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The teaching and learning experience – a look back at the last ten years and the way ahead for the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh

It is now over ten years since our School of Divinity began to explore the practical use of e-learning - always with the explicit aim of enhancing the experience of our students from a strong pedagogic basis, rather than simply introducing new technologies and techniques for their own sake. During this time, we have experimented with many different approaches, and evaluated many of these in formal or informal ways - often resulting in published conclusions. Over time, this e-learning component has been subsumed into a more integrated approach to teaching and learning, and this now provides a toolbox of techniques that staff can choose to use (or not), as it suits their own working style, and their students.

This paper will describe some of the key technologies that we have used and give examples of how they have been applied - often in innovative ways - to traditional courses. We will show how they have become embedded in the teaching and learning process, blending with traditional lectures and tutorials. We will describe some of the more recent developments that have benefited from this work, such as support for students pre-arrival, tutor support, and distance learning. We will conclude with some proposed future research, and a crystal-ball look to the future.

A wide range of technologies are available to support teaching and learning, including custom-written software to support specific topics, and special-purpose learning environments. We will describe our experiences with some of these. However, it is the way in which the software is used that has proven to be most important, and some of our most successful work has concentrated on using generic tools such as blogs, and wikis, in specific ways which have been structured towards explicit pedagogical objectives. The reflective learning approach which this encourages is currently being investigated for us in the development of personal development profiles. We have also evaluated the use of technologies for more obvious applications, such as the use of computers in examinations, and digitisation of special and rare collections.

We initially felt a need to provide specific "IT-skills" training to give students the capability to exploit these applications. However, it has become clear that this is simply one aspect of the need for a good grounding in broader "academic skills". This has led to a compulsory (online) academic skills course for all (UG and PG) students, and the use of wikis for peer mentoring work by PG students (for example). We are currently experimenting with the extension of these ideas to online distance courses, and support for students pre-arrival.