

How do we teach? - Continuing Education Programmes

Simon Eliot, University of London

1. As explained as part of my handout for the first session, what we offer in the IES of the School of Advanced Study in London is a mixture. It began about twenty years ago as an MA in Book History which you could take in a single year or as a part-timer over two years.
2. About ten years ago I proposed that the course be modularised and that each module should carry a standard credit-bearing value: namely 20 CATS M points (within the UK), the equivalent of 10 ECTS points in Europe. Students would have to accumulate 180 CATS points (90 ECTS points) for an MA.
3. Of course, once that had been done, a number of new possibilities opened up. Students would not have to commit themselves to a full degree programme; they could come in and do one or more courses and then leave with some accumulated credit. They could succeed in three courses and walk away with a postgraduate certificate, or succeed in six and claim a postgraduate diploma. The latter could then return at some later stage, to undertake an MA or an MRes dissertation.
4. Modularisation allowed us to take the teaching of a ten week course and compress it into a very intense five days, this creating the possibility of the London Rare Books School which I discussed earlier.
5. Thus out of one programme we now run a continuing education programme, a certificate programme, and a degree programme.
6. Our formal MA and MRes degree programme is small. We impose a maximum of twelve students per year, for the simple reason that many of our seminars are held behind the scenes in national libraries and archives where space is limited and where librarians and archivists are frequently reluctant to allow large numbers of students to get close to their precious books and manuscripts.

7. Modes of delivery: currently this is limited and, given the nature of much of the subject, may well remain so. The materiality of the subject means that we have to teach facing the student across a table or a bench littered with the material objects about which we are talking.
8. Actually this creates a simple technical problem. Do you introduce, say, the idea of a three-decker novel to students, and then circulate an example which each will look at in turn? Great for the first two or three but after that the tutors has moved on to discussing the first cheap reprint or the railway novel edition so the later students have either to listen to the tutor or concentrate on an object the reference to which has passed. We now tend to have ten minute breaks in each hour during which we have a brief 'laboratory' session where we look just at the books. Similarly, each term we have a two-hour session exclusively in the Senate House Library where the students look at examples and ask questions, and we act as curators providing orally a context for the objects.
9. Purpose and intent: to convey to our students that the transport of texts, transmission of information, and the transfer of value – all those things on which human societies rely in order to function – depend upon material devices that profoundly affect that which is transported, transmitted, and transferred; to an extent those devices determine both what is sent and how it is received. For us the history of the book is a subset of a larger subject, the history of communication.
10. Our audience is encouragingly wide in origin but small in number. We have graduate undertaking postgraduate training in their early twenties; we have middle-aged students who have achieved a certain status in their careers which allow them the time and the money at last to do what they wanted to do, and we have those who are retired or near retirement who have always been fascinated by books but who have never had the chance to explore the subject. Our youngest student was twenty-two, our oldest eighty-six.
11. Of course, all those who take the MA programme are aiming at a qualification. However, those taking courses in LRBS are not. I spent a lot of time designing LRBS courses in order to ensure that we the exact

equivalent of MA, and thus allow students to take such courses for credit. In LRBS over two weeks in the summer we have about 100 to 110 students. I imagined that perhaps 30 per cent would wish to take courses for credit. I was surprised to find that it was more commonly 10 to 15 per cent. Quite clearly, overwhelmingly our LRBS students were taking the courses for the best of all reasons, because they were interested in them and just wanted to know more.

12. The MA as a programme is constrained for the reasons explained above. However, the LRBS is not. In the future we are planning to offer more than the usual fourteen courses over two weeks that we have so far been running. However, as a student you need to be able to take a week off, live in London for that week, and pay the student fees. That inevitably limits the range of students to which we appeal.
13. However, we are currently looking at ways of increasing size of the constituency from which we recruit students. A number of LRBS courses, though by no means the majority, could be divided into two halves without damaging their intellectual coherence. Such half-credit courses could be offered for half the price over a long weekend. In doing this we would release ourselves from the need to commit to an expensive week in the middle of summer. We could offer courses at other times of the year, and some courses could be offered in other libraries and archives throughout the UK, and beyond.
14. We are also looking at the idea that one or two of the courses divided into half-credits could have one of their halves offered over the Web. That is, there would be one half-credit devoted to exploring the historical context of the subject, and the various methodologies used to handle it, which would be offered as an on-line course, while the other half would consist of a 'laboratory' weekend; located in a major library or archive during which students would explore rigorously the materials aspects of the subject. We have two courses in the history of reading, and we see these as possible candidates for such a treatment.

15. This will be as far as we shall go, because if we abandoned the material nature of the subject we would in essence subvert it, and by doing so reduce its most attractive and unusual qualities.
16. Another way of extending our audience is to explore others aspects of the subject, and this is what are actively doing. We already have a course on modern first editions, run by antiquarian book dealers, and we are planning a complementary course on establishing provenance. We are developing a series of courses on the history of libraries and on the history of reading, and on the history of maps, all three of which will allow us to offer specialist postgraduate certificates in those subjects. We are also going to offer a course on the sending and receiving of letters 1500-1919, which will involve the students in exploring the resources of the national postal museum in London.