CASE STUDY: TERESA

A student on an MSc programme in the Department of Education, Teresa was in her late 20s and came from the USA. She was returning to studying after a gap of six years, having gained a diversity of experience as a hostel manager and a teacher of English in Japan.

Returning after a gap in studies

Having been out of the educational system for a while, Teresa was somewhat apprehensive about getting back into the swing of studying and was unsure about her own abilities as a student. She had prepared herself mentally for the shift and did her best to organise herself: "It was really hard in the beginning, and I think I also though came into it thinking, okay what can I set up from the beginning organisationally that will help me to keep on top of my work."

Teresa felt unsure of her abilities – "I have really questioned whether I am good enough, academically speaking, to be here" – and this was not helped by the sparse level of feedback the students got on their writing: "It's been difficult to adjust to the Oxford way of doing things in some cases - like not getting much feedback on the work I'm doing, but having to worry about taking exams later on". At the end of the first term, she found it difficult to know how she was doing on the course: "The truth is, though, I'm not really sure how well it's gone. I've learned a lot, I suppose."

Even by the time of the exam, she still didn't have a feel for the level of her work. Although a tutor assured her that her work was good, she felt that the reassurance was optimistic, because it was based on only one assignment that the students had handed in early on in the year. The rest of the formative assignments were set too late in the course for the students to be able to make use of the feedback. Teresa realised, too late, that she should have approached lecturers for feedback herself. Although she was more confident in doing her dissertation, she still lacked support from her tutors: "Most of my support comes from within, and I guess it is easy to feel isolated during this part of the course."

Although Teresa was often unsure of her progress and felt demotivated by the teaching approach on the course, she really appreciated the opportunities that Oxford presented her – "I've been given access to many great opportunities here as such as being introduced to some of the greatest minds of our times" – and greatly enjoyed the practical parts of the course.

Pedagogical approaches

Teresa had strong views on the types of learning activities that were useful to her and which ones were not: "Specifically, it seems that the many PowerPoint lectures often just repeat what we've been reading in our assignments and there is not enough focus on discussion of the concepts being brought out." It was not only the content of the lectures that she took issue with, but also the very way in which PowerPoint was used:

> "It is nice to have an outline for what you're talking about/learning/working on, but it's a little distracting, and it takes some power away from the student in that it imposes an outline when the student might want to look at it differently or might benefit from trying to make sense of it her/himself."

Teresa often found that the ways tutors structured the PowerPoint presentations did not fit with her own logic and made little sense to her. At the same time, because she learns in a visual way, Teresa felt that the slides were 'burning into her brain' and she was compelled to learn them in a rote, non-reflective, manner.

She concluded:

> "I guess I have a stronger belief in experiential learning and just if we had had a little more of not just kind of talking about the different methods but also more practice in it, it would have a real good effect."

She preferred the hands-on parts of the course, which she felt gave her a better feel for research methodology, and which made the material she read on the course come alive. One such practical assignment was a case-study exercise where students interviewed and observed staff at the department in order to get hands on experience with conducting qualitative research:

> "I found the case-study exercise to be one of the most useful parts of the course – worth at least three lectures! The experience really helped me understand the readings we had been doing. I learned first-hand about the difficulties of doing qualitative research […] I also learned about myself as a researcher, what I found difficult […] and what I could consider my own strengths to be. I learned about situating data in theory, something you really cannot learn except by doing. It made me wish we had more time to do experiential learning like that."

Another practical part of the course was a two-week internship, where the students had a chance to take on the role of research assistants in projects running in the department:

> "I loved my internship. I definitely got to see theory in action, and it was so educational to see how major educational research projects work from the inside. […] As the researchers in this project were from all over England, they also had to devise a way that all of them could contribute to a common database without having to physically be in the same place. […]. The fact that it's possible to do common research simultaneously over a large geographical area is amazing. […] All in all, the internship allowed me to see how much time and energy goes into educational research projects."

The internship made Teresa engage deeply with the subject of the course through seeing experts at work grappling with methodological questions:

> "People who had done a lot of educational research came together and discussed the methods that they were going to use, very explicitly and in great detail, that was fascinating, fantastic, and I could really look at it and say, okay where here are things where the reading is coming into play. […] I did read the Robson book [a textbook on research methods] a lot, and you could really see, you know, kind of him sitting there and being in the middle of these people and saying, oh yeah, see this is how Chapter 12, this is how it is in real life."

Use of technology

At the beginning of the course, Teresa declared herself an unconfident user of technology:

> "I generally do not have much confidence in my technology abilities, and in fact might not have an IPod, webcam or even a mobile if they hadn't been given to me as gifts. I am one of very few people around who doesn't own a digital camera. I am very concerned about using new software (like SPSS) for my course, and also about using University/library search engines properly."

She found it somewhat embarrassing to need technical assistance, but realised that it was not unusual to need some help: "It's too embarrassing to admit in this day and age that I can't use the technology! But if [the Computing Services Department] does a class on it, others need help too, so it's not as embarrassing." Along the way, partly through participating in the Thema project, she came to change her mind somewhat about her technical aptitude, commenting in one of the online surveys: "Actually, being able to tick so many boxes in the last question made me feel a lot better about my tech-savvyness."

Teresa was definitely underestimating her technological proficiency, because although she reported being a hesitant technology user, she was using a wide range of technologies for her research – both regular and widespread ones, and more complex and unusual ones.

Although initially concerned about SPSS, she learned to use it on the course and was planning to use for analysing some of the data for her dissertation: "I actually really like the way the program is set up, it is intuitive and user-friendly, and I love having the ability to translate information into something visually understandable". She also used digital tools for her data collection because her participants were on the other side of the world, and technology made the data collection easier:

> "I am actually doing my questionnaire data collection online, using SurveyMonkey. I find it incredibly user-friendly and convenient. […] As my participants are in Japan and I am in the UK, I will use Skype for telephone interviews. […] I am contacting my participants via email and letter, and there is a possibility that some of my correspondence will be through Facebook."

Teresa approached technology as any other tool she could use for her research and adapted it to her needs. For example, she found add-ons to Skype on the Web that enabled her to record her conversations, although she used a digital recorder as a back-up recording device.

Teresa also used a range of Web 2.0 tools for both academic and private purposes. While working in Japan, she had contributed to a wiki, which only few students in the Thema project had done. She was following up her interests in the arts on YouTube, and used Facebook in quite sophisticated ways:

> "Facebook has been an interesting technology that I didn't use much before, but now look to for social and academic information. I've used it to make social connections, to search for clubs that I'm interested in, and now to help advertise a Human Welfare conference that I'm helping to advertise. It has been really useful in dispensing information to my housemates (I'm an off-site house supervisor) about issues relevant to our house."

Back home, she was the family member in charge of technical matters: "I came back from Japan and I was in New York for five weeks before I came to England, and in that five weeks I bought webcams for my mum and my sister and set them up with Skype."