Navigate our pages to see hot tips from colleagues, GTAs and students

What do you want to do?

Every course on Blackboard should look different. Some courses will have a large presence; some might be simply be text readings, etc. Tailor it for yourself – student feedback will tell you if it is OK.
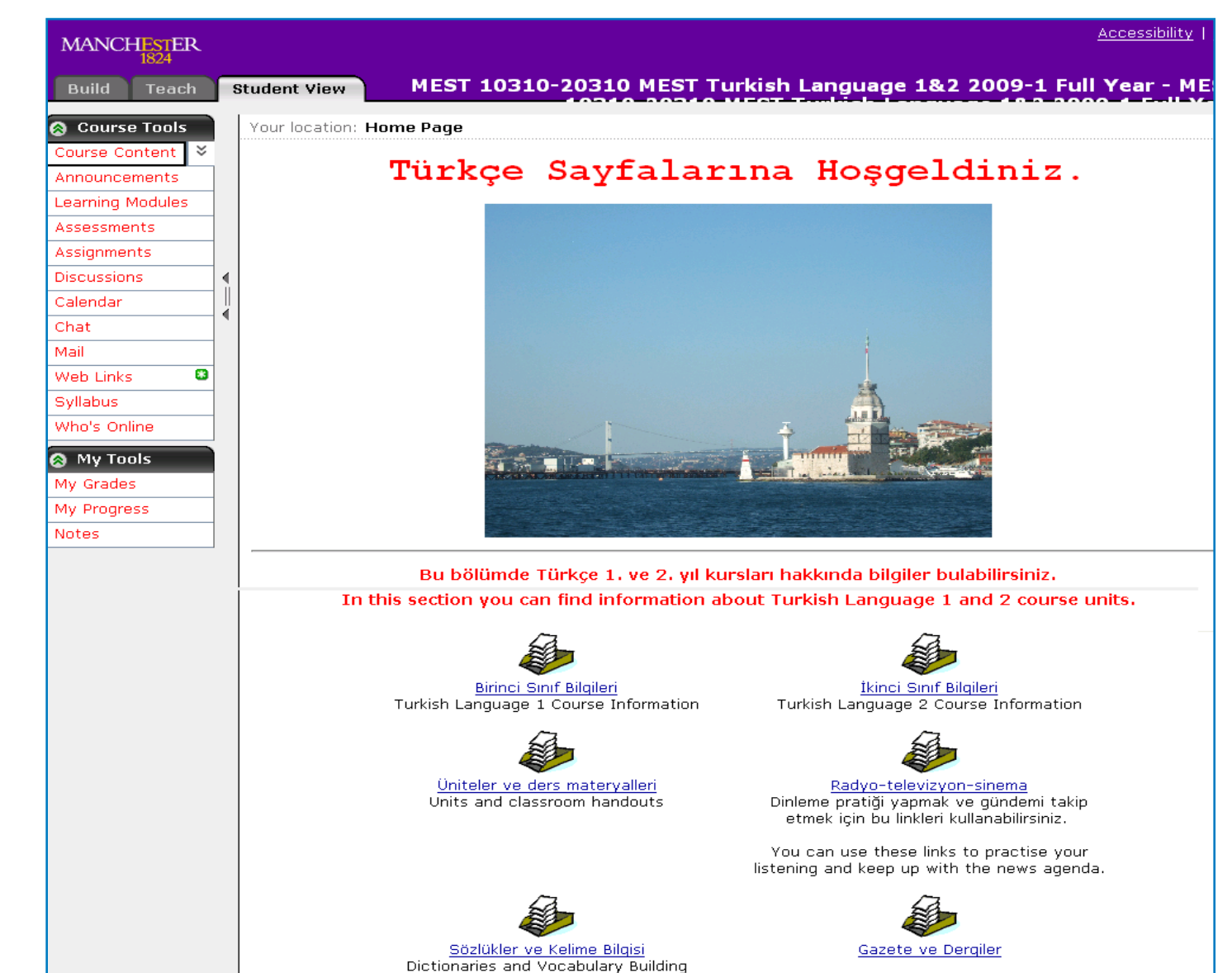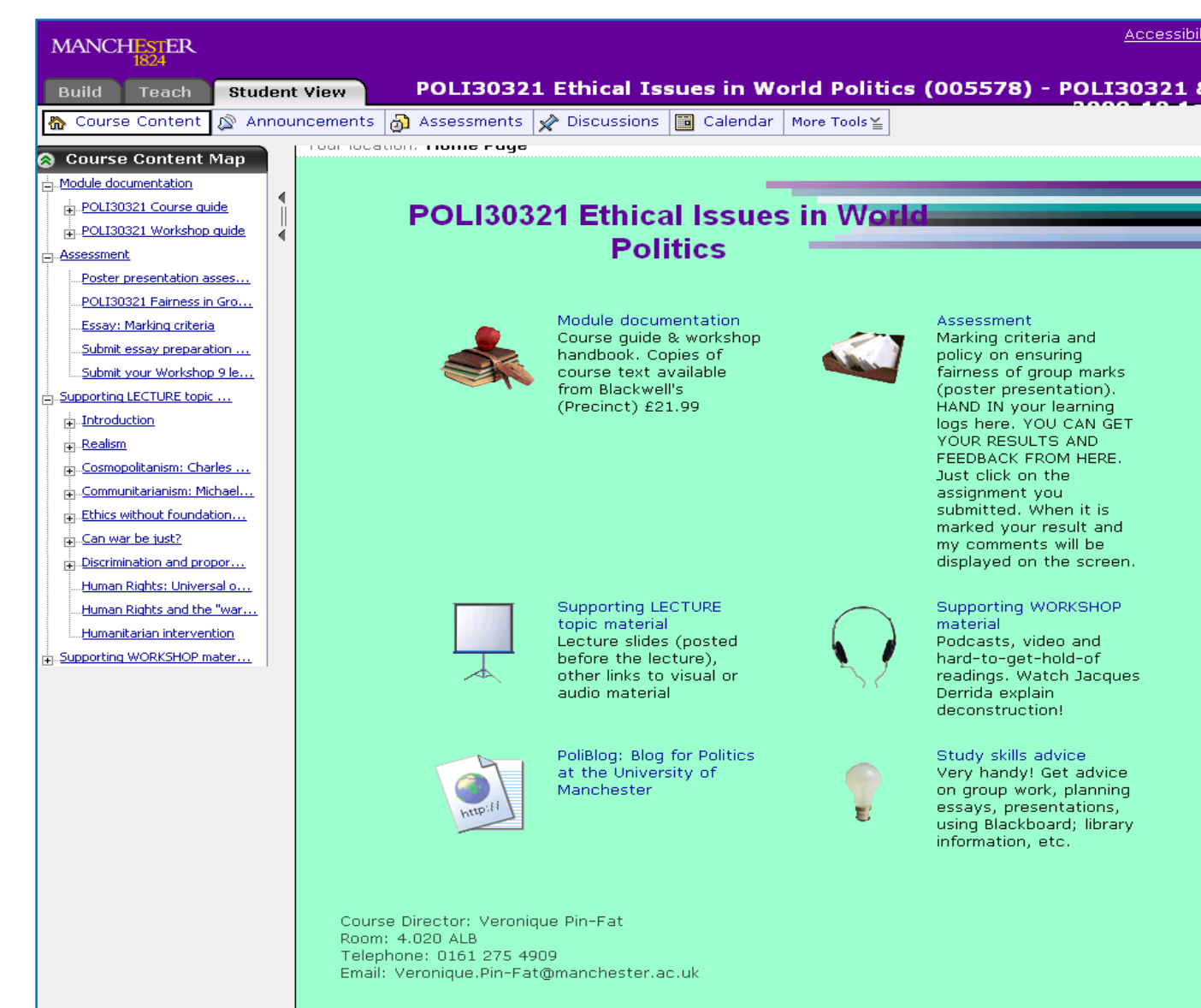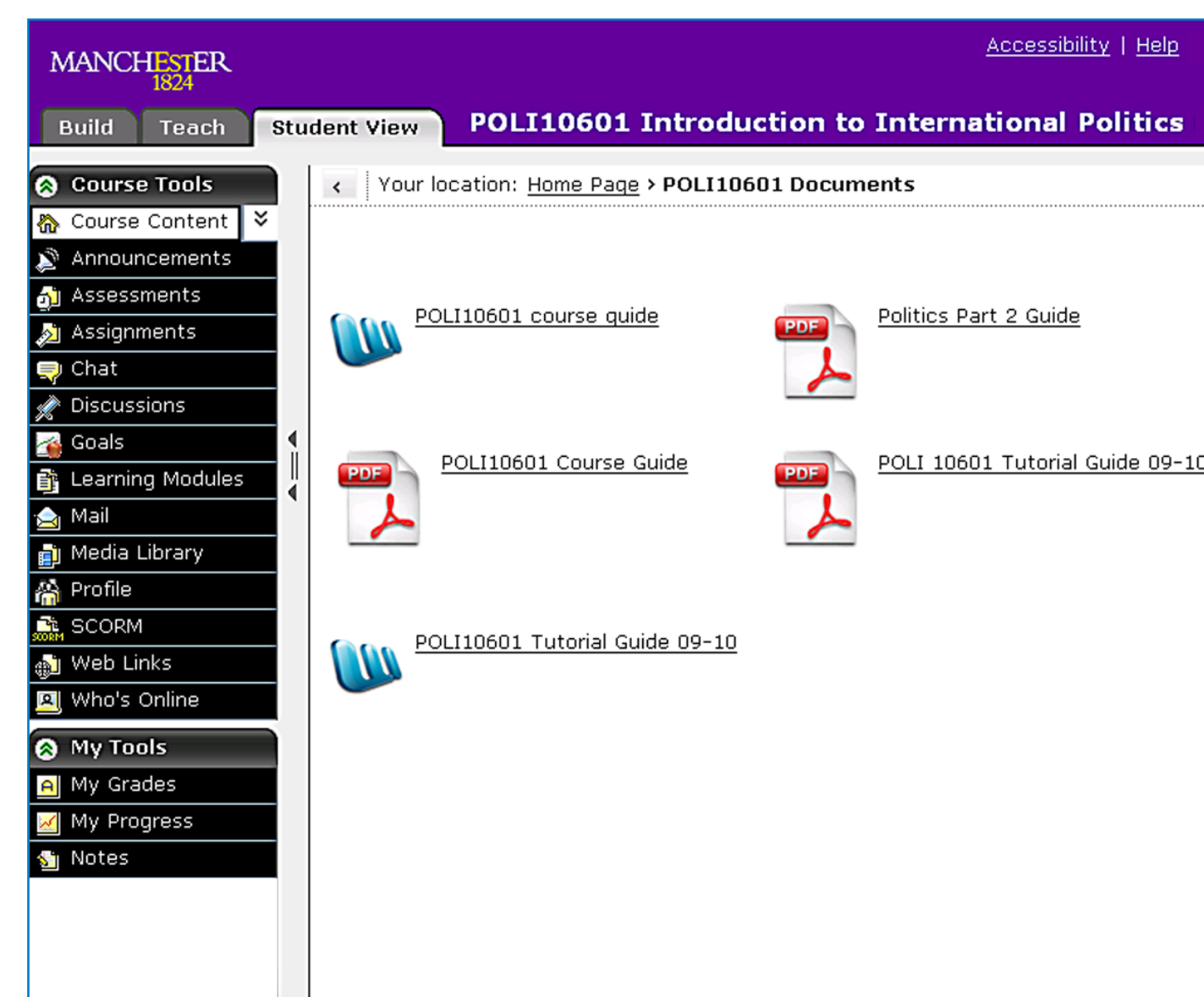
"I like to make the site visually attractive. I have shamelessly nicked icons from other University Blackboard sites! The students instantly recognise them and use them.
If you put a bit of effort in, it tells the students that you care and they will enjoy using it".
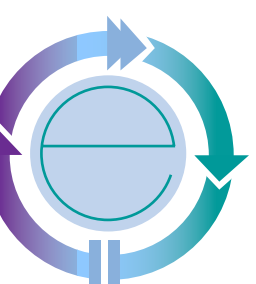
"Just because you can do something doesn't mean that you have to. My Blackboard site is minimal. The only thing that makes it good is the way that it links together the things that I want to do. What is there is what I want to do: to connect *lecture - tutorial - assessment*".

"At first I just used Blackboard as a dumping ground because I didn't have time to unpack the material.

It was an immediate improvement even at that level because I stopped having to chase the students for work and this saved a lot of time".

Save time

"I use Blackboard to save time. The information is all up there, so there can be no excuses like 'I have lost my course guide'. It is easy to respond to requests – e.g. if one student cannot find a paper, it is likely that no one can. I can post it up and e-mail all students in a very short time".

"The on-line tests mean that there is no photocopying and no manual marking.

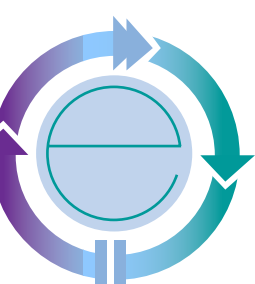Tests can be migrated to the new course for the next year and adjusted to include improvements".

"This course has 700 students. It is the same effort to teach a programme of this size as it is to teach a smaller one but other problems – discipline, counselling, personal support, etc. – are magnified. Students don't read University e-mail, so I use pop-ups and put the course guide on in all sorts of formats – word, PDF, etc. – so they can download it onto a memory stick or whatever. And it also gives back up when they say they don't know what they have to do.

When you make information highly visible there is no excuse for not accessing it".
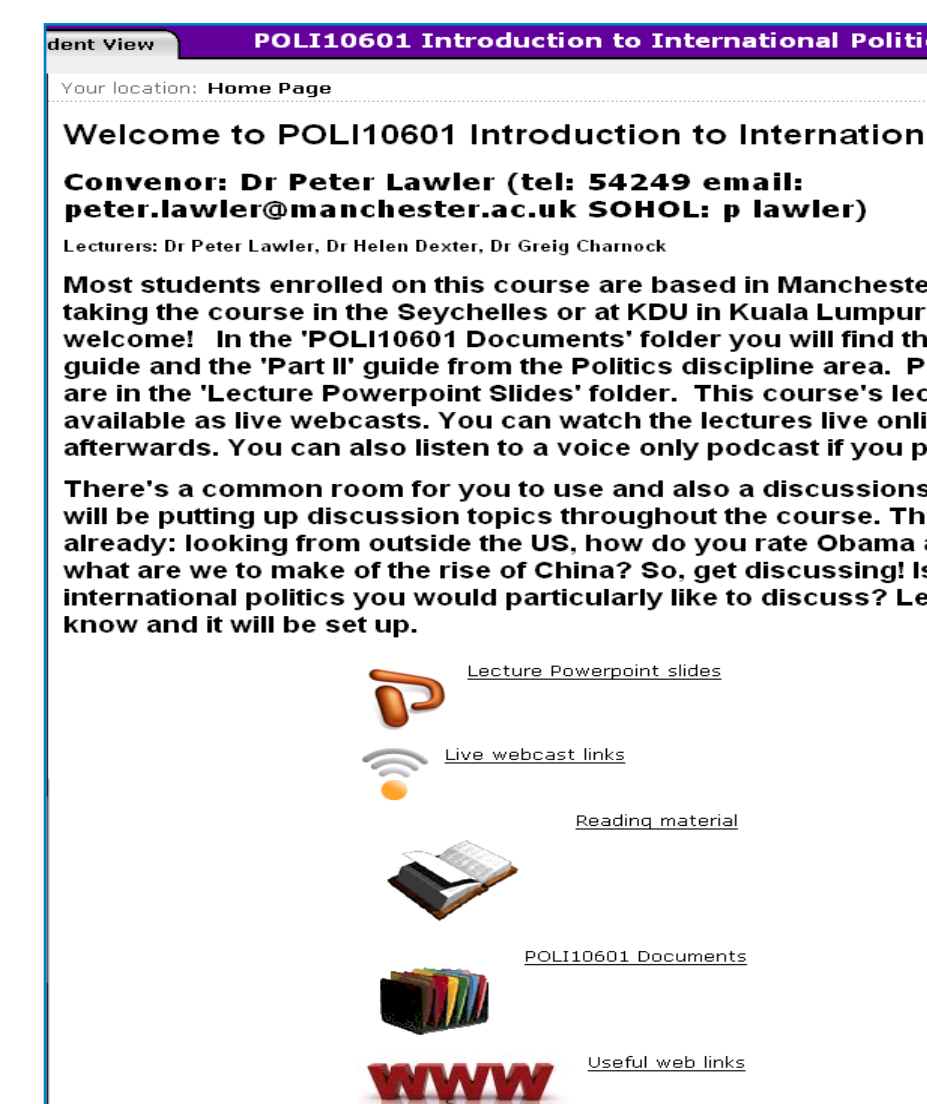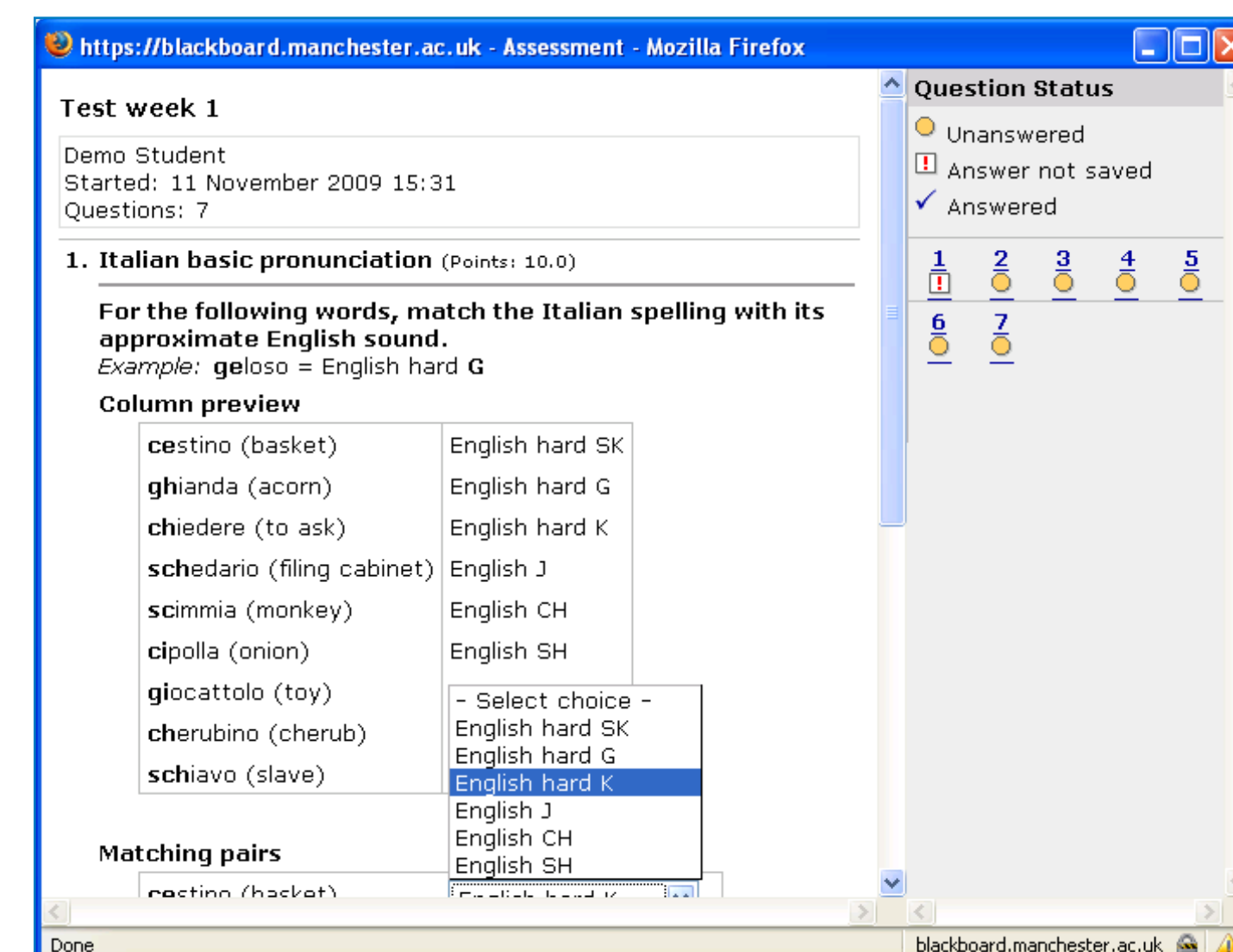
Prepare for seminars

A course structure was put in place to provide GTAs on a large humanities course with a strong framework of activities. After attending each lecture students are expected to engage with a set of related resources supported by worksheets before attending their seminar group.

Lecturer

"With simple stuff you can really improve a course, using common sense and basics. What is great is that visual material is quick to access. You can harness on-line material and direct students' preparation for seminars to make them more effective. This supports the GTAs and provides a strong framework of activity".

GTA

"The structure is good for standardising work. In the old days it was hard to generate discussion because everyone read different materials.

It generates good debate in seminars.

It is particularly useful for 2. I/2.II borderline students who find the guidance helpful.

What determines the success of the method is the level/appropriateness of the material. Videos and course materials on this course are excellent.

This method worked well for seminar preparation".

Student

"The worksheets and on-line material taught useful skills and helped preparation for the seminars – we all knew what were going to discuss and had time to think about it.

The handouts/worksheets must be at the right level and well thought out. It should help you move on. If it is useless on paper, it will be useless on-line.

It kept my interest and enthusiasm and kept me in contact with the lecturer".
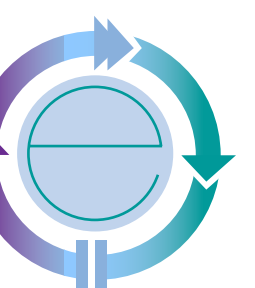
Humanities eLearning team
elearning@manchester.ac.uk

Group assessment

"We use selective release to give different scenarios to students in each group. The exercise is a role playing game. Each group has its own discussion; and there is a central group where questions can be answered by peers as well as the tutor".
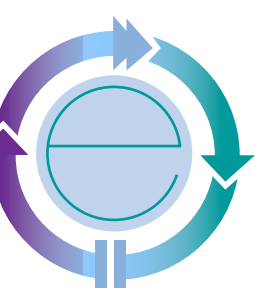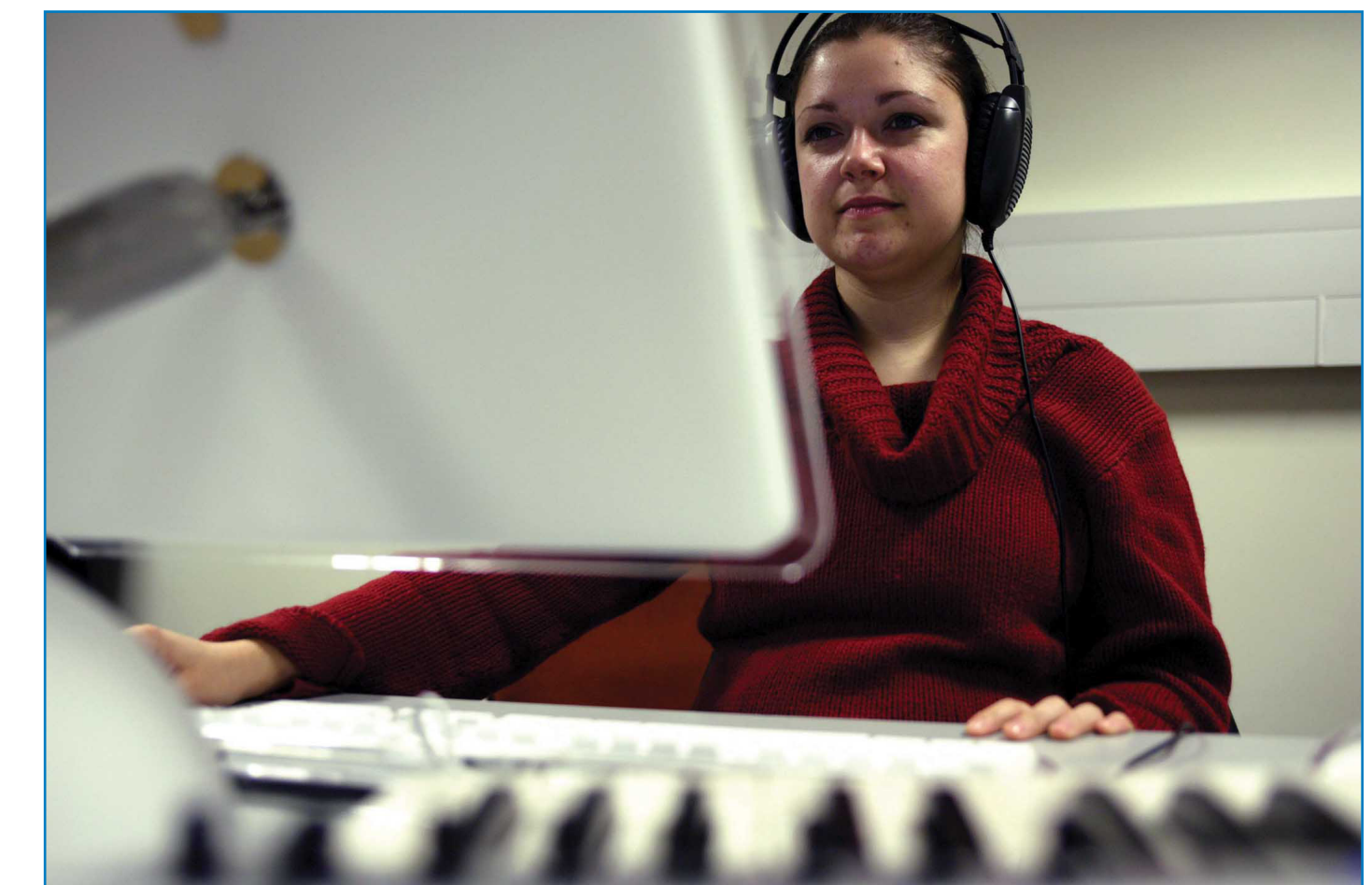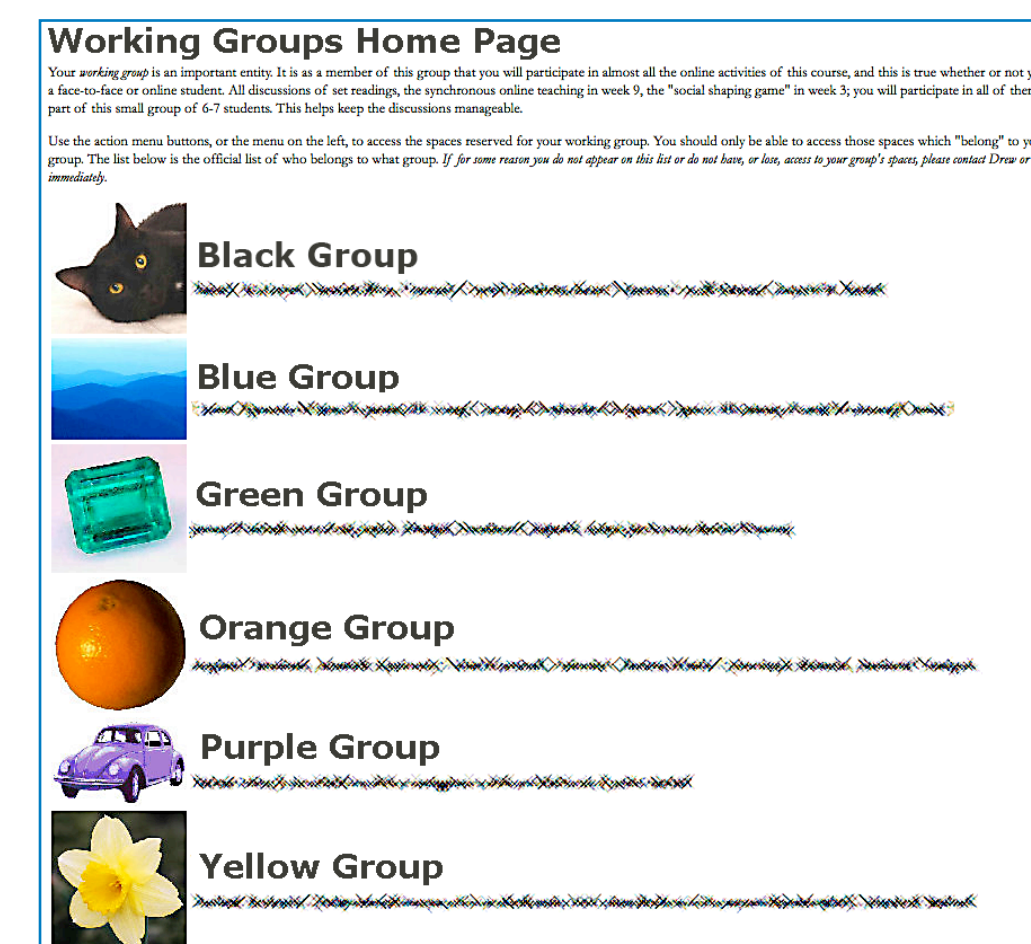
"The students are divided into groups of four. They are asked to complete a story or a poem/ song in about 500 words. The results can be very imaginative. Each group marks the work of another group according to the standard proforma — grammar, content, etc. — and gives feedback. 40% of the final mark is from the student group, 60% from the tutor.

Prior to the on-line version being available, this teaching method had involved large amounts of photocopying".

"Some students don't like group work because they think that it is an excuse for free-loaders.

So I post up a policy for group work to stop them all asking what to do if someone is apparently not pulling their weight, etc. It makes it clear that it is about assessing their ability to work together, not about individual brilliance.

In future we are going to have some discussions on-line so that there is a written record of input by members of the group and I can monitor activity".

Working Groups Home Page

Black Group

Blue Group

Green Group

Orange Group

Purple Group

Yellow Group

Effective discussion

"Students will be turned off if the discussion group is too large - so divide them into groups and give them something to talk about".

"If the lecturer has planned it well a discussion-based course can be really involving. It was most enjoyable when we were given a problem to solve and role-play tasks for small groups. A discussion board needs interesting tasks to make it work but ones that lead somewhere. The teacher needs to be the A and Z – planning and assessing but not necessarily intervening in between".
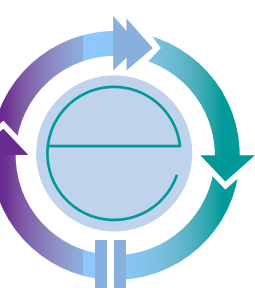
"The students are from a lot of different backgrounds and different countries so they have experience to contribute to teaching that is UK based.

They were shown a short video from the BBC's **Primark on the Rack** TV programme in the lecture and it was available on-line for discussion. The aim was to get them to question and contribute evidence based on their own experience and their own opinions on global issues concerning international fashion retail.

The response was very encouraging because it allowed them time to reflect and construct a good case. They didn't have to voice counter-arguments in front of other people who might disagree; and foreign students wrote much more because they were able to spell check.

The students made some excellent points showing the oversimplification of the arguments used in the TV program and enjoyed the exercise – those that have worked in textile manufacturing have passionate views about it – and the course gained a global perspective".

Help students learn

"What we forget is that the brightest among us can cope with being mystified. You can teach the top 90% in a tent – what about the others?"

"Some things work better face to face, some things work better on-line. The students found the lecture on creating financial spreadsheets dull – they glazed over during the explanation and their assessment results were poor.

The interactive exercise has changed this. Teaching on-line is not about replicating face to face. If you can see a use for interactive learning it just makes sense to use it.

I am not a techie person – I have to ask my niece to text for me!"

"The preparation for tutorials is the main emphasis. Usually I post reading materials but for 1 week I tell them to access research papers. I don't want any Wikipedia so I have to tell them how to use good sources. The first assessment forces them to find these sources.

Skill 1: They use the sources in preparation for a tutorial which is assessed.

Skill 2: The main assessment for the course is the essay. But now they know how to find and write a proper bibliography".

"We only have 5 hours a week with the students. It is not enough time to learn essential skills like listening. The students don't want to practise these skills in front of everyone. At home they can listen 5 times to the same piece if they want to. I start an activity in class then ask them about it next time.

It allows us to look at individual needs. Even a beginners' class with zero entry qualification will become a mixed ability group very quickly.

This allows you to have practice exercises that are on selective release to some students".
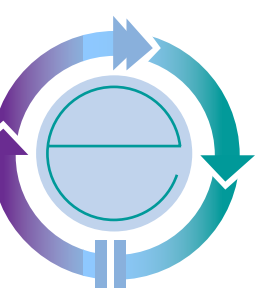
Improve student experience

"The thing that really helped me was that it gave me a means of finding out. I did not have very sophisticated library or web search skills. Access to resources and journals was available in a controlled environment. I could have been stuck in the library forever looking".

"It gave us the opportunity to study before class and discuss afterwards. They changed the structure so that instead of 'Go in - sleep - leave' it became interactive. We worked on-line in between.

They didn't just use the tools for the sake of it. They made the best of the tools. You were given homework while you were in it. It made the lectures relevant".

"As a mature student I had reservations about taking over in class – talking too much.
The discussion board allowed me to express my views. I joined it after my son went to sleep in the evening.

It can be a lonely world if there is no need to contribute and comments are just posted.
You want peer reaction to what you are saying – not just comments from the teacher".

"It saved time looking for resources in the library and prevented the frustration of finding that the books were unavailable or not accessible for photocopying".

"This is obviously the way forward – students go to the internet for resources, so join them. Students see this as a method of teaching them skills".