Moodling beyond Bollywood: e-teaching the language, literature and culture of the Indian diaspora

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A report on an interdisciplinary e-course experiment on language, literature and culture in the Indian Diaspora

Introduction

One of the rich potentials of the *World Wide Web* is to enable international and interdisciplinary projects by utilizing e-learning technologies. Further, contemporary students are used to structuring much of their public and private life and learning around the use of electronic technologies. Certainly, when learning, thinking and working are no longer solitary activities, then traditional notions of teaching must be redesigned throughout our educational institutions in order to meet the challenges of the communication age – language teaching and the humanities at our universities cannot be an exception (see King 1998:365–6). Since the classroom can transcend spatially limited locations, it can transform the 'traditional scene of instruction [...] into a joint venture involving many scholars, including our students as active researchers' (see Rowe 2002:61).

Internet platforms make it possible to establish international educational environments, integrating people in various locations, of different backgrounds, from various disciplines, and at multiple institutions in a single virtual classroom. Students from various locations are able to meet, read, view, and discuss material unrestricted by spatial and temporal boundaries. Based on the experience gathered in nearly a decade of e-teaching in the context of American Cultural Studies Onweb – a project which designed, developed, and implemented a series of online courses taught out of the Universities of Heidelberg (by Dorothea Fischer-Hornung) and Stuttgart (by Wolfgang Holtkamp) in Germany, and subsequently with students from universities in Australia, Italy, Russia, Switzerland and the United States – the next challenge was to integrate not only students but also teachers from various locations and across disciplines. Marianne Hundt initiated such a project at the University of Heidelberg, focusing on the Indian diaspora.

The mutual concern with various aspects of the Indian diaspora in our respective disciplines and locations motivated us to form a team of teachers, consisting of two linguists with an interest on Indian Englishes in the diaspora (Hundt and Mesthrie) and two cultural theorists with an interest in respectively media and cultural studies and the Indian diaspora (Brosius) and ethnic literatures and media (Fischer-Hornung). For a class composed of people from many cultures and backgrounds, what could be more interesting, we thought, than to investigate forms and implications of the global dispersion of Indian culture?

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Course structure and content

The Internet offers an excellent environment for independent and interactive research-based learning as well as the creation of knowledge through dialogue and interaction. Based on this fundamental assumption, we designed an interdisciplinary and transnational 14-week course, which consisted of four linked modules each of three weeks duration, each facilitated by one of the teachers in his or her discipline. An introductory one-week dry run was organized to familiarize the students with the e-learning platform, the University of Heidelberg's Moodle, which was used by all participants from the various institutions. The various technical aspects of the course served as a warm-up. Likewise, the final week was devoted to the completion of an Internet presentation based on the overall course material, which was to be completed by working groups of students using the electronic tools provided.

During the initial orientation, a tutorial with animated instructions and specific assigned tasks enabled the students to access the syllabus, test all the functions of the platform, access course material, utilize the internal e-communication features (forum, e-mail, and chat), and access and submit assignments as well as material to be shared with the class (e.g. files containing texts, hyperlinks, visual and sound material, a wiki, and a glossary). See Figures 1 and 2.

Moodle provides these features to teachers as selectable modules that can be uploaded into the course as needed. Course content consisted of Internet resources provided either in the form of URLs or texts, audio and/or visual files. This online material was then the basis of discussion in the virtual forum or written assignments to be handed in electronically. Students were required to post at least two 500-word contributions per week on the assigned topics; in practice, however, a majority posted much more than was required. The final assignment consisted of a two-week project (extended from the original one week's duration, in view of petitions regarding workloads) in which students worked in a virtual international team to complete a website presentation.

Each three-week unit was devoted to a separate focus. The first unit was facilitated by Rajend Mesthrie who provided the historical background and information on the dispersion of India's various cultural groups, incorporating maps, diagrams, etc. as well as texts focusing on the characteristics of diaspora over time; in the second module Christiane Brosius provided readings and media clips focusing on the implications of cultural identity and diaspora in the past and present as well as in various locations across the globe. The 2006 film *The Namesake* provided material to discuss the complexities of change in language, culture and identity in the diaspora. In the third module Dorothea Fischer-Hornung focused on two novels, *The Namesake*



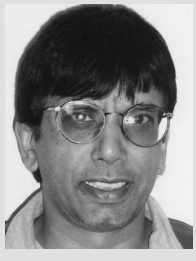
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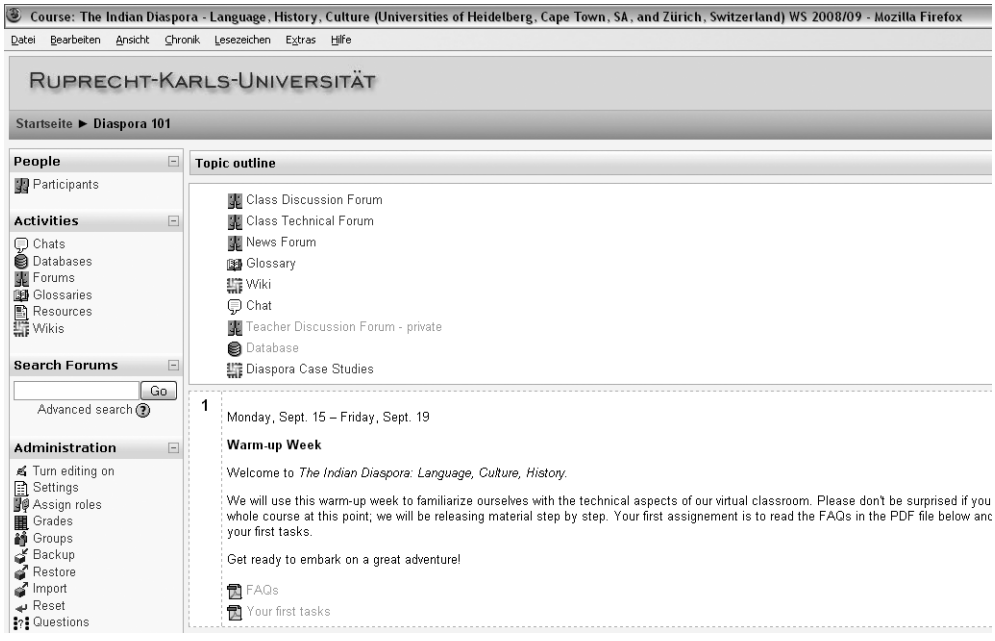


Figure 1 The Moodle e-classroom with tools and assignments for the warm-up week.



Figure 2 Example of glossary entries compiled by participants

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(Jhumpa Lahiri, 2004) and *The Inheritance of Loss* (Kiran Desai, 2006) to exemplify the cultural dimensions of the Indian diaspora in contemporary novels as well as the changes entailed in the transition from novel to film. The final module was taught by Marianne Hundt and focused on the English language in Fiji, South Africa, and the Caribbean, using original sound file sources providing the students with a hands-on approach to studying the linguistic features of Indian Englishes in the diaspora.

Module 1: History

In the first 3-week session students read material from the *Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora* (Lal, 2006) covering three periods of significant movements of peoples from India: an early period prior to the 17th century AD involving trade and religion; the 17th to early 20th century involving forced movements (slavery and indenture) under European colonialism; and the mid-20th century onwards under globalization and the search for better employment opportunities. The main focus fell on the second of these periods, which saw large-scale migrations to Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa, Suriname, and Fiji. The primary text that students read online was Mahatma Gandhi's *Satyagraha in South Africa*, in fulfillment of their first assignment which asked students to consider the proposition that it was the diaspora, and specifically his experiences in South Africa between 1893 and 1914, that led Gandhi to conceive of unity for all India. Students successfully picked out and commented on sections in the text that showed the initial immense cultural diversity among the over 100,000 migrants in South Africa gradually giving way to a sense of unity and 'Indianness'. Feedback from students showed that they found the assigned topic to be one that filled a gap in their knowledge of Indian history. Furthermore, it prepared them for the next two sections of the course on cultural change. See Figure 4.

Module 2: Culture

The key focus of this three-week module was on films, television and music, as produced by members of the Indian diaspora in the North Americas and the UK. The different meanings of 'youth culture' and 'cultural identity' were discussed in order to better understand how and for what reasons 'Indian culture' features so centrally in diaspora contexts and identity discourses. Students were given a range of options with respect to films and music (Asian underground) that they could explore. Participants ended up discussing the films *The Namesake* and *American Desi* at great length, while the music topic as well as the online diaspora were explored in several of the students' essays. The aim to set up a glossary of Indian diaspora film and music was not very successful because of the time required to read texts,

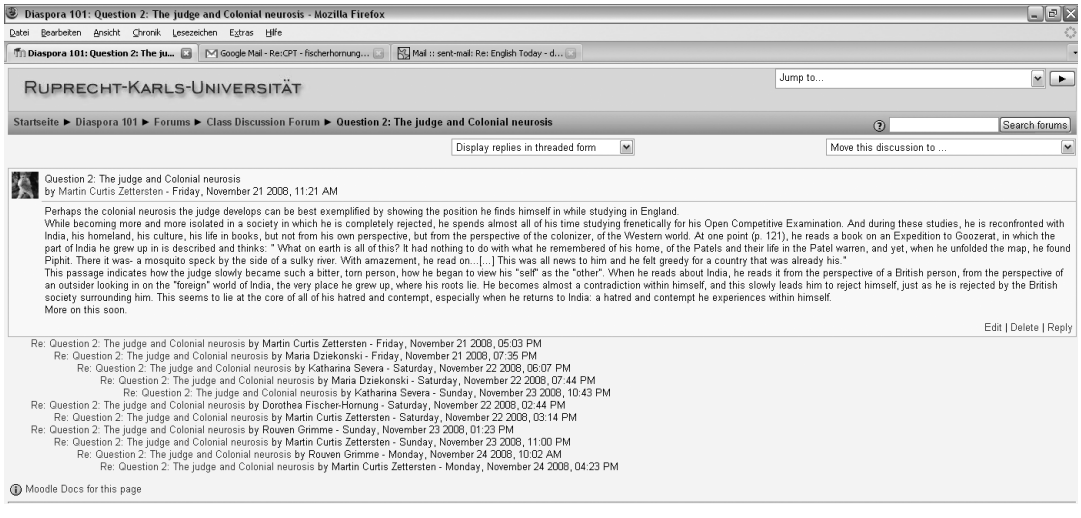


Figure 3 Example of a discussion thread

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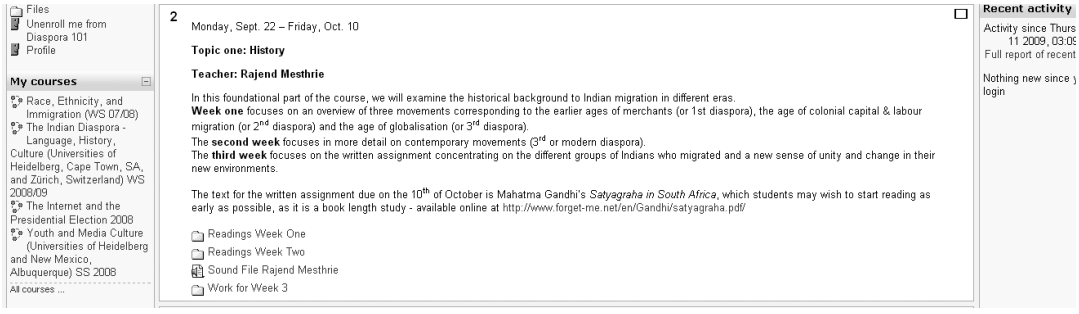


Figure 4 History module – content and assignments

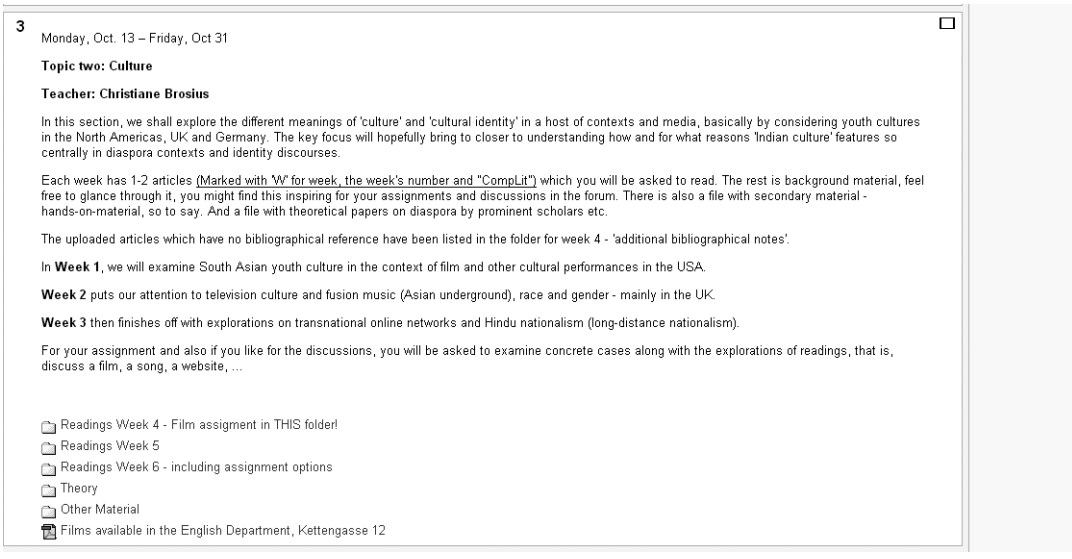


Figure 5 Culture module – content and assignments

to watch at least a limited set of films, and to write an essay. Extra time for additional activities was simply not available. For future sessions, it would be useful to be able to upload film sequences and music and improvise more creatively with writing about non-textual material. See Figure 5.

Very fruitful forum discussions were conducted on the topics of 'home and homeing', 'name and naming', as well as on individualism and collective values (e.g. joint family) in the context of romantic love versus arranged marriage. The question as to when each of us felt 'at home' or 'alien' proved a highly challenging task since most of the students either came from a migrant background or had experience of living abroad. Particularly relevant was the question how much 'ethnic' and 'national' identity mattered for one's perception of 'culture', and what home 'felt like', especially when one was 'away from home' (the myth of return). Additional key terms that triggered several discussions were 'authenticity' (what makes – or unmakes – an Indian 'Indian'?) and the role of religion, ritual and tradition in the ways in which youth encountered the relevance of identity. Furthermore, sexuality, race and gender were often underlined as elementary points of identification and discrimination. Important works by other scholars that stimulated discussions were Vertovec (2003) and Brah (2002).

The second part of the module on 'diaspora culture' focused on music and what role language could play in this. A text by Sanjay Sharma, *'Noisy Asians' or 'Asian Noise'*

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(Sharma, 1996), helped to alert us to the experience of stigmatization of 'coloured' migrants in a 'white' society and how we should understand the hybrid language of Asian underground music at various levels: as a language experiment, an experiment about identity as multiple identities, a challenge to mainstream (racist) thinking and politics, and a challenge to conservative Indian culturalist thinking (of the first generation, for instance).

Module 3: Literature

Kiran Desai's novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* explores the effects of globalization, modernity, class and gender within the Indian diaspora but also the interaction of various diasporic communities as well. Students discussed the effects of the colonization of the mind based on a conflict-wrought over-identification with the culture of the colonizer. Desai shows that for the colonial subject the 'essence, quintessence, of Englishness' is symbolically reflected in the identification with and consumption of marketable items such as 'marmite' 'daffodil bulbs' and 'Marks and Spencer underwear' (2006:53). The reference to daffodil bulbs enabled a discussion of the intertextuality of many postcolonial texts, which refer to both the world inside and outside the novel. The dissonances in the colonial mindset are reflected, for example, in Wordsworth's poem of the same name which conveys western aesthetics in colonies where no daffodil has ever grown or been seen. How this impacts in Jamaica, for example, was discussed after reading excerpts from Jamaica Kinkaid's *Lucy* (1990). All secondary sources were made available to the students as PDF files in Moodle's file storage. See Figure 6.

In Desai's portrayal of various forms of migrations and journeys – and attendant interchange within and among diasporic groups in the era of global markets – the categories of time and space cause a dizzying sense of displacement in her characters. Desai's migrants have 'a fearful feeling of having entered a space so big it reached both backward and forward' (2006:39). Within this expanding sense of temporal and spatial uncertainty certain cultural concepts serve to anchor diasporic consciousness, in particular the mythologies of home and return which 'are endlessly retrievable' (2006:177). The students concluded that Desai's central sense of diaspora revolves around the question of 'Could fulfillment ever be felt as deeply as loss?' (2006:3). The answer to this question is, for the migrant, often sought in elements of linguistic and cultural remnants retained within the context of the language and culture of the country they have migrated to.

Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* (2004) served as a transition between the previous module on Indian diasporic culture in film and prose. Students discussed specific changes made when translating the novel into film, evaluating how successfully the written form

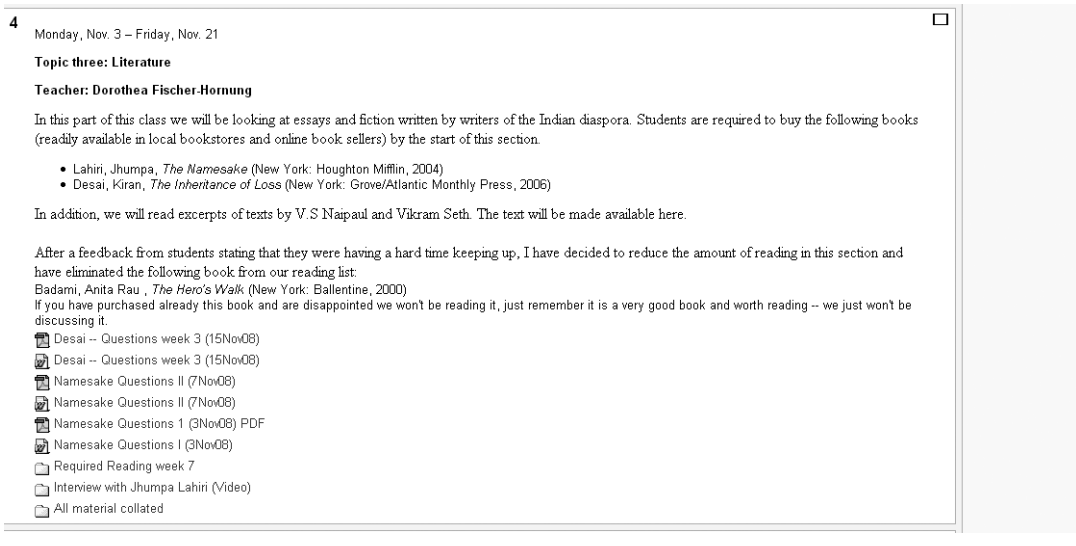


Figure 6 Literature module – content and assignments

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was translated into the visual medium. Naming is an essential thematic element in Lahiri's novel and students were asked to collect and list the protagonists' names and discuss their significance. The difference between pet names, formal names, and those given to individuals by family members in contrast to outsiders enabled a discussion about individual choice and community influence. The concrete listing of the transition of names throughout the novel enabled the recognition of one of Lahiri's primary themes in relation to Indian migration and diaspora – the process of being reborn in another country, one life emerging and another life almost dying: 'He [the protagonist's father] was born twice in India, and then a third time, in America. Three lives by thirty. For this he thanked his parents, and their parents, and the parents of their parents' (2004:21).

Finally, pointing back to the previous module on culture in which ABCD (American-Born Confused Desi) and *desi* (or *deshi*) culture as well as pointing ahead to the final module on linguistics, a close look at terminology and speech patterns of the generations and migrant communities portrayed enabled an initial sense of diasporic language change over time. The following quote serves as an example:

> Teleologically speaking, ABCDs are unable to answer the question 'Where are you from?' […] Gogol has never heard the term *ABCD*. He eventually gathers that it stands for 'American-born confused deshi.' In other words him. He learns that the *C* could also stand for 'conflicted.' He knows that *deshi*, a generic word for 'countryman,' means 'Indian,' knows that his parents and all their friends always refer to India simply as desh. But Gogol never thinks of India as *desh*. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India (2004:118).

The discussions of the complexities of diasporic encounters in the country of origin and migration were very fruitful, but the amount of reading in a three-week module was overwhelming for a number of students. For this reason a third novel, Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk*, was dropped. A reading guide supported the interpretation of each text, providing initial questions for discussion. The instructor for this section, Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, a teacher of literature in face-to-face classes as well as a devoted advocate of teaching cultural studies classes in an e-learning environment, found that she missed the emotional environment that classes on literature often evoke. The time lag between posted contributions and the response from fellow students and instructor seemed to affect the teaching and learning more than in her former cultural studies classes taught online. Further, in classes on cultural studies it is easier to integrate aspects of the Internet itself as a source and as a direct element of the teaching process. This proved to be more difficult in a module devoted to fiction.

Module 4: Linguistics

Comments on language use in the Indian diaspora in *The Namesake* served as the transition to the linguistics part of the course. Students discussed individual linguistic features that were brought up in the novel, but a large part of the discussion revolved around issues of naming and bilingualism on the one hand and identity construction on the other. The linguistics module was based on results from previous studies (made available in the form of background reading), but aimed at providing students with a more hands-on approach in that the main focus was on sound recordings. Students were supplied with recordings and transcriptions from four diasporic communities: South Africa, Trinidad & Tobago, Fiji and the double diaspora of Fiji Indians in New Zealand. For purposes of comparison, sound recordings of speakers still resident in India were also provided. The recordings from the diasporic communities came from research projects of the teachers (i.e. the South African sound files were supplied by Rajend Mesthrie, those from Fiji came from the material to be included in the Fiji component of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE)[1] that is currently being compiled in Zürich and interviews with Fiji Indians in New Zealand derived from Marianne Hundt's project) or from a colleague working on the Trinidad & Tobago sub-corpus of the ICE project.[2] They included both first- and second-generation speakers in some cases. See Figure 7.

In a first step, impressionistic evidence was collected: students were asked to listen to one recording from each diaspora situation (initially without the help of the transcriptions) and comment on features that they found surprising or unusual. As a follow-up, students read through the provided background information (Mesthrie 1996, 2002) and were asked

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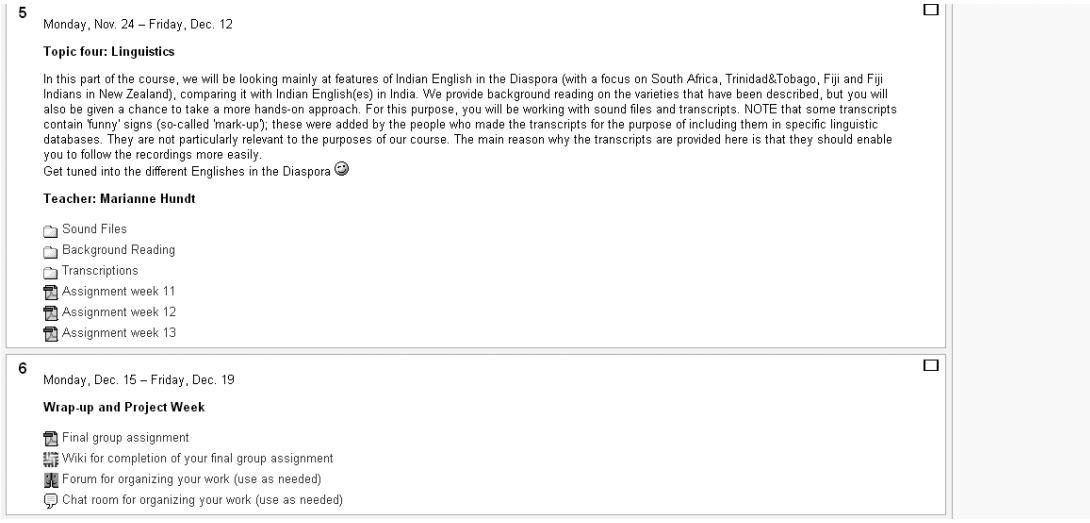


Figure 7 Linguistics module – content and assignments

to listen to the remaining sound files, now with the additional help of the transcripts. On the basis of the more 'linguistic' information, they were required to label and describe some features in more detail. In a final step, students could choose to either compare recordings from two different transnational communities and to give a close analysis of a sound file from each diasporic community, or to compare two different recordings (e.g. a first- and a second-generation speaker) from the same diaspora context. Additional background reading provided at this stage included descriptions of Indian English (Gargesh, 2004), South African Indian English (Mesthrie, 2004) and English in Fiji (Tent & Mugler, 2004). One of the most interesting strands of the discussion focused on the question of 'error' vs. 'feature', which enabled students to refine their initial assessment of features that they found in the novels or the recordings as 'deviant' or even 'deficient'.

Interestingly, students were more familiar with Southern Hemisphere accents (e.g. those of Australia and New Zealand) and could therefore relate more to the second-generation Fiji Indians in New Zealand; they had very little prior experience of Indian accents and therefore found it difficult to compare the South Asian speakers from overseas with people from the subcontinent. This part of the course would have benefited considerably from the initially envisaged participation of students in South Africa who might be members of one Indian diaspora community themselves or have first-hand experience from interacting with South African Indians on a daily basis. Instead, some students related to the linguistics topics of the class from the basis of their own mixed upbringing or experience of migration. In the case of the Swiss students, first-hand experience of a diglossic language situation provided a good backdrop for discussions on language and identity, too. One of the challenges in this part of the course was to make the step from the anecdotal and intuitive observations to a more technical, linguistic description of the data provided, as students were sometimes struggling with linguistic terminology. Among the advantages of an e-learning course are the various tools that can be integrated into the virtual classroom. The initial hope had been that students would make use of the glossary for the definition of technical linguistic terms, but this tool turned out to be somewhat underused. In a future class, this could be improved by integrating tasks on terminology in the assignments.

Results/conclusion

The various international and disciplinary perceptions of Indian diasporic culture yielded new approaches to the exploration of multiculturalism or the role of language in the shaping of cultural identity. In addition, the participants simultaneously acquired research-based Internet competence, skills which we assume will be beneficial to them in their future careers. In order to avoid student participants drowning in the vast and heterogeneous world

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of virtual knowledge and to enable them to be selective in the evaluation and use of their sources, research tasks must be more precise than in the case of face-to-face teaching or blended learning. Online courses require an initial carefully and clearly structured framework that fosters interactions and independent research. The work involved in creating and teaching such carefully structured courses entails, therefore, a significant workload for educators. Although an interdisciplinary course lightens the burden of teaching all the modules of a given syllabus, the coordination and attention required in remaining in tune with the remaining sections of the course seem to be very demanding for each teacher involved. However, if the Internet is used as a primary resource in e-teaching, the amount of course material actually posted on the platform can be minimized and can be augmented and focused according to the needs and inclinations of the students as they develop their own perspectives.

For the teachers, the teaching load was certainly immense, but manageable, because each module facilitator was able to focus on a three-week unit which he or she was responsible for facilitating (reading and research, written assignments, and also the respective elements of the final presentation). Nevertheless, the overall didactic structure required each instructor's participation in the discussions throughout the course, contributing to discussions with her/his expertise and thus enabling interaction across disciplines – the pay-off for the teacher being the potential for 'thick' teaching and learning for all parties involved. The tasks and discussions encouraged students and teachers as well to go in search of additional background reading – and then bringing it back into the virtual classroom. This, to all of us, seemed to be a clear advantage of e-teaching over face-to-face situations, where students tend to expect to be 'fed' with the necessary background information – independent and self-motivated learning is a core benefit.

However, for the students this meant a mountain of work throughout the course, leading to a considerable attrition rate.[3] As one student pinpoints: 'This was easily the English course I had to do the most work for so far.' In the feedback provided by the students who stuck with the course to the end, they concurred that they had learned more than in a traditional face-to-face classroom situation. It was the independent nature of the learning process, the potential of the Internet as such, and the participation of teachers and students from different locations and disciplines that did indeed make for the increase in learning achieved. As one student put it:

> I found many topics discussed in the course extremely interesting, many comments and ideas introduced challenging and provocative. I found myself constantly reevaluating my preconceptions on a wide range of topics, which should be a major goal of a course like this, I think. A lot of this 'worked' because you didn't impose ideas, but suggested questions and allowed us to 'explore' (using this powerful tool at our disposal, the Internet). In fact, I think some of the best moments of the course were when we were encouraged to find things out on our own. These were the moments I really thought, 'This makes sense, the elearning format really works.'

As teachers of this course we had to admit that each of us tended to overburden our short, three-week module with what we considered to be essential content – something that certainly will have to be alleviated in the next run envisaged in 2010. There were essentially no problems with technology, documenting contemporary students' overall Internet savvy. Students tended not to miss direct face-to-face communication because group solidarity developed quickly within the class discussion forum – certainly nothing new to students for whom social networks on the Internet are a part of their life style anyway. They noted that the concentrated focus implicit in the course structure leads to increased concentration, with students maintaining that they learn more than in a traditional class, including valuable secondary skills such as Internet research competence for academic purposes, content and time management, as well as website presentation skills. They value the flexibility in time and location, a factor that is positive, for example, for students with family responsibilities or disabilities. The individuality and self-motivational structure of the learning process is also considered a very positive feature.

In our own evaluation we came to the following conclusions and projections for future collaboration:

- From the onset, the amount of reading/viewing to be completed and written work to be produced must be transparent.
- Social bonding should be strengthened early

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on in the course; chat sessions with the participants as a whole (or divided into smaller chat groups if the size of the class is large) are a useful tool to achieve this.
- To enable the students to congeal as a group and also to learn how to work collaboratively using e-tools such as wikis and glossaries, it would be useful to schedule group work fairly early on in the course.
- The use and integration of Internet resources should be more efficient in order to make use of the powerful potential of the medium itself.
- The Forum contributions should be moderated carefully – the reading, monitoring and responding to Forum contributions are a major part of the teaching involved – to make sure that contributions are substantial and that there is not a drift to anecdotal contributions characteristic of social networks rather than scholarly discourse.
- Considering the focus on the Indian diaspora, it could prove to be very useful to integrate members of that diaspora via contacts in social networks.

An online course by its very nature faces the challenge of combining new technologies with a fundamentally altered didactic approach. Using the interactive features of an e-learning platform, it is possible for students to construct their own knowledge on a given topic by working individually and in virtual groups. E-seminars enable an emphasis on student interaction, on students' own experiences and their understanding of concepts, on the use of techniques such as dialogue and collaborative forms of working, on learning as a social activity, on the educator in the role of facilitator and possibly mentor, and on assessment that focuses on process and student interpretation. Each learner can, therefore, have a unique representation of the knowledge formed by constructing his or her own interpretations of and solutions to given problems and ideas. ■

Notes

1 See http://ice-corpora.net/ice/icefiji.htm.
2 The files were kindly made available by Dagmar Deuber, Freiburg University; on details of the corpus, see http://ice-corpora.net/ice/icetrin.htm.
3 We experienced an over 50% dropout rate, much higher than groups that had been taught by Fischer-Hornung in the past, where less than 10% is the usual dropout rate. In a survey of the students who did not complete the class, they concurred that they had significantly underestimated the work involved, also with respect to the different disciplines of the four teachers. They had, despite warnings given about the intensity of required work, often signed up simply because the course looked very interesting.

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