

Module: English Studies 178

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Blended Learning Coordinator: Mrs Miné de Klerk mine@sun.ac.za

Learning activity:
Blended learning approach

Learning technology:
Camtasia SCORM packages and SUNLearn quizzes

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Context

Background overview

The course intends to provide students with the skills and insights needed to engage with and interpret a wide variety of texts, including film and other media, to introduce students to the rich diversity of literatures written in English, both locally and globally, to develop an awareness of and sensitivity to the English language and its uses, to promote discussion and debate, to stimulate intellectual curiosity and to open up areas for further enquiry and research.

Topic and intended learning outcomes

English Studies 178 aims to develop students' ability to read texts critically, whether these are literary texts (novels, poems or plays) or other texts (films, news reports or advertisements). The study of literary and other texts requires both a sensitivity to language and an understanding of genre and context and of conventions such as realism.

Students' awareness of language (what it is and how it influences us) is developed in a variety of ways through all the courses offered. A key skill is the close, interactive reading of texts, together with the ability to formulate one's own response clearly and coherently.

Writing skills are also developed and students are required to submit written pieces in each of the terms based on the work done in a particular component.

The challenge

By 2010, the Department of English had 40 tutorial groups for a total of 1 500 students and a pool of 28 tutors. There were two tutorials a week focusing on different streams of English Studies. The tasks of the Department's tutors included the responsibility of the larger portion of first-year teaching, with the tutors as the prominent figures in small-group teaching. They were responsible for the grading of all assignments submitted in the classroom, including class exercises and essays. In some cases, individual tutors were asked to assist in the marking of term test scripts under the guidance of a lecturer. All tutors partook in essay moderation sessions, mid-year assessment and end-of-year final marks moderation. They were also all available for consultations with their students.

The tutors met once a week with their stream's resource coordinator to prepare for classes, discuss lesson plans and exchange ideas. In addition to the resource meetings, all tutors also attended a general meeting once a week, led by the tutor programme coordinator. In general meetings, administrative and pedagogical issues were discussed and tutors had the opportunity of making their individual contributions to the tutoring programme through suggestions and ideas. At the time, the previous learning management system, WebCT, was useful as a repository where students could access work, mostly readings.

Tutors were responsible for the pedagogical consistency of their classes, maintaining the intellectual vision of the Department, monitoring student behaviour, attendance and progress and enforcing controlled discipline, such as excluding students who did not attend class regularly. They were to adhere to lesson plans and ideas as discussed and imparted in resource meetings but to do so in a way that was compatible with their unique manner of teaching, keeping in line with the required professionalism and decorum that the University expects its teachers to display and ensuring that the necessary learning outcomes were met. Tutors were evaluated on their performance by their students at the end of each semester.

In 2017, not much has changed. Tutors are still the backbone of first-year English Studies and they still have to carry out all the tasks described above; they still outnumber the lecturers, heroically busy elsewhere. The difference is that now, in an austere climate, the tutor pool is smaller even though the student intake is roughly the same. There are fewer tutorial groups, meaning that most tutors have to manage four or five groups, depending on their own level of study activity.

Advantages associated with the integration of technology

In spite of the above-mentioned factors, the English Studies 178 module is in a healthy place. With the integration of technology, however, the key difference has been better leveraging the functionalities of SUNLearn (as opposed to merely using it as a repository). The Department of English has been able to make the changes demanded by the austere financial climate and to keep ahead, managing its average intake of 1 300 students. One tutorial per week has been replaced with online interaction, the first time in over 10 years that the Department has offered only a single English



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Studies 178 tutorial, thereby minimising the strain on its tutors and making the average week more manageable for the average first-year student. For the tutors, this means fewer tutorial classes to facilitate and a more manageable workload.

The online tutorials and SUNLearn activities were painstakingly crafted but are paying off handsomely: they have become self-regulatory mechanisms that hold down an important end (still controlled) but that allow the Department to cull one tutorial and add to the assessment effort (example in Figure 1). The current blended teaching approach was piloted in 2016, with the online tutorials and SUNLearn activities crafted by two then-postgraduate students, now both working for e-learning companies.

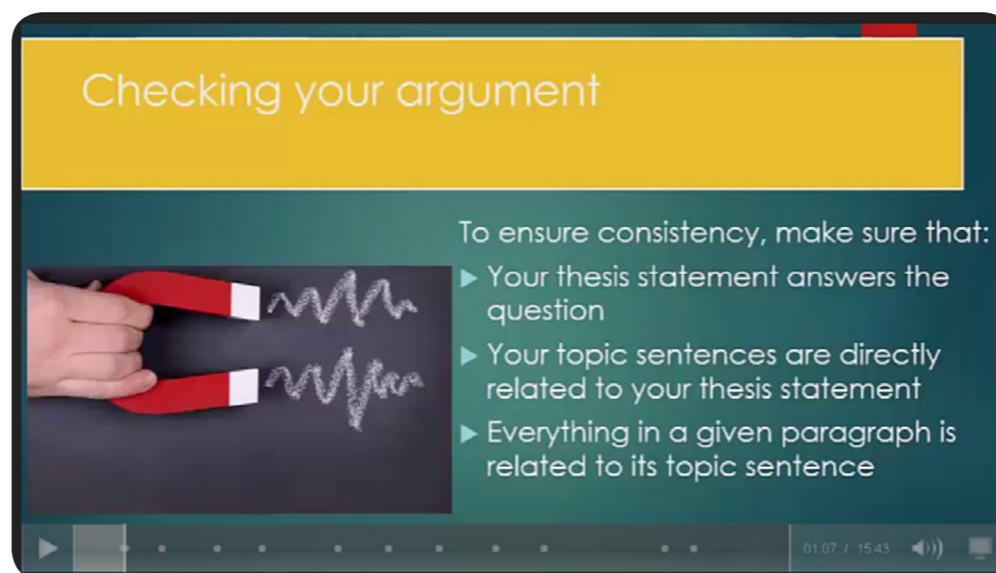


Figure 1: Screenshot of an online tutorial on essay writing

By replacing one of the weekly face-to-face tutorials with an online tutorial, valuable resources, such as lecturers' and tutors' time and capacity, are now applied to contact sessions intended to convey more complex material and actively to engage student participation.

The online quiz component further helps the Department to assess students' knowledge and understanding of basic, key concepts and helps students to practise applying what they have learnt (Figure 2).

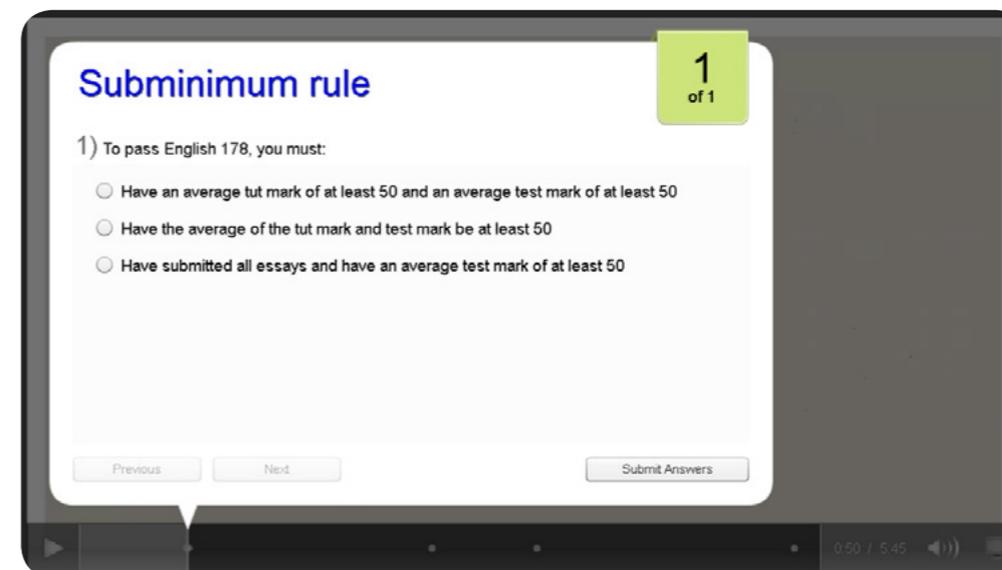


Figure 2: Examples of quiz questions embedded within the online tutorials

Student overview

English Studies 178 takes in a large cohort of undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds. Most students, at the start of the course, have been exposed to only a secondary education environment and therefore require academic literacy and critical thinking skills to be developed in order for them to meet course outcomes.

Other relevant role-players

Dr Daniel Roux (tutor coordinator) coordinated the creation of a tutor training platform and arranged a full-day workshop for both tutors and departmental lecturers. These training initiatives are intended to enable more tutors and teaching staff to leverage the appropriate software and SUNLearn activities, creating further opportunities for online learning, online assessment, self-paced exercises and flipped classrooms or tutorials as the design of the English Studies 178 course is further developed. At the same time, Prof Shaun Viljoen played a vital role in the design of the course structure for 2016, since he was in charge of the programme for that year.

The senior tutor and the rest of the English Studies 178 group of tutors



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were engaged in the learning technologies. Video tutorials were created by a tutor familiar with the relevant TechSmith (i.e. Camtasia) software, the content based on the PowerPoint presentations and course material provided by the relevant lecturers. The senior tutor embedded quizzes in the video tutorials before sending them back to the lecturers for review and approval. He also responded to any technical queries of students and teaching staff on either the use or the design of these learning objects.

Learning and assessment activities

Educational approach

As outlined in the course description and outcomes, English Studies 178 requires students to engage in a number of “ways of learning” (Laurillard, 2013). They have to acquire knowledge of basic theories and practices relevant to the discipline, typically by reading texts, watching informative videos and listening to narrations or lectures. They then have to develop critical thinking skills, typically by discussing course material and collaborating in small groups, writing skills, such as practising responding to a text in verbal or written format, and producing a written analysis or critique of a text, play or film.

It became apparent that some of the knowledge acquisition components of the course lend themselves to online learning, which would afford a diverse student cohort with self-paced learning opportunities (i.e. allow them to review and process new information, help them to develop basic academic literacy skills and help them to prepare for tests).

The online tutorials engage students in authentic learning and meaningful tasks that are relevant to their interests and goals (Dabbagh, 2005). The tutorials further provide the opportunity for a thoughtful and intentional approach to assessment (e.g. reserving online assessment for low-stake assessments and formal tests for high-stake assignments) (Taylor, 2013). Throughout the module, a learner-centred approach is followed by providing flexibility for students and scaffolding the introduction of independent learning skills.

Learning and assessment activities

The course schedule reflects how each learning activity and assessment opportunity build on the prior teaching and learning activity, a thoughtful

approach intended to scaffold students’ learning experience. Students have four periods per week: one lecture, one face-to-face tutorial (also called a group tutorial), one online tutorial and one SUNLearn activity (Figure 4).

As of Week 2, students are required to complete one online tutorial per week. These are interactive videos that contain new course content and short questions to guide students’ thinking about core concepts, methods and theories relating to the course. Online tutorials are compulsory for the successful completion of English Studies 178; students do not receive any marks if they miss an online tutorial. Completing online tutorials comprises watching all the video content and answering the questions correctly. Students may reattempt answering the questions as many times as desired by replaying the tutorial, as long as they do so before the deadline.

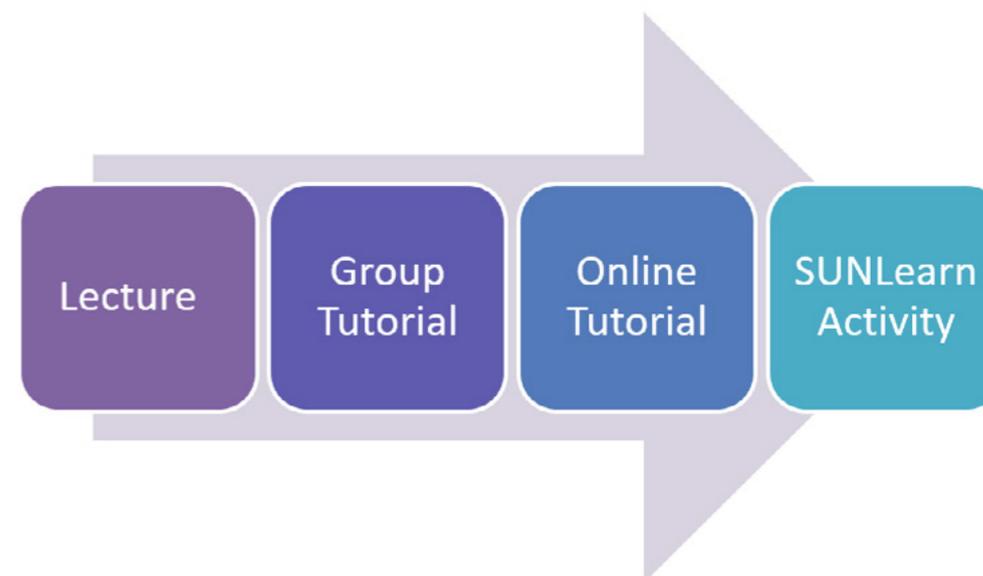


Figure 3: A typical week in English Studies 178

The SUNLearn activity component entails weekly online activities consisting largely of quizzes seeking to consolidate aspects of both the lecture and the tutorial components (Figure 4). In this section, students are required to think through principles in essay writing and research and are introduced to some core concepts in English Studies applied to prescribed and other texts. This section is compulsory and successful completion requires students to follow the component dates as indicated in the course outline.



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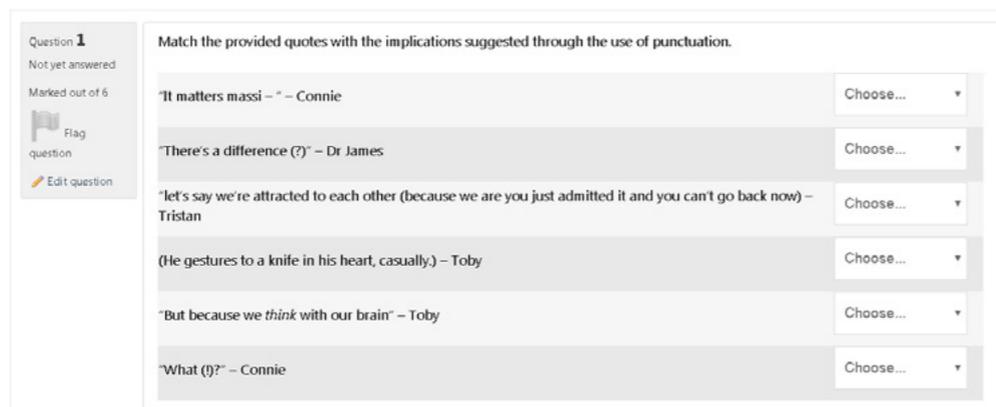


Figure 4: Screenshot of a SUNLearn quiz question

Feedback practice

Students receive instant or gradual feedback for almost all the activities and online tutorials. With instant feedback, students can immediately see their mark and the correct answer. Gradual feedback shows suggested answers and shows when students get only half a question correct.

Learning environment

Learning setting

The integration of online tutorials requires redesigning learning activities and assessments for a student-centred, blended course delivery. The 2017 course prospectus describes students' learning activities as follows:

The English Studies 178 course is designed as an integrated whole....

1.) **The lectures** communicate key concepts, and demonstrate the ways in which texts can be read and analysed.

2.) In addition to the lectures, each student will be placed in a group tutorial for a component of the programme. These group tutorials cover texts dealt with in the lectures and texts which are not covered in lectures. Tutorials are structured to encourage cooperative learning and **active participation**: the more you participate, the more you will learn and benefit from these classes.

In this department, 'English' is not only a field of study and our medium of communication, but also a set of (speaking, writing, reading and listening) skills which we try to cultivate in our students.

3.) Every three weeks, by yourself and at a time of your choosing, you have to complete, by the Sunday midnight of the final week, an **online tutorial** as well as a **SUNLearn activity**. These contribute to your final mark and are also **compulsory**.

Support challenges

It is recommended that students attempt the online tutorials in HUMARGA (the computer usage area for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences), where there is reliable WiFi connection. There are still some technical issues, most on access and connection. Some issues included the online tutorials not loading completely, the tutorials crashing halfway through or students not being able to access the online tutorials. Using the land-line connections in HUMARGA remedied these issues.

Student experience

Student feedback on the learning experience

Students are given a week to complete the online component in addition to their other coursework. Student feedback shows high satisfaction rates with the standard of the online tutorials. Students particularly like the open access to the online tutorials, affording them the opportunity to view material repeatedly, take notes in their own time and break their learning sessions into manageable chunks.

In the first semester that these online tutorials were implemented, students were also given a week to complete the online component in addition to their other coursework, the teaching staff involved expecting them to have more than enough time to complete all their required tasks. However, the most common student complaint was that the first semester SUNLearn activities were taking up too much of their time; final quiz questions were often essay-type questions requiring a lengthy paragraph response. As a result, some students dedicated a disproportionate amount of time to this section, while others wrote little to nothing at all. Some students raised the concern that the written component (paragraph responses) of their



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SUNLearn quizzes served no feedback purpose and therefore did not justify the amount of time that they spent on their responses. This was addressed in the following year's online quizzes, which now require less online writing.

General Opportunities

A thorough guideline (made available on the SUNLearn course page) was drawn up as a step-by-step guide for students to understand better how the SUNLearn online activities have to be completed.

Guidelines for Online Tutorials

Online Tutorials are multimedia, interactive lectures that contain new content to be covered each week. These tutorials are compulsory; you have to complete them to pass English 178. In order for a tutorial to be considered complete, you **need to answer the short questions (multiple choice, true/false or gap fill) correctly**, and provide a coherent response to questions that require short paragraph answers. Please note that the mark that you will achieve for the activity does not include the mark for the paragraph answer questions; thus **you may get 40% but answered all the short questions correctly, and will advance to the next tutorial**. For this reason, it is best to **check your answers during your completion** of the tutorials. You can do this by clicking the "check answers" option after you answered each mini quiz - there you will see whether you have chosen the correct option. You may reattempt the tutorial as many times as required.

The **weekly deadline** for the completion of your Online Tutorial is **Sundays at 23:55**. The new Online Tutorial will be available every Monday from 00:05.

You will not be able to continue with the tutorial series if you have missed one, and you will not be able to complete a specific week's tutorial after its deadline. The exception to this rule would be if your tutor provides you with a password for later access, either because of it being a first offense or should you have a valid medical excuse. As such, if you have **missed a tutorial** for a valid reason, such as a family crisis, serious illness or serious injury, please **contact your group tutorial tutor** with proof of your situation to be granted special access to the Online Tutorial(s) you have missed.

Online Tutorials commence in Week 2 and conclude in Week 13 - this means that in the first and last weeks of the semester you will not be required to complete an Online Tutorial. If you have questions about the Online Tutorial, or something you wish to discuss about it, feel free to **ask your group tutorial tutor** when next you see them.

Most of the tutorials contain an audio component. You are not allowed to play audio in campus computer areas (such as HUMARGA or the library) without headphones. **If you do not own headphones**, you can borrow them for free from the **Learning Commons Helpdesk**. This is a pink helpdesk located in the Learning Commons of the JS Gerike Library. Here you will also find computers on which to do the tutorials, and **Student Assistants** whose job it is to help you if you struggle with the technology. Keep in mind that the Learning Commons is very popular, so you should go early in the morning (between 8 and 9) or after 4 pm to maximize your chances of getting a seat. [Click here](#) for more information about the Learning Commons and the Student Assistants.

If you would like to minimize the progress bar during your viewing, simply click on the video screen once.

Figure 5: A guide for students on how to complete online activities

Students have the option to attend a contact information session where the course coordinator and the senior tutor demonstrate how to access and use the online tutorials and how to complete the online quizzes. SUNLearn analytics show high engagement and completion rates for the online tutorials and high quiz scores. The teaching staff agree that the online materials and activities are well designed, the team involved ensuring that the online tutorials serve to build on lecture material and support the intended outcomes of the face-to-face contact tutorials.

Challenges

In 2016, tutors had to manage frequent requests for extensions for online work and some students repeatedly fell behind. This may have been due to the fact that students were not accustomed to taking responsibility for their own learning, that they did not read the course outline and instructions carefully or that a one-week cycle allowed too little flexibility. In 2017, the deadlines were adapted and students are now provided with a three-week window to complete each online tutorial. This has resulted in more successful completions and better learning.

The Department is taking steps to train its tutors and teaching staff to understand and manage the online activities better. It is expected that, if the tutors and lecturers are enabled to engage actively with the online platform, they will be better equipped to monitor their students' progress and work ethic. A possible outcome could be the ability to perform spot checks (either in person or by using SUNLearn data) of students' marks for weekly activities to identify and support struggling students earlier.

Alternative software packages and online tools are being explored for the creation and editing of online tutorials. The current software is costly (requiring a software licence per computer) and possibly not as user-friendly or flexible as other alternatives.

Other concluding thoughts

"I am increasingly more attuned to the concentrations of pedagogical practice we invest in blended learning and how those of us more old-school can use it without being overly dependent on it. It's a meeting ground where we interact with our students rather than trying to keep up with them. It's a workshop where our tutors interact in a transparent manner. We can keep an eye on things and see the system run itself while still ensuring the machine does not take over. Rather than the system running our classrooms, I find that it helps us run our classrooms better, and saves paper into the bargain". – Dr Riaan Oppelt (lecturer and course coordinator), April 2017



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