Blended/online learning case study: Robert Burns Online

Course code	SCOTLIT4030 (Hons blended); SCOTLIT1014 (Distance)
Title of course	Robert Burns Online
Course lead contact	Dr Ronnie Young (ronnie.young@glasgow.ac.uk)
No of credits	20 credits
Level of course (UG/PG) & year	*Online distance strand* pitched towards Level 1 UG, or SCQF level 7, but is a self-standing course not attached to a formal MA degree programme and is suitable for all levels, whether newcomers to University study or graduates. *Blended strand* is available to on-campus Scottish Literature honours students only (SCQF level 10), and has more advanced forms of assessment.
No. of students	First run, session 2016-17: (Distance) 13; (Hons Blended) 22.
Platforms used	• Moodle

Multimedia content

- Video – Camtasia screen recordings or mini-lectures
- Video – Topic introductions and interviews hosted on YouTube and embedded in Moodle
- Audio – song recordings/performances, poetry readings
- Digital images – manuscripts, early publications, portraits, paintings, material objects/culture, maps

Learning activities

- Readings
- Transcription exercise
- Forums – general forum; discussion forums in the *online strand* replaced by weekly face-to-face seminars in the *blended strand*
- Critical questions for further reflection
- Wiki – collaborative glossary (optional)
- Summative assessment:
  - (*Distance*): Essay (1,500 words) - 60%; Written assignment (500 words) - 20%; Blog-entry exercise (500 words) - 20%.
  - (*Hons Blended*): Essay (2,500 words) - 40%; Blog-entry exercise (750 words) - 10%; Examination (90 minutes duration) - 50%.

Describe your blended/online learning approach	There are two strands to this project – a blended strand and an online distance strand. The first one is intended for on-campus Honours students, with the online instruction on Moodle, alongside traditional face-to-face seminar teaching (amounting to 2 hours per week). In the online distance strand, there are forum discussions and various other learning activities which replace the face-to-face seminar component.
	The teaching itself is provided by a mixture of short videos and Camtasia screen recordings (totalling approx. 2 hours of instruction per week), where, alongside Robert Burns' poems, a variety of images (digital images of objects, Burnsiana, manuscripts, books, portraiture, historic and contemporary maps, etc.) and other digital content (songs, poetry readings, musical performances) are blended together to create a transformative experience of learning about Robert Burns' life and work.
	Critical reflection on the course material is achieved by various learning activities and assessments, such as points to reflect on or discuss a topic on the forum, and critical writing exercises (blog entry exercise, final essay). It should be noted that weekly course contributors e-moderated the forums or tutored the seminars.
Why was this blended/online approach taken? i.e. what issue was it trying to solve?	With the Subject change of Honours courses to bear 20 credits, which meant more instruction with the same number of staff, but also with the motivation to provide the students more course options, the online/blended platform presented itself as a unique opportunity and it allowed us to teach more efficiently.
	We were also interested in what technology can do for teaching literature and how it can transform the teaching of Robert Burns. We were able to look at not just his printed work, but various other aspects of his creative output, such as his manuscripts, songs, and also material culture through which he is commemorated.
What advice would you give to other teachers taking this approach for the first time?	Allocate a lot of development time for yourself and/or your team. It is easy to underestimate how quickly the time runs out and how much work needs to be done to create an online course.
	If there are multiple contributors to the course, style of the unified course should be a concern. In our context, this translated into a need for somebody to take on the role of pulling material together and editing it in the interest of consistency across the course. Creating an over-arching theme, feel and look for the course also provides your students with consistency of the learning experience.
	Keep videos short (no more than 10 minutes at most), and use them to their advantage. E.g. videos are good for briefly introducing staff and broad themes or for short interviews, but not for capturing long lectures or imparting a lot of in-depth information. For close analysis or case studies it can be better to utilise screencasting software such as Camtasia in order to take screen recordings of slides accompanied with voiceovers. Images help illustrate videos and create movement.
	On this point, the more images the better. This applies not to only video content but also to lessons or articles in order to illustrate and to break up chunks of on-screen text. The library copyright team can advise on copyright permissions and 'fair use' for educational purposes. There are many free online repositories that offer download of images in the public domain or under a creative commons license, from Wikimedia Commons through to some of the National Portrait Galleries, British Library and other major institutions.

	Provide your students with meaningful learning activities and keep them active as learners. Don't just 'dump' articles on Moodle and expect the learner will know how to progress through a course. Signpost what the students have to do, let them go through the activity and then perhaps follow-up with some kind of reflection, discussion or review. Also, be prepared to maintain an online presence to support your learners.
What student support needs should be taken into account? i.e. how did you support their transition into this way of learning?	We repurposed College of MVLS's induction course for distance students and provided our learners with induction material that included (a) sample lessons and how to navigate through a module on Moodle, (b) how to use Moodle in general, (c) how to access library services as well as external services provided via library transcriptions. It was important for us to make our learners aware that aside from the course itself they had access to the University's various electronic resources. We maintained an online presence on forums, not only to lead discussions, but also to address any queries.
What are the lessons for the institution and the sector from this work?	Ultimately, various aspects of University's systems and infrastructure might be revisited in order to ascertain how these promote or inhibit the BOLD projects, and to determine where the University puts barriers up to its own e-learning ambition. With regards to creating a course for example, the standard PIP document is based on 'offline' learning, and it is not always straightforward to find equivalents for certain features of online teaching. Furthermore, admissions remain a concern. We set up a short interest course which is not attached to a degree, yet our learners had to go through a full-fledged admissions routine pitched at PG study. A question remains over whether this discourages learners from participating. In terms of support for distance learners, there is scope to centralize in order to avoid duplication of effort. For example, to create a University-wide general induction course for distance students, which could then be followed-up with further specific induction activities if a particular BOLD course requires them (rather than all BOLD courses providing their own general induction).