Dr Liam Harte

Project: Testing 1,2,3: Using online multiple-choice tests in a Humanities subject to enhance student learning, engagement and feedback

School: School of Arts, Histories and Cultures
Course: ENGL20492 Writing, Identity and Nation **No. of students:** 103 **Level:** UG
**Themes:** Student Learning, Student Engagement, Feedback

TESS 2011
Teaching Enhancement and Student Success
TESS is a University-wide initiative, funded by the Faculty of Humanities. Working with the Faculty elearning Teams, academics set up projects aimed at developing course content specific to their needs, through elearning tools and skills development.

What was the problem?

'Writing, Identity and Nation' has been a perennially popular Level 2 course since its introduction several years ago, yet some students had recently expressed dissatisfaction about there being no means of receiving early, formative feedback on their progress. They pointed out that by the time they had written their coursework essay and received feedback on it, the course was in its final phase. Such student feedback coincided with a growing desire on the part of the course tutors to make more use of Blackboard as a means of encouraging students to engage more deeply with the course from the outset and to think reflexively about how they learn, rather than become solely focused on essay and examination performance. Having had experience of the benefits of paper-based multiple-choice tests during my time as a visiting professor at the University of Toronto, I began to think about how a more technologically advanced form of this assessment method might be adapted to deal with this problem, with the provision of timely formative feedback as a key objective.
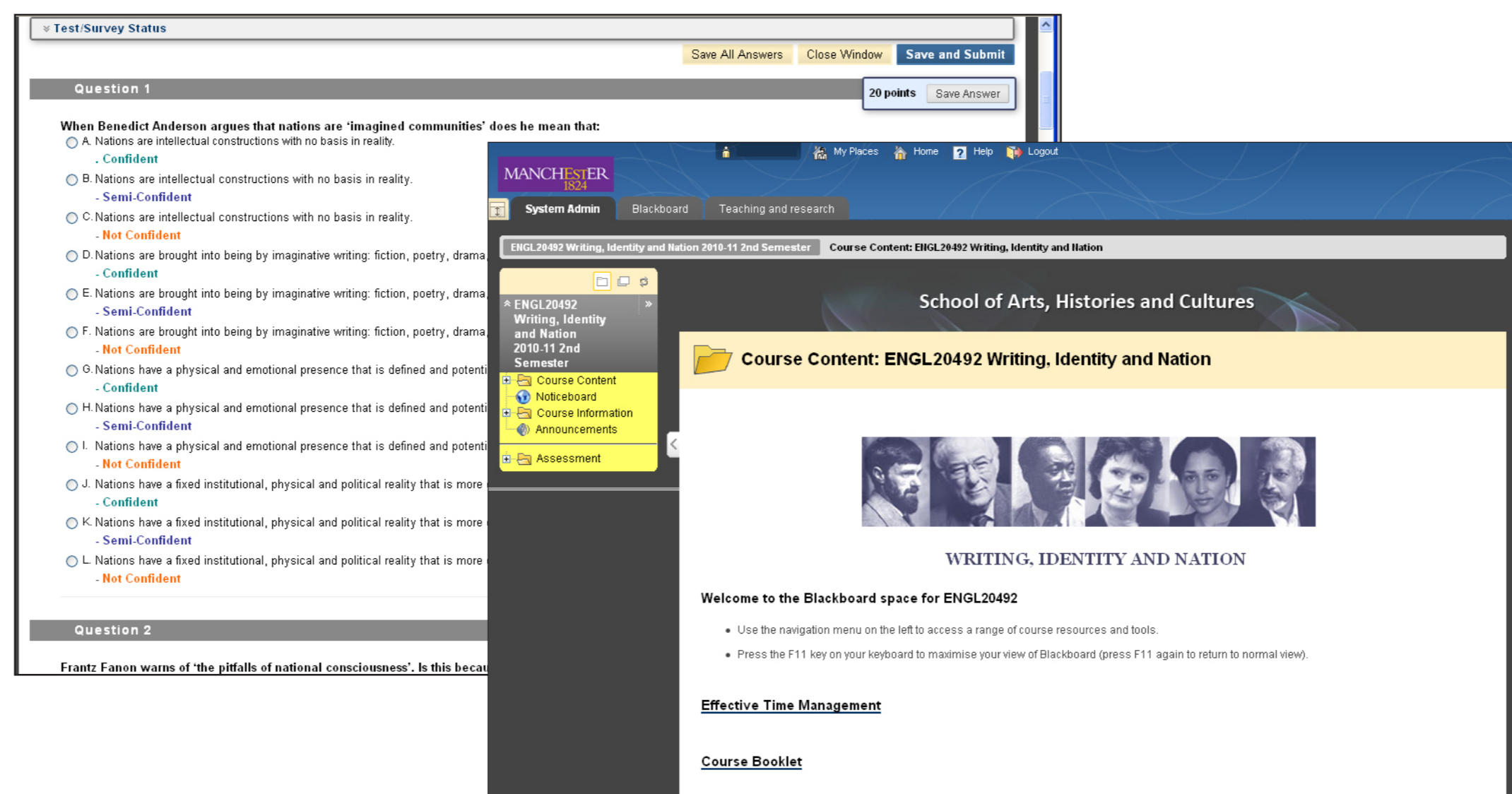
How was the problem solved?

The solution I arrived at was to devise an online multiple-choice test, delivered via Blackboard 9 in the sixth week of the course. The questions are designed to test students' knowledge and understanding of both core concepts and specific texts that are part of the prescribed weekly reading. Each question has four possible answers and each answer has a piece of feedback attached to it, which appears when students access their results at the end of the test. A key feature of the test is a component called 'confidence-based answering', whereby students are asked to rate their level of confidence in selecting their answer to each question (confident, semi-confident, not confident). This feature is designed to deter random guessing and encourage students to reflect on the soundness of their knowledge and critically assess their reasoning as they work their way through the questions.

How successful was the solution?

More than two thirds (69%) of the students who responded to a test-specific questionnaire said they found the test 'helpful' or 'very helpful'. The main reasons they gave for liking the test were the provision of immediate feedback, the motivation to keep up with the weekly reading and the exposure of gaps in knowledge and understanding an early stage in the course. It is also clear that students enjoy the intellectual challenge posed by the questions, which are closely matched with the weekly primary and secondary readings.

What did the students think?

Both formal and informal feedback from students and tutors suggests that the test was well received and much appreciated. The fact that the test is designed to allow multiple attempts means that students can retake the test after further rereading and revision. The one significant problem that arose was a technical one, which is currently under investigation. Some students reported that they could not access their results or feedback, particularly when taking the test off campus. The eLearning technologist with whom I worked on the project was quick to respond to technical difficulties as they arose.