Teaching Morris Online

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For the past three years I have been teaching two final year undergraduate courses – The Victorian Vision: Literature and Culture c. 1830–1880, and Fin de Siècle Writing and Culture – as a mode of ‘blended learning’; that is, these courses incorporate an online or e-learning component alongside face-to-face teaching. Morris features on both syllabi. In this article I am going to focus predominantly on my Fin de Siècle module and how I teach News from Nowhere on it. In particular I will discuss the online activities I have devised that use Morris’s text, both as a means of suggesting the kinds of possibilities available using an online space in teaching, but also as a way of arguing that e-learning can considerable enhance the quality of student engagement with literary texts and the overall learning experience.

BACKGROUND

Most universities now offer their students access to some kind of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Typically these VLEs enable the creation of a dedicated online space in relation to a course. Low level use of a VLE might involve using it as an information depository, whereby students can access course programmes, bibliographies, lecture outlines and perhaps some relevant weblinks. This is probably still the prevalent use of VLEs within English Studies in the UK. However, simply being able to access information does not constitute evidence of actively con-
structured learning, and VLEs contain tools that can be used to far greater effect in terms of augmenting a course. As D. R. Garrison and Terry Anderson argue, ‘the essential feature of e-learning extends beyond its access to information and builds on its communicative and interactive features’.

If students are given guided activities – just as we might devise specific and focussed questions in relation to a set text in a face-to-face seminar – they are able to respond to these activities via online Discussion Boards (also known as Discussion Forums or Computer-Mediated Conferencing). It is my experience that having a number of such online activities taking place alongside ‘real time’ teaching adds a new dimension to the course as a whole.

At the University of Wolverhampton our VLE is a custom-built system which is known as WOLF (the Wolverhampton Online Learning Framework). Commercial systems such as Blackboard, WebCT and Moodle are also widely used in higher education. All contain Discussion Board facilities. From the outset students come to my courses on the Victorians knowing there is going to be an online component. Alongside the weekly programme of texts and topics they are also given a programme for the Victorian Vision Online (VVO) or the Fin de Siècle Online Experience (FOE) which shows them where an online session dovetails with that week’s subject of study. My Victorian Vision course has seven online sessions and the Fin de Siècle four, over a course of twelve teaching weeks. This means that the online sessions can be spaced out over the course at regular intervals. The reason for the difference in the number of sessions relates to the fact that the work students do on both VVO and FOE is assessed (to the tune of 40% and 25% respectively of the overall marks for the course). The question of whether online discussion should be assessed is one of some debate within the English Studies community in the UK. My view is that if I wish my students to regard the online component as an integral part of a course then I must acknowledge and reward the effort they put in to it. Assessment also ensures full-class participation in Discussion Boards. If only the same keen few take part in an activity this may well deter the more reticent from joining in, and I’m interesting in hearing the
views of all the class, not just a few of them. Also, if participation isn’t made integral (and thus mandatory) then when life becomes too busy some students may well not bother.

‘NEWS FROM NOWHERE’ IN ‘REAL TIME’

*News from Nowhere* (*NfN*) is a work that disturbs, challenges and disorients. As David Latham suggests in his article elsewhere in this issue, Morris’s vision of a radically transformed society may well elicit cries of ‘get real!’ from some of today’s consumer culture MTV generation. But this is perhaps to underestimate the capacity for critical reflection that is hopefully a feature of how our students operate by the time they are in their final year of an English Studies degree. My experience is that students’ opinions of *NfN* are often very diverse: there are some who dismiss it as fanciful and naive, but others will argue strongly, even passionately, for the spirit of what Morris sets before them. Even if students aren’t prepared to accept Morris’s vision wholesale, almost all are willing to weigh up some of its responses to various social issues. As Stephen Coleman says, ‘*News from Nowhere* is a vital contribution to a long-fought and far from purely academic debate about what human beings may one day become’, and it offers students – all of whom are living through their own quite involved processes of becoming, growing and finding out what their values are – the chance to put these personal questions into a larger context about the nature of the society in which they live and in which they may hope to live.

My Fin de Siècle course focuses on literature and art of the 1880s and 1890s. *NfN* appears quite late on in the course, after the class have crushed their faces into honey-sweet mountains of flowers with Dorian Gray, roamed the streets of darkest London with Jekyll and Hyde, shifted a few shapes and sunk a few pints of blood with Dracula, intoxicated themselves with the absinthe-inflected flavours and hues of decadent poetry, and tried to redeem some of the masculinist gender politics of these aforementioned texts with a good dose of the NewWoman’s struggles
and stories. They then wake up in Nowhere, and, like William Guest, wonder just where they are.

At Wolverhampton we teach in ‘blocks’ whereby contextualising lectures immediately precede seminars in which the week’s set text is discussed in more detail. In the lecture I briefly outlined Morris’s life and many interests, focussing in particular on his role in the emerging socialist movement in Britain in the late nineteenth century. I accessed the online facsimile of Commonweal via the University of Michigan’s Library catalogue that Elizabeth Miller mentions in her article ‘Collections and Collectivity’ and was thus able to show my class the original context of NfN’s serial publication. They also saw an image of the famous opening frontispiece of the Kelmscott edition, with Charles Gere’s engraving of Kelmscott Manor, followed by a live weblink to Kelmscott Manor’s current website, whose homepage includes a (presumably recent) photograph of exactly the same view as Gere’s illustration. This juxtaposition of late-nineteenth-century contexts (here of the book’s publication) with contemporary, twenty-first century images was intentional, not least because NfN is, of course, still very much a text that readers quickly engage with as pertaining to now as well as emerging from a specific historical, political and cultural moment. Anticipating some of the potential cynicism towards Nowhere’s vision that I thought might emerge once discussion began I deliberately ended the lecture with Herbert Marcuse’s famous comment that ‘capitalism’s real power is to make unthinkable the alternatives’, having been reminded of this by Latham’s quoting of it in his article.

In seminar we discussed in more detail some specific issues about life in Nowhere. As a fair number of my class will go on to train to teach we discussed Nowhere’s model of education, and as literature students we also looked at what happens to books themselves. In my experience students are also often quick to pick up on what they perceive as Morris’s none-too-progressive (from a twenty-first century perspective) views on the role of women. It could be argued that one of the things NfN implicitly asks its readers to do is imagine themselves into the world of
Nowhere. 'If this is utopia, would I like to live there?' may seem an inappropriately individualist response, but it is one which readers, including our young student women readers, will ask. We also broached the question of how 'human nature' itself seems to have been transformed in Nowhere, now the capitalist system that deformed humanity has been removed. Again, my experience is that this is often quite a stumbling block for student readers, who simply can't (or won't) believe that human beings would ever willingly co-operate and work together as harmoniously as they do in Nowhere. Despite having to 'defend' NfN against a number of 'this just won't work' comments from the class, it was clear by the end of the session that Nowhere had really got them going. It was this that I then attempted to make the most of by introducing an online session to take the discussion further.

VIRTUALLY NOWHERE

My online sessions all use classroom-based teaching as their starting part and allow the class to develop and expand their consideration of that week's topic and text into a kind of virtual seminar. So after the classroom session on NfN my students were sent off to Wolverhampton's VLE to engage with a specific activity I had set up for them online. I post the instructions about the activity in the VLE and also post up links to any relevant web resources that they might need to undertake the activity. The students make their response to the activity, and to each other, in the Discussion Forum. Whilst students can obviously make their posts to Discussion Boards at any time of the day or night - they are an asynchronous method of communication — the online activities on my course are timebound in that the students have a week to make their postings and develop the discussion. This allows them to revisit the Board several times and they can both create and participate in the developing discussion as the week progresses. The limited time for each online activity ensures focus and encourages participation; it also guarantees that there
is a ‘critical mass’ of activity on the Board which is necessary for Discussion Forum activities to be successful. This particular exercise invited each member of the class (of about thirty) to select a chapter from NfN, reread it, and then post up a summary of that chapter’s main points. Alongside this summary they were encouraged to comment on that chapter as well. As Discussion Boards are a collaborative space – a point I frequently reiterate to the class – part of the exercise is also to read some of their classmates’ postings and to respond to their comments. In addition I also stipulated that each student should try and choose a different chapter; thus if most of the class participated in the exercise we would have comments on a fair number of the total chapters in the text.

Below I offer an example of a discussion ‘thread’ that emerged from this exercise:

*Concerning Government – Ch. XI*

*John Garrick 02/04/07 14.55.02*

Ahh, the sweet smell of anarchy in the morning: smells like the dung in what used to be Parliament House.

Morris leans more towards anarcho-syndicalism in this chapter than he does towards socialism. What he describes is the quintessential anarchist setup (I ought to point out here that anarchism is not the absence of government: anarchism is the absence of leaders) without ‘an elaborate system of government, with its army, navy and police to force [the people] to give way to the will of the majority...’.

The ensuing conversation with Guest reveals firstly how ignorant the average citizen was (and is?) of the process of government: Guest, by stating that he is ‘supposed to know’ what the process of government is, is tacitly admitting that he doesn’t. I’ll spare you all my thoughts on Parliamentary democracy being a fancy way of deferring responsibility on the part of the citizen (this time), but his state of mind isn’t terribly surprising to me.

Hammond (and, by extension, Morris) levels a pretty sharp critique at Parliament, referring to the self-interest of the Lords (the device by which the aristocracy ensures Parliament doesn’t
do anything truly revolutionary) and the ineffectiveness of the Commons in the light of that (not to mention the primary concern of all MPs: forget representing the people, just get voted back in!)

Guest is intelligent enough to realise this: that any serious attempt at altering the status quo is defined as Revolution and slapped down, and thus that true power lies with the people who define the rules by which this is accomplished: the Law Courts and the instruments of enforcement, the police and military.

Touching briefly on the idea of law as fundamentally unfair to everyone (but more so to the poor, since they can’t afford to take the kind of losses or invest in the kind of representation that are involved even in winning the game), Morris claims that the primary function of government is defending a class system that does nobody any real favours, but the poor least of all. It’s there to ‘defend the rich from the poor, the strong from the weak’.

All well and good, but then he makes the somewhat contentious claim that abolishing the concept of property removes the need for laws to legislate upon it. I mentioned P. J. Proudhon, anarchist and genius, in class: he points out that the concept of owning oneself is essential to defining identity and freedom. I’m also going to argue that some laws are absolutely essential to protect ‘society’ from rogue elements. Prohibiting things like rape and murder are vital as long as you have individuals who are sufficiently unbalanced to indulge in them: Morris seems to skip over this kind of crime (in the next chapter when he gets on to discussing them), focusing on the Great Injustice of the Rich and the Poor.

All very salutary, William, but I happen to believe that people’s bodies are their own, and that that’s a concept worth keeping the notion of property around for. If your body is the Property of the People, what’s to stop the People doing whatever they see fit with it? Generalised niceness and an assumption that it’s easier for us all to just get along? I wish it was that simple, but it only takes one person to decide that’s not the way they’re going to play it for the whole system to come crashing down. Without a means to stop
them, they'll take what they want and give nothing back ...

Anyway. Back on the topic, Morris goes on to discuss the threat of war, and to pretty much dismiss it as irrelevant to the rich and the governments involved: it's a game between the rich to make each other richer or eliminate competition. To the poor, it doesn't make a damn bit of difference whether the nation is at war or not: their lot is much the same.

Morris cries out against government for the sake of government, maintaining riches for nothing but the sake of being rich. I'll end, I think, on a link to some thoughts on gift economy and autonomous interdependence, [live weblink] which I hope y'all find enlightening. It certainly seems to be the sort of thing Morris was aiming for ... but that doesn't come until Chapter Twelve.

Re: Concerning Government – Ch. XI
Anne Cooke  03/04/07  10.40.50
Hello John, firstly I would like to mention about your first quote, compared to today maybe a pile of dung in the Houses of Parliament might be more productive, at least something can come into fruition from a lovely pile of compost! This thought was held even in the nineteenth century, conveyed through the old man on answering Guest 'well, well, dung is not the worst kind of corruption; fertility may come of that, whereas mere dearth came from the other kind ...'

Back to the serious stuff ... I believe that everybody has the right to their own liberty, but it just seems that Morris does not want to face the negative aspects of not having a leader, our society cannot live without one, we do need direction and law and order to progress. If not we will go back to being primordial, apparently our natural instincts have been suppressed to live in a society and if these instincts are released then we would live in bedlam. Unfortunately, even now there are people who murder and rape, they would have a field day in Morris's world, wouldn't you agree? All I can think about is the book Lord of the Flies, children deserted on an island without any law and order, what do they start doing, they divide into groups and the savagery
starts, portraying the human element of survival, all of us in that position would do anything to survive, even if we don’t/won’t admit it.

But could it be argued that today we the people are the Parliament. Everybody from the age of 18 has the right to vote, therefore theoretically, we control the way Parliament is governed by voting who we want to be governed by and agreeing with what they plan to do with our country. We know that politics is corrupted but the majority control, at one point in time we chose how to be governed. Throughout history it is mainly about how one person controlled another which either ended positively or negatively (maybe that is why in Morris’s utopia history isn’t taught as it reveals that since the beginning of time somebody has held a position of control).

*Re: Concerning Government – Ch. XI*

*Penny Jones 03/04/07 21.45.31*

Hi. To take your idea and digress a little, but you’ll see my point later, what troubles me, is Morris’s utopia means work is art, and it is people’s alienation from art that creates the dysfunctional society. Where, therefore, does Morris find the art in menial tasks? Who assigns these menial tasks? Who decides who does what and when? or, do we all get up the morning and instinctively know that we’re having this week or cleaning the toilets in the local pub the next? It’s all very well having the jolly gentleman dustbinman, but he’s still shovelling somebody else’s s—t. However, it appears, for Morris, that we should all take turns in the shovelling – again I stress, who decides: who, where and when? What happens when somebody decides they don’t feel like cleaning toilets today and that they want to spend another week sailing up and down the Thames?

Morris accepts there is a minority, but his answer to this is to go with the majority, a little contradictory in this perfect world where everyone is equal don’t you think? It’s a pity Morris wasn’t around to read *Animal Farm* or *Lord of the Flies.*

Although I think we could organise our own society a little bet-
ter, *News From Nowhere* is not the answer. We are inherently animals, and no matter how much our id or super id is constructed or conditioned by society (or Freud for that matter) we have survival instincts. I do not believe that you can eliminate this through a social and physiological breeding programme. This has a tendency towards ‘eugenics’ and lest we forget Hitler and his Aryan race.

I have deliberately not amended my students’ posts here (although names have been fictionalised to protect privacy), and we may think that some of these comments demonstrate a more nuanced understanding and ‘feel’ for NFN than others. This is fine, as in due course I will assess the different contributions to the Discussion Board that they have made over the module. The tone of the posts is more informal than in an essay, but is clearly far more than inconsequential and off-message ‘txtspk’. I do give some guidelines on ‘Netiquette’ – how to respond appropriately in an online space – and I encourage students to write as well as they can, but I flag up that the post-and-respond nature of collaborative discussion online is not meant to be the same as writing an essay. Students are given credit where they engage with each other’s comments. One role for the tutor or e-moderator might be to post a response to Anne and Penny’s comments about the scarcity model of human survival on which they focus, pointing out that Nowhere is a vision of abundance in which no one wants for the necessities of life, so there is no need to compete or fight with others on that account. They are, however, certainly touching upon a number of issues here which the society presented in Nowhere raises – about the balancing of freedom and responsibility, the extent to which human beings can self-regulate, and the question of what government can and should be about – and I hope it is clear how they are using each other’s comments to spark further ones of their own. John has also exploited the online nature of the Discussion Board to include a weblink of relevance to his arguments.
Here's another ‘thread’:

*On the Lack of Incentive to Labour in a Communist Society – Ch. XV*

**Kelly Baker  05/04/07  20.48.52**

This chapter raises the issue of labour without reward and how it works in Morris’ utopia. Instead of reward of money their reward is life and creation which is compared to the wages God gets.

Instead of the fear of no money which is of the nineteenth century, the fear in Nowhere is that work will run out. These people see work as a pleasure and not a suffering. In Nowhere work is enjoyed because the products made are needed and as the chapter states, ‘All work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without’. This shows that the key to their success in labour without pay is that the individual decides what they do by hand and what is made by machinery ensuring that everyone is happy. However, in the nineteenth century according to old Hammond, the work is done to make the system keep going. The idea is to make as many products as possible paying little attention to the quality...

I believe Morris is suggesting that for his utopia to work then everyone must be happy with their labour and therefore money will not be an issue. I think this is a good idea because there would never be any arguments over money and people wouldn’t be striving to earn lots of money. It would put an end to the idea of getting the most expensive products and in turn irradicating bullying. However, as good as this sounds I don’t believe it will ever happen in society because people will never give up their wealth or the notion of money.

After re-reading this chapter I looked at the online edition. I don’t think it aided my reading much other than showing the key figures and machinery. I feel that the book is best, it aids imagination and for me this is the best thing about reading a book. I prefer to imagine characters and places rather than have them placed in front of me.
Hi Kelly. I’ve been looking at this one too I just wasn’t quick enough! I thought I’d post what I made of it alongside yours I didn’t want to waste it.

In this chapter Morris questions how anybody could be induced to work in such a society which offers no fiscal reward to the labourer. Already having seen how his money is worthless to the tradesmen that he has encountered, he struggles to understand what motivates society to continue producing wares failing to see the reward. In his response to this Hammond claims that the reward for labour is the creation of the entity itself. He notes the unnaturalness of being paid for such by drawing on the example of conception, ‘If you are going to ask to be paid for the pleasure of creation, which is what excellence in work means, the next thing we shall hear of will be a bill sent for the begetting of children’. In this utopia, all work is regarded as pleasurable in one of three ways. Firstly, it can be pleasurable in the sense of the knowledge that there will be some form of recognition and honour. Secondly, if the work has become part of a routine, pleasure can be derived from the consistency and stability of this role. Finally, there is a sensuous pleasure in the crafting of an object.

In order to contextualise this approach to labour, Hammond explains the situation that existed before society reached its state of utopia. The development of a ‘World-Market’ is charted where the exchange of goods through buying and selling is seen to spiral out of control, and the desire for capital growth had usurped the wellbeing of the public. This idea seems to draw upon the Marxist concept of ‘Commodity Fetishism’, where ‘sham or artificial necessaries’ become to hold as much worth to the public as the ‘real necessaries which supported life’. Caught in an ever growing cycle of commerce the British workforces were urged to produce more and more wares, exceeding the amount that was actually needed and manifesting in a surplus of gratuitous goods. When demand became so high, there was a marked decline in the quality of production that up until this point had been of a high
standard. Quality was sacrificed for quantity, a ‘cheapening of production’ ensued and the morale of the workers was significantly weakened.

In regard to the labour saving machinery which should have bettered working conditions, Morris condemns them claiming that they merely quickened the production of simplistic wares in order to increase the burden of more complicated processes onto the craftsman. The online edition of News from Nowhere suggests that this negative representation of machinery could be due to his dislike of other utopian writers who supported this technology in their fictions which is interesting. I’d have thought myself that technology would have been seen as a positive thing especially in the light of progress which seemed to define the era.

Here Sally bounces off Kelly’s post to offer a quite detailed comment on her chosen chapter; she also included quite a long quote from NJN at the start of the post (which I have omitted) to help orient her readers. An e-moderator response to Sally’s musings on the role of machinery in Nowhere could have pointed her to Bellamy’s Looking Backward of course, against which Morris was reacting, or to extracts from Morris’s lectures. Some of the discussion threads can become much longer than these two examples. I had also posted a message early on in the week of the Nowhere online activity entitled ‘And just to be provocative…’ in which I told my undergraduate class that I was also teaching an MA Module on Morris and Wilde in the same semester, and each week a different student had to introduce that week’s text. When we came to NJN, an enthusiastic postgrad who was clearly very persuaded by Morris’s ideas opened his presentation by saying ‘this is the most inspiring book we’ll read on the course’. I invited my undergraduates to agree that he was right. This triggered a flurry of responses – eighteen in total (Figure 1) – which ranged from the dismissal of NJN as a fairytale to others also

Fig. 1 Screenshot from the Fin de Siècle Online Experience Discussion Forum, News from Nowhere activity. Wolverhampton University VLE (WOLF), April 2007.
I also teach this text in an MA module as part of our English Studies MA here. The module considers Wilde and Morris alongside each other in some depth. Each week a student kicks off our discussion for us, introducing the text for the rest of the class. We considered "News From Nowhere" several weeks ago and the student doing the presentation opened with "This is the most inspiring book we'll read on the course."

He's right, isn't he?
defending it as ‘inspirational’, with a few swipes at Tony Blair thrown in for good measure along the way.

I am unable here to give more detailed examples of my students’ posts, but they ranged from pleasing references back to lecture material (always good to know that students are actually listening!), to their own citations of other reading they had done on *NfN*, to someone posting up information about the ethos of Steiner schools as a model of alternative education and asking whether it would or could ever work in a city like Wolverhampton, to a cheeky close reading which argued that it was not only Dick who fancied Ellen, but that Nowhere’s most fully alive and animated character was so attractive that Clara couldn’t resist her too. None of this would have been offered to the class for further debate and comment without the opportunity of the online activity. What is clear to me is that students undoubtedly benefit from – and enjoy – being able to extend their engagement with a text or topic by taking it further into the online space of a VLE Discussion Board. The students only have an hour in the classroom together to discuss that week’s set text whereas here they have a full week to build on what they’ve initially learnt. It is also well documented that online discussion can help quieter students find their voice. Not everyone will speak up in a classroom setting, whereas some students will come into their own on the Discussion Board when they have had more time for reflection.

**STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE ONLINE EDITION OF ‘NEWS FROM NOWHERE’**

Sally’s and Kelly’s posts above also both mention the online edition of *News from Nowhere* created by Florence Boos at the University of Iowa. I have been interested to know how students respond to this resource and thus I also asked the class to comment on how the particular chapter they had selected to summarise was presented in the online edition. Did reading it
add anything? In this final section I offer a summary of responses to this question.

What my students most appreciated about the online edition was its inclusion of images as a way of illustrating and bringing to life what the text is discussing. Commenting on Chapter XXII, 'Hampton Court and a Prais'or of Past Times', one student said,

The online edition of this chapter did help as the pictures of Hampton Court and of that section of the Thames really helped [me] to imagine [that] Morris's Perfect World is there somewhere within our own. It allows you to see what Morris saw ... I think Morris would have enjoyed the online version of his work as it would have allowed a degree of creativity and freedom that a book might not, such as the inclusion of photographs and links to other areas of interest.

The democratic potential of the edition being free and available to everyone who has access to a computer was also appreciated: 'Morris would quite enjoy the online experience because this highlights how he believed education and art should be accessible to everyone, and that is what this website is doing -- showing people the work of someone like Morris'. Without particularly being aware of Morris's own views on the 'ideal book' as a harmonious integration of word and image another student commented:

I think the website provides a more authentic feel; this usage of image within text fleshes out the meaning of the whole thing. The use of the border down the side as well as the images of the setting serves as a fuller means of appreciating how Morris perceived his habitat as well as his and his family's creative endeavours to add a personal signature to his abode.

However, numerous students were also vocal in saying that they would rather read from books, and they too harnessed Morris to their cause:

News from Nowhere privileges practical skills that involve work
ing with the hands instead of ‘book-learning’. As [Morris] made specially printed, beautifully illustrated editions I think he would have preferred a book as a decorative object that could be held and admired, rather than the more nebulous and intellectual method of searching the internet ... and reading from a grey screen.

Far more students said they disliked reading from a computer screen than said they liked it, particularly with regard to reading long passages: ‘books are still the best form in order to present text’ said several. And whilst many could appreciate that the images in the online edition helped them understand the context of the book better, some actively wanted to be left to engage with the text imaginatively, without the ‘making concrete’ that the inclusion of pictures brings:

For me [the images] created a problem a bit like the one you might get when a novel is dramatised for the television. It just never is quite how you imagined it – and somehow the reality of it tends to be rather disappointing in comparison. I prefer to rely on the very personal pictures I create within my own head!

So, responses are mixed. One student was adamant that ‘Morris would be turning in his grave if he saw our ... being able to read books electronically’! Certainly part of me is very heart-ened that many of my students still value the experience that is reading a book, and would consciously choose it over reading text on screen. Another part of me thinks that online resources can also offer expanded or transformed reading opportunities that go beyond what the book can offer – particularly in respect of incorporating visual material – and thus they can complement ‘book reading’. As Marshall McLuhan (now long ago) famously said, ‘the medium is the message’: reading NfN in book form is different from ‘reading’ NfN in its online version. That’s how it should be. Those of us involved in the creation of online editions and literary resources need to remember this: just as the book as a technology has been so successful because it has exploited what it can do best, so web-based technologies need to exploit what
they excel at in terms of the (re)presentation of materials.

CONCLUSION

VLE Discussion Boards are dynamic spaces for learning. Using them has considerably enhanced the way I teach the Victorians and student feedback over several years tells me that the students themselves think these kinds of guided, focussed online activities add something of significant value to their experience of English Studies. Before I used a VLE on my Fin de Siècle course I often found it quite difficult to engage a majority of the class with *NfN*. If students had already made strategic decisions that they weren’t going to write an essay on the text as part of their assessment then their interest was sometimes quite limited. However, by using a number of assessed online sessions across the module, students have to engage with a wider range of texts in more detail. I am in no doubt that asking my class to extend their discussion of *NfN* into the virtual seminar of the VLE has improved their understanding of both the text and Morris. It may well be that some of today’s students want to resist a work like *News from Nowhere*, which is all the more reason why they should continue to be encouraged to wrestle with it, argue with it, disagree with it and be inspired by it. Using an online Discussion Board – a previously inconceivable Nowhere which can now be a Somewhere in cyberspace for debate, discussion, reflection, play and fellowship – is one way of making this happen.

NOTES


2 For further discussion of the topic of assessing Discussion Forums in relation to English Studies see Benjamin Colbert, Rosie Miles and Francis Wilson, with Hilary Weeks,
'Designing and Assessing Online Learning in English Literary Studies', *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 6: 1 (February 2007), pp. 74–89.


4 The digitised version of Commonweal can be found via the University of Michigan’s library catalogue, http://www.lib.umich.edu/

5 Kelmscott Manor’s website can be found at http://kelmscottmanor.org.uk/


7 Jan Marsh’s essay, ‘Concerning Love: News from Nowhere and Gender’, is extremely useful here. Not only does it contextualise Morris’s portrayal of Dick and Clara’s relationship in terms of contemporary socialist discussions about marriage but Marsh is also not afraid to tackle head on the issue of how ‘traditional’ the roles for women in Nowhere seem to modern readers. Whilst not attempting to deny this Marsh ultimately suggests that Nowhere is portrayed as suffused with an erotics which is an integral part of its political longing. See *William Morris and ‘News from Nowhere’*, pp. 107–26.

8 Aside from the assessed Forums I also set up a specific discussion space where the students can go which isn’t assessed, and where they can be as off-message as they like. In practice this non-assessed space has been used to varying degrees: my 2006–07 class mostly ignored it. However, a previous cohort memorably used it as a means of discussing where it was possible to buy absinthe in Wolverhampton – an anecdote that all on its own seems to justify teaching courses on the Fin de Siècle!

9 The *News from Nowhere* online edition can be found at http://www.uiowa.edu/%7Ewmorris/news/index.html