**Blended English:**
Technology-enhanced teaching and learning in English literary studies

Naomi Milthorpe, Robert Clarke, Lisa Fletcher, Robbie Moore and Hannah Stark
University of Tasmania, Australia

**Abstract**
This article provides an account of a collaborative teaching and learning project conducted in the English programme at the University of Tasmania in 2015. The project, *Blended English*, involved the development, implementation, and evaluation of learning and teaching activities using online and mobile technologies for undergraduate English units. The authors draw on the project’s findings from survey and focus group data, and staff reflective practice and peer review, to make the case for increasing technology-enhanced teaching and learning in English literary studies. The blended approach described in this article has the capacity to enhance disciplinary learning; increase accessibility for students in remote and regional areas; facilitate deeper scholarly enquiry; and encourage staff to develop innovative, collaborative, and flexible teaching and learning practices. Appendix 1 presents examples of the project's practical outcomes, as well as outlines of and reflections on three of the activities developed during the project.

**Keywords**
Blended learning, English studies, student experience, teaching teams, technology-enhanced pedagogy

**Introduction**
The importance of technology in 21st-century tertiary education is undeniable. With the widespread adoption of Learning Management System (LMS) software
for making course information and content available online, and the importance of computing and web-based skills in the modern workplace, tertiary educators recognise technology’s central role in the modern classroom. Indeed, ample evidence suggests ‘e-learning is now at the heart of a university’s core business of learning and teaching’ (Kregor et al., 2012: 1382). Yet online, blended, e-learning, or technology-enhanced learning remains an area of significant challenge for humanities disciplines that prize traditional face-to-face pedagogical methodologies such as the lecture, and small group discussion and debate. With a growing cohort of students accessing education off campus, and recognising the importance of e-literacy for the 21st-century student, understanding e-learning and fostering equivalencies across distance and face-to-face modes is crucial for English studies. Nevertheless, English teaching academics seeking to adopt these technologies face significant and persistent challenges including equity of access for low-SES students, infrastructure problems for staff and students, and the resistance of some students to technology. This article describes and analyses the activities and outcomes of Blended English, a research and teaching project conducted by staff in the English programme at the University of Tasmania, in order to make a case for technology-enhanced teaching and learning in English literary studies that acknowledges the potential challenges. Blended English shows that online and mobile technologies can enhance disciplinary learning; increase accessibility for students in remote and regional areas; facilitate enhanced scholarly enquiry; and encourage staff to develop innovative, collaborative, and flexible teaching and learning practices.

The project team share the view of Colbert et al. (2007: 75) that ‘online teaching and activities only have value if they allow students to develop key skills, abilities and interests that we regard as the heart of university English’, and that the use of online and mobile technologies ‘must extend the possibilities for this in ways that go beyond what is achievable within a more traditional classroom’. Blended English sought to address a significant gap in our English programme, and in the discipline more broadly, in knowledge and application of the principles and activities of technology-enhanced university teaching and learning. In Australia, English literary studies projects were noticeably absent from the Office of Learning and Teaching’s (OLT) Good Practice Report on blended learning (Partridge et al., 2011). In Australia and internationally, the relatively slow uptake of technology for teaching by English academics is mirrored by a significant lack of research and scholarly reflection on blended learning in the English discipline, in which discussion, either in tutorials or in online forums, still dominates teaching delivery (Colbert et al., 2007: 74). Limited opportunity to experiment and reflect upon technology-enhanced teaching ‘causes faculty to maintain the assumption that online teaching can never approximate the interaction of a face-to-face classroom’ (Blair, 2010: 73). However, the demands placed upon 21st-century graduates to be e-literate means that understanding e-learning and fostering equivalencies and efficiencies across both modes is of crucial importance to ‘the future of literary studies’ (Blair, 2010: 68), the future of the University, and our students’ future employability.
In this article we explain the rationale and methodologies of Blended English and present findings drawn from survey and focus group data, and staff reflective practice and peer review. In Appendix 1, we propose some practical activities for introducing technology and blended modalities to tertiary literary studies.

Literature review

Understanding e-learning and fostering learning equivalencies using online and mobile technologies are important to the future of our students as well as to the future of English studies in higher education. This is particularly felt in regional universities such as the University of Tasmania, often isolated by distance from the information and cultural resources open to metropolitan institutions. Technology is especially important at the University of Tasmania given the challenges posed by multiple campuses separated by distance, at Hobart, Launceston, Burnie, and Sydney. University of Tasmania Vice-Chancellor Peter Rathjen (Rathjen, 2011: 6) has stated that staff should ‘embrace technology as a key component of the learning experience’, and this vision underpins the University’s Strategic Plan for Learning and Teaching (University of Tasmania, 2015a) and Technology Enhanced Learning and Teaching (TELT) White Paper (Brown et al., 2013). The benefits of blended learning and technology-enhanced teaching in terms of student experience, interaction, and intellectual expression are multiple and well documented (Kayalis and Natsina, 2010; Laurillard et al., 2009). Blended learning can foster more interactive and collaborative learning experiences (Garrison and Vaughan, 2007). A recent OLT-funded project on technology-enhanced teaching evinces the potential of blended learning for fostering inclusivity and adapting to individual student needs (Wood, 2014). Yet fully online teaching poses risks to student engagement, particularly at the undergraduate level. As Caulfield et al. (2013) testify, undergraduates value the sense of community that emerges through face-to-face interaction. Courses that adopt blended modalities experience lower attrition and higher levels of student achievement (Moskal et al., 2013). At the heart of the push towards blended or technology-enhanced teaching are the opportunities these modalities create for interactivity, inclusivity, and access, and for increasing teaching efficiency.

Interactivity is widely held as the lynchpin of learning. Fostering interactivity at multiple levels – student–content, student–teacher, and student–student – is effective in fostering engagement and deep learning (Muirhead, 2000; Wilson and Stacey, 2004). Of course, interactivity at these levels often occurs in the traditional bricks-and-mortar institution without the assistance of technology, but as many studies have shown, learning interaction in the 21st century increasingly relies upon web-based technology (Sabry and Baldwin, 2003). In universities with ever-more diverse student cohorts (varying in educational background, geographical location, and work and family demands), web-based technologies allowing asynchronous interaction encourage engagement in learning and acquisition of knowledge (Sims, 1997).
Prensky (2001) argues that today’s students are digital natives. Such assumptions about the student cohort have led to widespread curriculum changes to accommodate these students’ learning style. Yet as Kennedy et al. (2008) demonstrate, contemporary student cohorts vary considerably in terms of access and use of the range of available technologies. Mobile and online technologies create opportunities for a diverse student cohort drawn from populations traditionally barred from accessing higher education because of geographical location, employment, or family responsibilities, or physical, mental, or learning disabilities. Assuming our students are homogeneously tech-savvy is therefore problematic. For instance, a theme that emerged from the Blended English survey discussed below was that many students had difficulty using the University of Tasmania’s LMS, for a variety of reasons (unintuitive design, unfamiliar interface, or low IT skills on the part of the individual user were commonly cited). Incorporating and scaffolding blended modalities thoughtfully will accommodate the range of web skills of today’s diverse student body.

Access is implicit in the ability of technology-enhanced teaching to foster inclusivity. The challenges posed to students accessing e-learning include those of infrastructure, connectivity, and socio-economic barriers. For students from low socio-economic backgrounds, the costs of accessing education at a distance, including maintaining reliable internet access and using potentially costly hardware and software, may inhibit their learning. As Stack et al. (2013: 290) suggest, the problem of uneven digital literacy in the population increases ‘economic and participation gaps between the connected and disconnected’. Infrastructure challenges posed for students in isolated areas include, but are not limited to, reliable internet coverage, still a deeply felt problem in Tasmania in spite of the rollout of the National Broadband scheme (Carlyon, 2015). Connectivity remains an issue for institutions as well as students, in which impediments caused by budgetary constraints, institutional filtering, and limited bandwidth lead to disengagement on the part of both students and teaching staff members (Stack et al., 2013). The mooted efficiencies of e-learning can be severely hampered by such infrastructural problems, particularly when an LMS crashes or institutional access to the internet fails.

In addition to connectivity issues faced by universities in adopting e-learning on a broad scale are challenges to the paradigm that contemporary students are eager adopters of technology in the classroom. Multiple survey findings synthesised by Kregor et al. (2012: 1384) show, for example, that though current student cohorts use hardware such as laptop computers and mobile phones, they prefer ‘learning in traditional ways such as lectures and discussions’. Similarly, in spite of early predictions of the death of the codex, a four-year survey of university students in the US, Slovakia, Germany, and Japan indicated a large majority of students prefer reading using traditional paper books rather than e-readers (Derla, 2016). Such survey evidence echoes the data collected in the Blended English survey, discussed below.
Project outline

*Blended English* was a collaborative, process-driven University of Tasmania teaching development project involving participating staff from the English programme in the Faculty of Arts, and from the Faculty of Education, in 2015. The project was prompted by our team’s growing awareness of the importance of – and challenges posed by – technology-enhanced teaching, particularly in light of University-led initiatives to promote blended learning, such as the *TELT White Paper* (Brown et al., 2013). This project sought to investigate questions about our students’ use of technology in their studies, in particular investigating questions of access; and their familiarity and comfort with using mobile or online applications in their English majors, minors, or degree electives. We also sought to question our own assumptions about teaching using blended modalities through reflective practice and workshopped how we might best adopt the most appropriate affordances of technology-enhanced teaching.

The project was conducted over the 10 months of the academic year in Australia, from February to November 2015, and involved practice-based and community-of-practice methodologies as well as quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. *Blended English* used community of practice (CoP) methodologies including collaborative workshopping, peer feedback, shared participation in project activities, and reflective evaluation. The CoP ethos that underpinned the project has emerged from the English programme’s track record in this area (Fletcher et al., 2016). From a staff perspective, the programme is characterised by collaborative curriculum design and team teaching and fruitful professional conversations emerging from teaching planning days. The benefits of this culture of workshopping ideas and sharing resources are demonstrated by our online space *Teaching in English*, housed on the LMS, and by teaching publications informed by collaborative programme workshops, including contributions to *The Pocket Instructor: Literature* (Crane, 2015; Fletcher and Richardson, 2015; Gaby, 2015; Leane, 2015; Milthorpe, 2015; Stark and Narraway, 2015; Wood, 2015).

In February, June, and November, we held workshops with the six participating teaching staff members. The aim was to develop, refine, or redevelop, our teaching, ranging from the micro-development of creating new teaching exercises for individual tutorial sessions or developing major assessments that would incorporate the affordances of technology-enhanced teaching to more macro-reviews of our pedagogic structure and the ideologies of teaching practice, including the benefits and challenges of adopting technology in the English classroom. These discussions and workshops helped prompt reflective practice that has uncovered many issues germane to the adoption of technology in the classroom for our discipline and more broadly.

After creating or redeveloping classroom activities and assessments that would incorporate blended learning, we put them to practice in the classroom, and throughout the semester monitored student learning through observation,
reflection, and qualitative data collection and analysis. While classroom observation was a primary technique for gauging effectiveness of these activities, we also sought to gather quantitative answers to questions we ourselves were concerned about, such as access to and facility with technology. Students were asked to respond to a formal survey about their use of technology and invited to participate in voluntary focus groups about their experience of teaching in the English programme. Some staff members also conducted informal surveys of students at mid-semester to gauge their progress and understanding of teaching methods. Throughout the year we also participated in peer review of teaching, observing unit design in the online space in order to learn from and constructively develop our and our peers’ teaching.

Throughout the project, we had clear practical outcomes in mind. We aimed to create teaching exercises that could be used and adapted in the tertiary English classroom and that would promote use of technology in an appropriate, effective, and usable manner. We aimed to evaluate the equivalences between traditional face-to-face and distance modes using these assessments and activities. We therefore reflected upon the effectiveness of technology-enhanced teaching in fostering equivalences between learning modes in the discipline of English. Finally, we sought to initiate a continuing CoP in the discipline of English that could eventuate in sector-wide or national networks of English teaching practitioners. Above all, the project, which focused on a priority area of the University, was designed to be collaborative, to engage staff in context-specific teaching development and research, and to value-add to the student experience in the programme.

Discussion and findings

Survey

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through an anonymous online survey of students using Survey Monkey. The survey was open to students enrolled in participating units of study in 2015. These units ranged from first- to third-year undergraduate level, with a range of students enrolled, including declared English majors and students studying English as a degree elective. The students surveyed had either undertaken previous units in a blended modality or, if there were first year students, were engaging in this format for the first time at a tertiary level. However, because of the use of technologies in high schools, the vast majority of this cohort were experienced with technology-enhanced learning. The survey questions were designed to serve the information needs of the project. Quantitative questions sought information on demographics, and on participants’ use of hardware, software applications, and frequency of Internet and technology usage. Open-ended qualitative questions sought information on participants’ attitudes towards technology in the university classroom.
Sample characteristics

Sixty-six students completed the Blended English survey. Most respondents (75%) were between 17 and 30 years of age, with 17–20-year-olds representing the majority of the sample (45.3%). Most respondents were female (68.8%). Only two students recorded a language other than English as their first language. More respondents were enrolled on-campus (67.2%) than off-campus. Fifty per cent of the sample indicated that English was their major, while 31% were undecided. In these respects, the sample matches the general profile of the full first-year cohort (Fletcher et al., 2016).

Access and use of technology for study purposes

All respondents indicated that they or their family owned a laptop computer. Most respondents use laptops (84.1%), and nearly all (96.8%) use a personal desktop or laptop to complete study and assessments every day or at least more than once a week. Less than half of respondents indicated that they use a smartphone or tablet for study purposes (43.6%), and of those who do so, the most frequently cited use was to ‘access the Learning Management System for assignment instructions and study resources’ (40.3%), while a smaller number of students used these devices for ‘sourcing and reading research resources’ (24.2%). Less than a third of the respondents (30.7%) indicated that they used a Kindle or other digital reading device, and of those who did, 31.5% of them were using them for their English studies: this only amounts to about 10% of the sample. This small figure might be accounted for by the fact that that the requisite reading lists provided through the accredited university bookshop directs students to purchase hard copy texts, and that established face-to-face practices such as small-group close reading exercises do not encourage the use of such devices, but assume all students are working with the prescribed codex edition.

Use of the LMS

Not unexpectedly, nearly all students used the LMS, though for primarily instrumental reasons. They used it to access ‘the unit outline’ (93.6%), ‘study resources’ (96.8%), and ‘assessment resources’ (96.8%); ‘submit assessment tasks’ (98.4%); ‘undertake activities such as quizzes and surveys’ (74.2%); ‘access news’ (71%); and to ‘view progress’ (87.1%). Fewer used it to ‘participate in online discussion’ (51.6%), or for ‘other online communication’ (27.4%) or to ‘contact fellow students’ (19.4%). Relatively few used chat rooms (6.5%), online rooms (12.9%), or e-portfolio (11.3%).

Qualitative responses

Students were asked to respond to two open-ended questions: ‘how important is technology use for tertiary education?’ and ‘why do you think university educators
use technology in teaching?’ Fifty-two responses were given for the former and 49 for the latter. Answers to both questions reinforced themes of ‘access’, ‘flexibility’, and ‘convenience’: but these themes arose in both positive and negative ways. As above, responses emphasised the ‘instrumental’ potentials of technology, rather than its potential to facilitate active and engaged learning. We anticipate that as staff become more adept with the use of technology to enhance teaching, students will become more aware of its methodological value.

**How important is technology use for tertiary education?**

Responses to the first question – ‘how important is technology use for tertiary education?’– were consistently and emphatically answered in the affirmative. Technology was considered vital to facilitating off-campus study, increasing the efficiency of resource dissemination, and undertaking assessment tasks. Some students could not complete their course without technology. Furthermore, information technology skills provided a form of learning consistent with community expectations. These views are reflected in the following comments:

- It is the way I contact my lecturers and tutors, as well is listen to lectures and research for my assignments.
- I could not complete this degree without it.
- In terms of writing and submitting assignments in assessment tasks, modern technology is really important. For accessing online-based units and interacting with lectures cross-campus, technology is a necessity.
- It is essential for generation Y. We have grown up using technology to aid our study. Personally, I am 22 and have never completed an assignment without the Internet and a word processor application.

Nevertheless, technology use was considered problematic especially if there was a perceived over-reliance on it. The expense and reliability of internet-based learning, a particularly vexed issue in Tasmania which has very poor internet coverage in some areas, was also reported to be problematic. Some respondents raised the issue of the lack of consistency and quality in lecture recordings and what they perceived as a lack of IT knowledge and skills on the part of lecturing staff. Only a couple of respondents referred to the potential for facilitating active as opposed to instrumental learning. And a number provided mixed and even cynical responses to the use of technology in higher education.

- E-media will never replace books though. I find physical textbooks and resources far easier to use, they are tangible and easily organised, they can be written on et cetera. [The University] needs to work through [sic] and all units should upload lectures in the same way and take into account slow Internet connections due to poor coverage. This
should be directly reflected in uploading unit material and lectures in multiple formats. The lecture recordings let [the university’s] distance students down. They are not always easily accessible and teaching staff need to defer to the tech experts in how best [to] disseminate this material. [The University] is getting paid to provide a service and students should not have to ask the teaching staff to provide their lectures as a PDF or transcript, which they were frequently refused to do [sic]. This has greatly hindered [...] learning with [the University], the staff’s inability to accept that distant students are often distant students for that reason and as such have restricted Internet signal and service. The staff need to become more user friendly toward their students and remember that they are being paid to provide this information.

[Technology] is far less important than people think. Internet research or Dropbox services are very useful, but apart from that tertiary education isn’t going to change much. Recorded lectures in online discussions are useless, frustrating and unhelpful, a woeful substitute for face-to-face lectures and classes.

**Why do you think university educators use technology in teaching?**

Responses to the second question – ‘why do you think university educators use technology in teaching?’ – revealed commonly held views: technology facilitates student access to materials, including augmenting teaching content; technology allows teachers greater access to students and vice versa; technology provides educational opportunities for more students than face-to-face teaching; and allows for greater convenience/efficiency for staff and students.

[Technology] allows [lecturers] greater scope in teaching their subjects, better example is able to be shown.

It gives them [lecturers] access, outside of the classroom, to virtually all students. And it gives those same students access to them.

[Technology provides] easy access to information, easy to share information. Less time consuming than books, journals. It is free. It is widely understood by most students. I imagine the flexibility and accessibility that technology offers me that course content is available to a wider range of students, that these students have better access to resources and tools to help them succeed, and that the university’s retention rates and results would probably improve.

Moreover, students accepted that lecturer’s use of technology reflected the latter’s appreciation that technology is an accepted mode of contemporary life, and that students need to develop IT skills.

Educators use technology in teaching as it is such a huge part of everyday life. Also, [...] if it weren’t for technology and studying for many people would become a lot more limited so by educators using technology allows more people to be able to complete a university degree.
Because as a learning hub, educators must keep up with technological advancements, thereby encouraging the students to do the same.
To ready students for the world outside of university, and for ease of access, as while some cannot access the Internet, many young students are very integrated with the virtual world.

Students responded that lecturers who use technology facilitate different modes of learning, including visual learning, to appeal to and accommodate different kinds of learners, and acknowledged that information technology provides convenience for the educator.

It enhances the teaching process, the use of visual aids like power points and YouTube videos allow greater learning benefits to students.
Because it is part and parcel of daily life now for most people, and students coming through from technologically savvy high schools and so on expect to be able to study how they feel most comfortable. Technology also provides opportunity for new and more effective teaching methods.
It can be a helpful way to create different and more engaging learning activities for students, but it should [not] be the only way that this is done.

Yet, some students suggested that use of technology in the classroom was perhaps more indicative of institutional pressure and as a way for the University to cut costs. And some questioned of skills of teaching staff to us IT as well as the efficiency of IT use.

Possibly […] they think it’s the future of teaching. Unfortunately I think there exists a pressure to doggedly conform to electronic teaching methods regardless of the actual necessities or advantage to such an approach.
I think the university wants to cut down on face-to-face time so they can cut down on costs.
They may use it but not necessarily understand […] competently. Educators use technology in teaching because I think today’s students couldn’t have it any other way. There’s not enough time in the day anymore to complete the required workload without technology.

Focus groups
The focus groups were intended to complement the quantitative data collected through the survey. These were voluntary, held at a specified time in the middle of Semester 1 2015, and conducted by a research assistant who was not a teaching staff member. Questions were open-ended and designed to allow students the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings about particular aspects of teaching in the English programme. While the information volunteered by those
students who participated is interesting, the number of participants was extremely small and therefore not representative of the attitudes of the whole cohort. We offer some of these participants’ remarks where they seem relevant to our discussion of the survey results, with the caveat that they represent an extremely small sample of student attitudes.

The focus groups revealed some common themes familiar from the scholarship on blended learning and technology-enhanced teaching, with students openly discussing the benefits and problems involved in blended learning including flexibility and access, engagement, and interactivity. Flexibility and access for our students referred implicitly to geographic, financial, and synchronic barriers to study, common to many people studying today (Hara et al., 2000). A number of these issues are compounded in Tasmania, which ‘has the most regional and dispersed population of any state in Australia’ (Tasmanian Government Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2013a), an alarmingly low rate of educational attainment compared to the national average (Tasmanian Government Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2013b), and the lowest income rates in the country (Tasmanian Government Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2013c). It is therefore no surprise that the University of Tasmania has a significant population of students who are the first in their family to attend university (Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment, 2015: 121). Such students tend to have ‘lower rates of progression and completion than the broader student body’ (University of Tasmania, 2015b: 8). Devising pedagogical strategies cognisant of the institution’s social inclusion agenda should therefore be both a whole-of-university priority and a key concern for disciplinary teaching teams. Providing low-cost e-text alternatives to text books was one aspect of blended learning our focus groups appreciated. In general, our students endorsed the view that technology offers greater flexibility for students, in particular the ability to study from home and/or to access lecture and reading materials online.

Learning or physical disability and mental health were also factors in which online or blended learning helps some of our students to better manage their studies. One participant explicitly stated: ‘technology enables me to participate’, adding that, because of their particular mental health situation, ‘I don’t think I could be at uni without the online tools’. Another offered a similar experience:

\begin{quote}
I have a lot of trouble just doing things [because of my disability], like some things that people don’t think about. So doing it online at my own speed at my own pace, being able to push “pause”, and being able to take it in at my pace is a lot easier.
\end{quote}

Other students were less positive about the requirement to undertake some of their study online. These responses chime with traditional anxieties that technology in the classroom increases the risk of student isolation and disengagement (Robinson and Hullinger, 2008; Stott, 2016). One participant suggested that online learning created a sense of disconnection from ‘the real world’; others talked of the importance of ‘face-to-face communication’ to support online or blended study,
particularly in combating decreasing motivation (7). A number of participants felt that their engagement with content was increased by using technology. For example, one student suggested that the option to listen to lecture recordings more than once means that ‘you don’t miss out on the things […] which are important’. Likewise, for one participant contributing to online discussions and group knowledge building activities required a higher level of critical engagement with the material than studying alone: ‘getting peer-reviewed [in an online setting] you’ve really got to know your stuff’. These individual experiences are supported by the scholarship on content engagement in the online realm, in particular with knowledge construction activities (Salmon, 2013).

Staff reflection and peer review

The key methodologies for assessing staff responses to, and engagement with, the Blended English project were reflective practice and peer review. Reflective practice occurred through focussed discussion at the staff workshops and, more formally, through a shared online reflective space housed in the LMS. Informal discussions amongst staff were particularly fruitful. While staff embraced the possibilities of blended learning with genuine enthusiasm, most also noted that they had never studied in a blended learning situation. For some staff this realisation prompted reflection on their own biases with regards to the use of technology in teaching and, particularly, about their past assumptions that distance study was an impoverished student experience. Discussion also revealed the key obstacles to implementing blended learning strategies: the time required to master new technologies and set up blended activities; the constantly changing technology systems and University expectations of teaching staff; and lack of experience of, or available training for, the use of technology.

Reflection in the teaching blog in the Blended English site enabled staff not only to participate in reflective practice but also to engage with, and comment on, posts by other staff in a dynamic CoP. Blog postings revealed the positive aspects of blended learning and also some of the difficulties with implementing blended strategies. Some of the benefits of blended learning that were highlighted included the increased flexibility that online activities create for staff if they need to be physically absent, and the capacity to bring both face-to-face and distance cohorts together in the online environment. Multiple staff stressed the benefits of making small changes to existing practices such as shifting to online marking or designing simple activities to increase the use of technology in the face-to-face classroom. On the latter point, one staff member described a particularly effective activity for teaching Martin Amis’s novel Time’s Arrow that involved students using their devices to look up the strange words that Amis uses in a particular passage of text. The staff member writes:

This paragraph used medical jargon, so apart from the one ex-med student in the unit, most students had to look up all 100 words in the paragraph, which they did on their
phones or laptops. This activity enabled the kind of close, slow reading signature to English, but used mobile technology to achieve it.

Another positive reflection discussed the benefits of abandoning the quest for equivalence between distance and face-to-face cohorts. This staff member described the way that they had shifted from facilitating a weekly discussion board engaging with that week’s content to scheduling less frequent, thematic, student-facilitated discussions which spanned several weeks of content. The staff member reflected on how students were more engaged in less frequent discussions and how this simple change had significantly increased student engagement with the content in the unit. However, reflections also highlighted some of the challenges of blended learning including difficulties with getting students to engage with online resources and activities. One staff member discussed an issue with social media that had arisen in class where a student expressed concerns about their privacy when encouraged to engage with social media for an assignment. The *Blended English* project team agreed that different student attitudes to the use of social media, particularly in relation to privacy, were worth further investigation and consideration.

Peer review of teaching was undertaken in relation to unit design and the use of the LMS. It revealed that blended strategies were being used to create a dynamic learning environment. All peer review emphasised the variety of activities that were available to students including discussion boards, activities, readings, reading guides, quizzes, and a range of short lecture recordings (moving away from the University’s standard 50 minute lecture format). One of the benefits of blended learning that was identified through peer review was that the variation between written, visual, and (more traditional) lecture material had the potential to facilitate a range of learning styles. One staff member noted that ‘[l]ooking at your unit has inspired me to re-think some of my own strategies for teaching with [the LMS]’. Perhaps the most fruitful aspects of the *Blended English* project were that it enabled staff to see what was happening in each other’s (virtual) classrooms. This knowledge sharing has proved central to developing a coherent blended learning strategy in the English programme at the University of Tasmania and to conversations about the opportunities and challenges of blended learning that continue amongst staff.

**Conclusions**

*Blended English* upheld many of the narratives about blended learning in the tertiary context, in terms of increased student engagement, access, interactivity, and flexibility. However, the project also confirmed our shared sense that there is something distinctive about literary studies that requires a nuanced approach to using technology. The affordances of technology can bring about innovative classroom and online teaching strategies and can help students reconnect with literary texts in a way that runs counter to alarmist narratives about ‘switching off’. Moreover, blended learning technologies provide new opportunities to prepare students for an
increasingly technologised workplace and can enable students to develop new capabilities that will enhance the traditional work skills that they garner from their study of English, such as writing, problem solving, and abstract thinking. Yet at the same time, in surveying our students, we have a renewed sense of their delight in the physical, temporal, and embodied aspects of learning in literary studies. Our students recognise the importance of digital learning in the 21st century, but their desire for a tangible experience of the text – through the physical codex, and through the disciplinary practice of close reading – remains paramount.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References


**Author biographies**

**Naomi Milthorpe** is a Lecturer in English at the University of Tasmania. She is the author of *Evelyn Waugh’s Satire: Texts and Contexts* (2016), and of essays on modernist and interwar literary culture published in *Journal of Modern Literature* and *NOVEL*, and was a 2015–16 Huntington Library Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellow.
Robert Clarke is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Tasmania. He is the author of *Travel Writing from Black Australia: Utopia, Melancholia, and Aboriginality* (2016), and editor of *Celebrity Colonialism: Fame, Power and Representation in Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures* (2009), and *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Travel Writing* (forthcoming).

Lisa Fletcher is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Tasmania. She is the author of *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity* (2008), *Cave: Nature and Culture* (2015), and *Island Genres, Genre Island: Conceptualisation and Representation in Popular Fiction* (co-authored with Ralph Crane, 2017), and the editor of *Popular Fiction and Spatiality: Reading Genre Settings* (2016). She is currently a chief investigator on the Australian Research Council Discovery Project, “Genre Worlds: Australian Popular Fiction in the Twenty-First Century” (2016–2018).

Robbie Moore is Lecturer in English at the University of Tasmania. He has previously published on modernist “technographies”, on corporate space, and on Henry James, and was a recipient of the Leon Edel Prize from the *Henry James Review*. He is currently researching a monograph on hotels in modernist culture.

Hannah Stark is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Tasmania. Her research interests include the work of Gilles Deleuze, feminist and queer theory, philosophies of love, the nonhuman, cultural representations of climate change, and the emergence of the Anthropocene as a key conceptual framework. She is the author of *Feminist Theory After Deleuze* (2016) and the co-editor of *Deleuze and the Non-Human* (2015).

Appendix 1: Sample Blended English activities

These three learning activities for introductory and intermediate-level students were developed as part of the *Blended English* project. Using digital tools including web searches, wikis, word clouds, and digital texts, the activities demonstrate ways that technology can be deployed to engage students, to look at texts in fresh ways, and to make learning more interactive and student driven. The first activity, on the cultural ephemera that surrounds F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, is specifically for students studying online; the second and third activities, which involve crowd-sourcing a critical glossary and using digital tools to enhance close reading, can be used to enhance traditional face-to-face teaching practices.

Activity 1: Such beautiful shirts

This activity on cultural reproduction and *The Great Gatsby* is designed for online, intermediate-level literary studies students as a stimulus for online discussion. The activity requires students to think critically about how *The Great Gatsby* is reproduced
in popular culture, what Fitzgerald or Gatsby might be used for (in consumer culture, identity formation, or asserting cultural prestige), and to apply their understanding of the process of literary canonisation to their understanding of Fitzgerald’s novel.

_The Great Gatsby_, though a flop on its initial publication, has since become a classic – thanks, in part, to its many instances of cultural reproduction. Kolbas (2001) argues that additional to a text’s intrinsic worth, ‘material conditions’ – including cultural reproduction – impact upon a text’s inclusion in the canon. Forms of cultural reproduction include film and theatre adaptations, spoofs, reboots, and rewritings. From the first film adaptation in 1926, to Elevator Repair Service’s award-winning 2010 theatre production _Gatz_, to an i-Pad game, to YouTube make-up tutorials, _The Great Gatsby_ is continuously reproduced, revised, referenced, and reinvented, perennially a part of our shared culture.

The instructor should direct students to use online research to find one piece of evidence of _The Great Gatsby_’s cultural reproduction. It would be helpful to provide a list of some of the forms that this evidence might take (e.g. a YouTube clip, a theatre poster, a t-shirt design). Students should post their example of cultural reproduction, including an image, video, or hyperlink where appropriate, to a moderated discussion thread within their online learning environment. This activity requires students to critically engage with their selected artefact by writing three to four sentences on how their example reinforces _The Great Gatsby_’s canonical status. Finally, students are encouraged to respond to the examples offered by their peers and to offer their own thoughts on how these reproductions reflect issues central to Fitzgerald’s novel (such as materialism, identity, or waste).

**Reflection**

_The Great Gatsby_ is taught in the latter half of an intermediate literary studies course on the literary canon (‘Literary Classics and the Canon’). In this course, students study a range of texts in the contexts of national canons, thinking through issues central to each text’s production, contemporary reception, and critical history. Students also encounter the concept of cultural capital as theorised by Guillory (1993), analysing how literary and cultural texts might be used to reinforce or challenge societal distinctions created by the categories of race, class, and gender. _The Great Gatsby_ is an ideal text for this course of study, concerned as it is with issues of class, gender, and nation, as well as with the creation and performance of identity through cultural products.

This activity has proved popular with the online cohort, and students have curated a collection of items related to _The Great Gatsby_ that range from the expected (film adaptations, video clips) to the unexpected (nail-art tutorials, mobile phone covers). The lecture on this novel focuses on object relations and waste in the novel, particularly looking at the way that Gatsby, the character, uses (and misuses) various material things in order to enact his dream. Students have been particularly adept at applying themes and motifs of waste and materialism to their analysis of how these cultural reproductions work.
Activity 2: What are words worth? A glossary of critical terms

Intermediate-level students of English are usually experienced close readers, but they often struggle to understand and apply the critical language of literary studies. How do we ensure our students are using key terms – like ‘representation’, or ‘intertextuality’ – correctly? And how do we teach this critical language dynamically, actively, and interactively, in a way that ensures students will grow comfortable with adopting it in classroom discussions and their assessment tasks? ‘What Are Words Worth?’ offers intermediate students the opportunity to build knowledge, apply key terms in literary studies, and create a shared resource with their peers, by constructing a glossary of key terms with illustrative examples from their classroom texts.

Before semester begins, the instructor should create the online environment that will house the glossary, such as a Wiki. Create a master list of critical terms suitable for your course. For example, for a course on narrative theory, you might include terms such as ‘diegesis’, ‘chronotope’, and ‘fabula’. For each entry, create a template of fields for students to populate, including fields for definition, examples from literary texts, and further reading. Assign each student a different critical term, or direct the students to choose one for themselves.

Set clear parameters as to length of glossary entries or the number of examples, and guide them in the art of constructive editing of entries. Encourage students to find reputable web sources to hyperlink to their contribution; these could link to technical terminology, textual examples, or secondary sources. Explain the importance of group knowledge construction for students’ learning: that in this activity, as in essays or composition exercises, they are in charge of their learning – what makes this different is that this knowledge will be created, moderated, and enriched by their peers.

For a face-to-face class, this activity might be done as a low-credit assignment out of class, or you might direct students to bring their laptops and research materials and to work on their entries in class. For a fully online course, students can complete this in addition to, or in lieu of, regular discussion activities.

Reflection

This exercise has been used effectively in an intermediate narrative theory class (‘Telling Tales: Literature and Narrative’), which students can take in both blended and fully online modes. Although students report initial trepidation – mostly around being ‘caught out’ by their peers – they are very willing to participate, not only creating entries, but interacting with their peers by editing and adding to definitions, providing further examples, and even cleaning up minor formatting and presentation errors.

Choosing a user-friendly online environment, and giving guidance on how to use the tool as well as how to create an entry, is key to the success of this activity. Because of its nature as an online activity that can be undertaken synchronously or
asynchronously, ‘What Are Words Worth?’ can work well for instructors seeking to incorporate blended modalities into traditional literary studies instruction.

**Activity 3: Digitised close reading**

This activity, using a word cloud and a searchable digital text, redevelops for blended learning a face-to-face activity that has been used effectively for some years in introductory English at the University (Fletcher and Richardson, 2015). While ‘Digitised close reading’ could be adapted for almost any text of a suitable length, this sample activity explains how it has been used to teach Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* in first-year English. It is especially useful for introductory-level classes as it encourages facility with and enjoyment of the key skill of close reading and offers an early introduction to digital humanities methodology.

*Never Let Me Go* is centrally concerned with the use of language as a screen to obscure reality. Since the narrator of this novel is so (seemingly) straightforward, natural, and conversational, first-year students do not always apprehend that Ishiguro is deliberately crafting and manipulating the novel’s language for specific ends.

As a stimulus for this activity, students study a word cloud, created online at wordle.net. The cloud represents the top 300 frequently used words in *Never Let Me Go* (excluding common words), with the most-used words the largest. Students will write down three interesting features, patterns, or categories of words that they notice, with a brief explanation of why they believe these patterns to be significant.

Building on these observations, students then search for specific instances of one of the words they have highlighted. Using a digital edition of *Never Let Me Go*, they track the word’s usage through the novel, extracting three noteworthy examples. Allison (2015) argues that full-text keyword searches ‘might be, pedagogically speaking, the new close reading . . . . Dealing with a set of specific examples helps students focus their thinking about unwieldy texts, and also helps students see how concepts develop across a text’. Students share their discoveries with the class, or else write them up, depending on whether the activity is deployed as a tutorial exercise or a low stakes formative assessment to be completed outside of the classroom.

**Reflection**

*Never Let Me Go* has been taught in a first-year English unit (HEN101 English 1A) for several years. This activity was developed for face-to-face and online tutorials in order to focus the students’ attention on the novel’s language. The activity has led to more detailed and productive discussions.

(‘pretty’, ‘just’, ‘really’). The cloud made these patterns visible, but the word search element helped students to see precisely how simple words like ‘probably’ and ‘just’ are used to unsettle the narrator’s insights.

Students also developed a sense of the way arguments can be formed with this kind of data. Discussions inevitably turned to the significance of these patterns: why are these words and ideas so prevalent? Close analysis of the novel’s language and style opened out into discussions of the novel’s themes, ethics, and politics.

Access to technology in the classroom is the key obstacle. Students could be encouraged to purchase a cheap digital edition of the novel (accessible via an e-reader, computer, or mobile device) at the beginning of the semester. Full text archives like Gutenberg could be used if this task is adapted for an out-of-copyright text. Students could work in groups if limited devices are available.