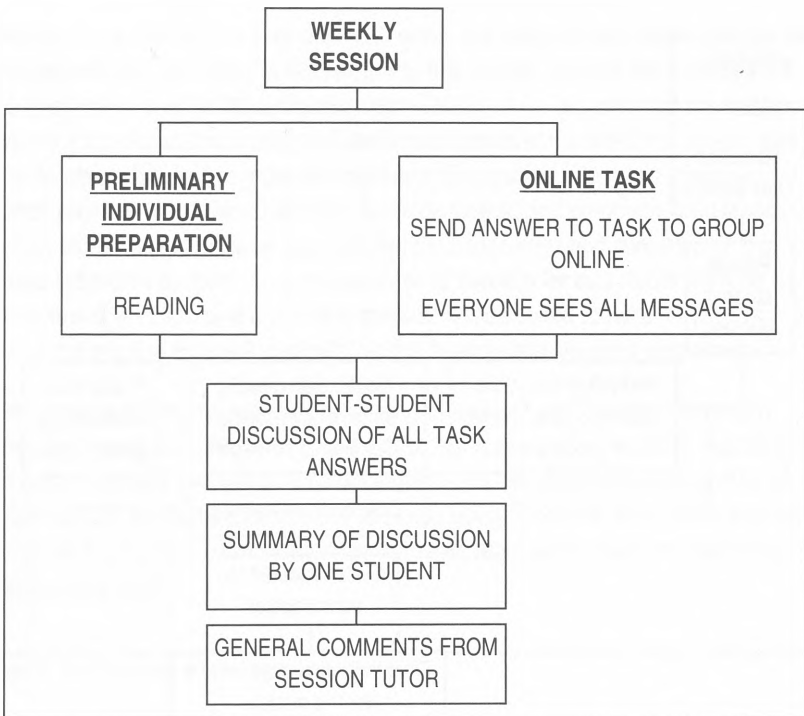


Figure 1. Weekly Activities Outlined

The course is delivered on-line and consists of four content modules (20 credits each) and a dissertation requirement. Each module lasts for ten weeks and around five hours a week are expected for reading, doing the set tasks and interacting with tutors and fellow students. Six months are programmed into the MA course of study for researching and writing the dissertation. Figure 1 outlines what students are required to do on a weekly basis. The degree is also envisioned as having many opportunities for collaborative learning, as illustrated in Figure 2. Figure 3 explains the online learning given to the students to guide them through their tasks for each module and the degree.

The first module, *Progress in Geography – Changing Viewpoints*, focuses on changes and developments in geography in higher education, to illuminate different and contrasting philosophies, methodologies and meanings within geography and to relate these changes to geography in education. This module is assessed by the curriculum unit. *The Geography Curriculum – Development and Planning* is the second module. This module is entwined with change, development and research as issues of public policy, development projects, aims, objectives, styles, evaluation and planning come under scrutiny and is assessed by a critical analysis. The third module, *The Geography Curriculum – Issues of Concern* addresses concerns in geography, curricu-

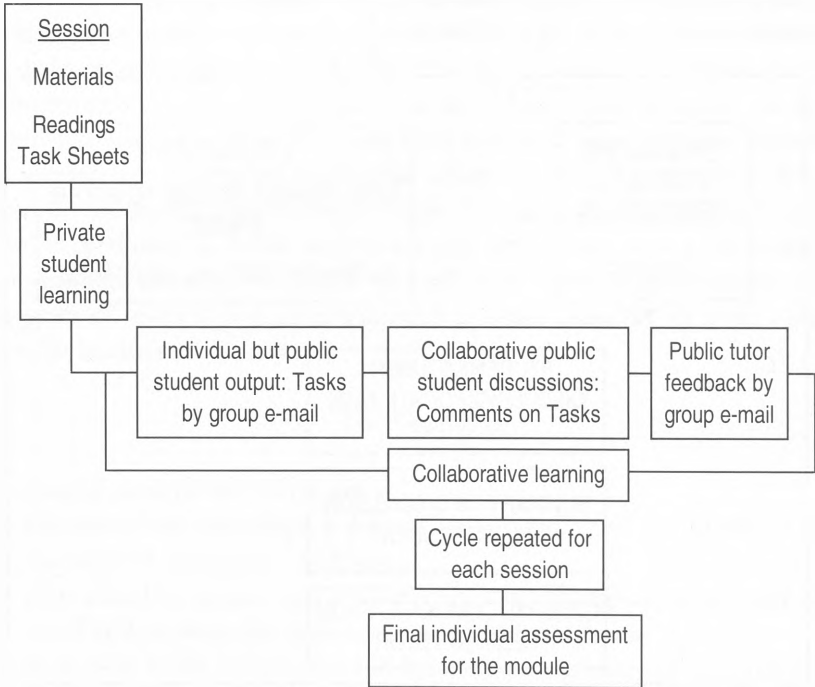


Figure 2. How Collaborative Learning is Encouraged

Explanation of Online Learning

Your work for each module will be divided into weekly sessions, and each session will deal with one topic of the module. These topics are given in the timetable which you are expected to follow in the same way as you would follow the timetable of a normal term. Each week you will be required to do the required readings and send in, by e-mail through First Class, a finished task which you have been assigned for that week. Please see the chart of weekly activities which shows you what you need to do week by week.

Your time commitment each week will be roughly equivalent to that required for our in-house MA programmes. At the Institute of Education, an in-house module equivalent to ours involves a total of 20 hours of classroom time. This is normally spread over 10 class sessions lasting 2 hours each. In this distance learning version of the course, you will have the same number of sessions, but each one will be spread over a week. You are expected to spend roughly the same time per week as in the traditional mode, but you will be reading and writing online instead of attending a class. In total for each week you should be prepared to spend 5 hours on each topic. This will include interaction with fellow students.

Although you can work in your own time within the space of each week, we ask that you submit your task early in the week. For this reason, the task for the week will be available online by Thursday afternoon (GMT), as we assume that most of you will do your preparatory work and submit your task over the weekend. Please see the timetable for the first module *Progress in Geography: Changing Viewpoints*. Once your task has been submitted, it can be viewed and commented on by your fellow students. In the same way, you will be able to view and comment on the tasks submitted by them. The complete set of answers for each topic will form an overview of the topic and one of the students will be asked to write a synopsis. Then the session tutor will comment on the session and students' responses.

Although your tasks do not have to be long (usually about 300 words in length), they do have to be submitted regularly each week. In terms of Institute regulations, in order to qualify for entry to the examination, you are required to attend 80% of your lectures for each module. For this online MA programme, this means you are required to submit at least eight of the ten tasks required for each module in the appropriate week.

Figure 3. Explanation of Online Learning

lum, research, information technology and assessment as emphases have changed. In other words, this module aims to raise for discussion, analysis, and reflection those aspects and concepts of education and geography in education that are occurring in either an evolutionary way or in more rapid and sometimes controversial ways. A coursework essay is used to assess this module. The final module is also intended to acquaint students with the existing range of thought and methods. The *Research and Research Methods* module reviews various strands of thought, ideologies, traditions and viewpoints, explaining possibilities of strengths, weaknesses and implications. At the end of this module, students will have a greater appreciation and understanding of research in geography education in a substantive and methodological sense, preparing students for their own research. For this module, students create a portfolio that is used for assessment.

The dissertation requires students to write an ordered and critical exposition of existing knowledge in any field of study and normally does not exceed 20,000 words. Evidence that the field has been thoroughly surveyed should be apparent and a full bibliography is required. This portion makes up 40 credits of the 100 credits required for achieving the degree. Table 1 gives

Completion Year	Author	Title
2002	McKee, J.	Without criticism can there be integrity? Teaching the moral dimension of geography models.
2002	McCleave, A.	An investigation into the effective implementation of formative assessment principles in the classroom.
2002	Gibson, J.	An evaluation of the impact of a variety of strategies on learning for pupils with specific special educational needs in geography.
2002	Aspel, M.	Young peoples' perceptions and experiences of private space.
2001	Forrester, E.	An instrument to measure the use of a textbook in
2001	Parker, N.	An investigation into the residuals of geography education in adults.
2001	Elliman, H.	To what extent is curriculum progression and continuity achieved in geography across the primary/secondary interface?
2000	McCready, L.	Does geography fieldwork experience produce learning gains in Key Stage 4?
2000	Hodgson, N.	Why do students choose advanced level geography? An investigation into subject option choice at 16+.

Table 3. The Place of Geography in the Curriculum

some recent examples of dissertation titles in the conventional MA course. It is expected that the distance learning MA will have similar capstone theses to demonstrate the students' research capacity.

Figure 4 is an example of a weekly task. Readings are scanned, as are previous successful assignments and dissertations, and students gain access to these via the London Institute's library website. Usually these online resources are sufficient for completion of the course, along with the course book designed to meet the student needs on this course (Kent, 2000). Occasionally, extra readings and videos are sent out by the course administrator.

Students have support in a number of ways, including three types of university tutors. The course tutor is the overall leader of the course, a session tutor is responsible for a particular weekly 'session', and a personal tutor is there for academic and personal support throughout the period of study. Tutors and the course administrator may be contacted via email, fax, and telephone. A course website contains a noticeboard and chat room for students to contact fellow students. The library may be accessed via a named contact for queries about reading materials and scanned documents. Finally, there is named technical support for the course software. "First Class" is the software used for the course and it is available on the Institute's computer server. A key individual is the course administrator, who monitors all the interchanges and student work and is there to help with any administrative queries and any general issues. This person helps students decide on who is best to deal with a specific query.

Evaluating the Course

The evaluation data are of three types. In preparing this formative evaluation, I interviewed key persons within the course process. These were two students, two tutors, a course administrator, a technical support manager, and an external examiner. In each taped interview, I asked how that person functioned as a part of the course system, their views (both positive and negative) about the course, and finally, suggestions for ways to improve the course. I also studied the end of module student evaluations – providing both qualitative and quantitative data. Finally, as course leader, session leader, and personal tutor, I have my own experiences and views.

A number of positives were noted by the range of persons. Some of these positives include satisfaction and an overall positive impression of the course, flexibility of the course, weekly tasks, and quality of work as illustrated in Table 2. Student 2 was so taken by the course she collated responses from fellow students and wrote it up for the Geographical Association Committee of which she was a member. The First Class (technical support) librar-

<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> Evaluation for Module Changing viewpoints </div>	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4	Session 5	Session 6	Session 7	Session 8	Session 9	Session 10
How interesting did you find this session?										
Don't remember										
Dull										
Uninteresting										
Generally interesting										
Extremely interesting										
How worthwhile did you find the session?										
Not at all worthwhile										
Generally not worthwhile										
Generally worthwhile										
Very worthwhile										
How much do you estimate you learned from the session?										
Nothing										
A little										
Quite a lot										
A great deal										

Figure 4. Module Evaluation Form

Person	Observations and Reflections
<i>OVERALL IMPRESSION OF COURSE</i>	
Student 1	I have been very impressed by the course...more than my expectations were...I think it's a very good course.
Tutor 1	On the whole, I am positive about what's going on.
Student 2	I was surprised how much contact there was between students and staff...I've really enjoyed it.
<i>FLEXIBILITY OF COURSE</i>	
Administrator	It can be done from anywhere...so long as the right technology is available...the strength is its flexibility-fitting in with people's lives.
Tutor 1	It is obviously serving a need for those who want this particular type of Masters course.
Tutor 2	It certainly suited my hearing-impaired student...I, too, personally have enjoyed the flexibility it gives me.
<i>WEEKLY TASKS</i>	
Student 1	I enjoyed the weekly tasks...I couldn't leave it alone really.
<i>RANGE OF WORK COVERED</i>	
Student 1	Covers a lot of ground...transformed my way of looking at human geography.
<i>QUALITY OF WORK</i>	
Tutor 1	Quite amazed at the contributions (they) made...they were very studied...they certainly engage with the reading at a high level.
External Examiner	The best work (assignments) is as good, if not better, than the work from on-campus students.

Table 2. Positive Observations Recorded

ian appreciated the strength of working with one dedicated administrator, the positive cooperation of students when there were technical difficulties, and the general acceptance of the experience as a new venture.

At the same time, a number of negatives were noted by the interviewees, as illustrated in Table 3. Tutors had some concerns over their ease of access to students thereby leading to heavy time demands. Student expectations for rapid contact and feedback are high. Concern has been expressed about the lack of face-to-face contact, tutor-tutee, and the lack of student-student interaction. A range of other concerns emerged, including why a large overseas market seemed not to be reached, the maintenance of the quality across the campus and distance versions of the course, and avoiding the feeling of isolation in the second year.

Several suggestions were made by the interviewees to improve the course (Table 4). A commonly recurring theme was to vary the pedagogic 'diet' so as to encourage greater and more in-depth interaction. There are examples of this varying 'diet' in Table 4. An example would be small groups working on

Person	Observations and Reflections
<i>TIME DEMANDS</i>	
Tutor 1	They do expect quick responses, which is not always appropriate or possible...an issue of me being too available...one tutee will get on the phone and go on for an hour or so...have learnt to manage that...more tutees are taking up a lot of time for their dissertations.
<i>RAPID RESPONSE TIMES</i>	
Administrator	Some have expressed concern about the speed of feedback to e-mail.
<i>LACK OF FACE-TO-FACE CONTACT</i>	
Tutor 2	Lack of contact, face-to-face worried me...it's one of my strengths...an imagined audience...one first-year student came in for a chat and asked me a lot of low-level questions which she didn't feel she could bother me with...they could be blunt with my (virtual) feedback later.
<i>QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF INTERACTIONS</i>	
Tutor 2	Tutor interaction doesn't prod them any further...subsidiary questions aren't possible.
Administrator	Surprised how little the chat/café facility has been used...maybe they feel exposed, since I have access to it.
Student 1	I was expecting a lot of student interaction.
<i>POSSIBLE LACK OF DIRECT TUTOR SUPPORT</i>	
Administrator	People become isolated...not feeling involved.
External Examiner	Weaker students...finding level difficult...less support...ability does not match aspirations (to successfully complete the course)...they're the ones to worry about.

Table 3. Negative Observations Noted

different tasks/readings, such as a critique of a particular resource or curriculum and then sharing and comparing their conclusions. To monitor their progress, the external examiner suggested that students be asked to keep a diary of work accomplished and a log of time spent. The examiner also suggested that pedagogic strategies could be shared across the two courses (campus and distance) among students. Several persons felt this course would grow and that certain strategies were needed to achieve growth (Table 5).

Each of the four modules was evaluated via a survey form (Figures 4 and 5). The responses from two of the modules are used in the formative evaluation analysis (Table 6).

All respondents had many positive qualitative comments to make about each module. The negative comments (Table 3) were much less numerous and there was no clear and obvious pattern. Those mentioned included (1) no use of chat rooms (geography café), (2) the suggestion that students could

Person	Observations and Reflections
<i>VARY PEDAGOGIC 'DIET'</i>	
Administrator	More variety for sessions...not sure whether ten sets of activities per module is always necessary...vary the pedagogy.
Student 1	Work together in groups early on to encourage collaboration...the biggest thing would be to get students interacting early on somehow...first term is critical in terms of how people see the course.
Tutor 1	We need to some extent move away from the standard weekly model...reading, then individual tasks
Student 2	Rather liked the set pattern...(but found) interactivity (varied collaborative tasks) difficult for me.
<i>MORE STRUCTURE AND SUPPORT</i>	
Student 2	Dissertation year needs more work...organised target setting (is needed) in regard to the dissertation...needs structure.

Table 4. Suggested Course Improvements

Person	Observation
Administrator	I don't see why it shouldn't grow...a question of keeping it going in the first few years...could see it taking over the campus course.
Student 1	Communicating the nature of the course is a real challenge...you don't know what to expect with distance learning.
Student 2	Links with people (alumni) are crucial.
External Examiner	After a group was through, they could be mentors of the newest cadre of students...one afternoon a year (give the possibility of), meeting together face-to-face at the Institute.

Table 5. Suggested Strategies to Help the Course Grow

meet, (3) time taken to download some resources, (4) personal feedback wanted on each weekly task, (5) 300 word limit for most weekly tasks was difficult to maintain, (6) time taken to get feedback on assignments, and (7) an appeal to vary the types of task. The one recurrent negative problem was how to manage time, given other pressures.

Reflections

My own observations as course leader and tutor for the majority of sessions are as follows. The administrator's role is crucial throughout the course. More reading is undertaken by distance learning students compared to campus students, and fewer students defer completion (interrupt their course/module and rejoin at a later date). The pedagogic diet should now be widened to encourage greater and more in depth interactions, student–student and stu-

General Comments about the Module (one student's response)

Positive

I graduated in 1980 with a B.Ed. This unit opened my eyes wider to all the developments that had taken place and put them into perspective and brought me up to date not only with the changes but also their details.

Gave me the opportunity to put my own teaching and learning experiences into perspective from the developments studied; e.g. my own learning experiences at school compared with the way geography is taught now to understand how the subject has developed.

The unit allowed me to pursue areas of geography I hadn't really thought about in detail before including the 'post colonial' perspective.

Encouraged me to be more self disciplined and focused on my work due to the time limitation. I'm not perfect by any means but I now work more efficiently than I've become more self critical of my own work.

All resources were readily and easily available.

The course in itself is useful ICT training.

My ability to write at length returned.

Negative

Sessions 6, 7, and 8 provided options. In the first term I opted to work with subject areas I felt most confident with concentrating on the physical geography options. Perhaps there should be an insistence to pick up one less familiar subject as part of the course e.g. a physical geographer should investigate a 'human issue' and vice versa.

I found the weekly word limit difficult to keep to.

Other Comments

Support from you is there if we need it. I don't think I accessed my tutor enough to ask questions and raise issues._

I've become more supportive to my sixth form students in their assessed work because I know what it is like to be a student again.

Figure 5. Example of General Comments about the Module

	Development and Planning	Changing Viewpoints
Evaluation forms returned	45%	65%
Participants marked all sessions as either generally or extremely interesting	100%	88%
Sessions were considered to be generally or very worthwhile	100%	95%
Percent of sessions participants considered to be ones in which they learned quite a lot or a great deal	98%	95%

Table 6. Evaluating for Two of the Modules

dent–tutor. In the first instance, we ‘played safe’ with conventional and manageable weekly structures and tasks, so the time is right to be a touch more pedagogically ‘adventurous.’ We are beginning to bring in forms of debate online. Role-playing can include such scenarios as how a different geographical perspective/paradigm might cause a lesson on the structure of Western cities to be different. Students take on a particular perspective, propose a related lesson, and then the lesson is discussed. Finally, the need for regular, supportive feedback during dissertation research is a clear priority since some students have struggled at that stage in the course.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the initial and formative evaluation of a new and innovative course in geographical education. The course will soon complete its first full cycle, 2004. It reflects a microcosm of the boom in e-learning courses in higher education. The British Department for Education and Skills has just published its latest consultative document on an ‘e-Learning Strategy’ and the European Commission has funded the ‘e-Learning Thematic Network’, an Information Society Technologies (IST) Project supported by the Fifth-Framework Programme of the European Commission. It arose as an initiative of some of the most important players in distance education in Europe, the Open Universities.

The findings here are tentative and interim, but suggest that, in general, the experience for the 16 students has been positive. A thorough summative evaluation will take place at an appropriate time. For now, there are certain specific actions that can be taken to improve the course. These include (1) a conscious two-way feedback between the two MA courses run at the Institute so both can benefit from their respective experiences, (2) a face-to-face

meeting at least once a year for students held at the Institute or in other venues, (3) to help market the strengths of the course to enlist in various ways alumni who can share their experiences, (4) structuring tutor contact and support during the dissertation research period, and (5) begin to vary the weekly pedagogic 'diet' to encourage greater interaction.

An encouraging piece of evidence for the course team, however, is that the proportion of A, B, and C grades (the three passing grades) are 20%, 40%, and 40% - rather higher than similar figures for the on-campus course. Plans are to conduct more research and evaluate this experiment more fully as the cohort of students reaches completion of the degree.

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Footnotes

¹ The Open University is the UK's largest university with over 200,000 students. It does not insist on entry qualifications, nearly all the students are part-time and, two-thirds are between 25 and 44 years of age. Its student body represents 22 percent of all part-time higher education students in the UK.

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