‘Responding to the digital essay: a study of the attitudes of online tutors towards alternative format assignments within a UK university.’

Technological advances and pedagogical innovation are helping to reshape the online classroom. In particular, students are able to express ideas in new and exciting ways. With access to a growing array of digital tools, online students can exploit different modes in the preparation of coursework assignments. Podcasts, films, web essays and digital dissertations can complement or even replace the traditional text-based essay. In some cases, a single piece of coursework might present ideas in oral, textual and visual form. The online classroom is being reframed as a place of multimodal learning populated by transliterate students.

While this multimodal classroom provides exciting new ideas for the dissemination of ideas, a shift towards the presentation of work in alternative formats inevitably has implications for teaching and feedback. As the online classroom evolves, so there is a need for tutors to adapt to these new modes of communication. Amongst the challenges facing tutors is the how to measure the quality of academic work that is presented in an alternative format: the criteria traditionally used to assess text on page or screen may no longer be applicable to work presented in alternative, multimodal formats. Can existing accepted assessment standards be applied to build in Second Life or a hypertext essay, for instance? Furthermore, is there a need to rethink the format used to provide feedback: might the tutor question the validity of preparing textual comments in response an assignment submitted as a podcast?

In this dissertation I will:

* look at how technological advances and pedagogical innovation

are prompting a shift towards the preparation of digital alternative format coursework within online education. This will be undertaken using an examination of published literature covering the fields of online assessment, multimodality and transliteracy.

* explore the experience and attitudes of tutors on online programmes towards alternative format assignments. This will include how they are responding to the challenge of providing feedback in response to alternative format work.
* I will consider the collected data in relation to literature on the subject of online assessment and feedback and in particular, literature covering alternative methods of digital feedback
* finally, I will conclude by offering an overview (based upon theory and data collection) on the ways in which digital alternative format assignments have implications for online feedback, before outlining how tutors can respond to and exploit these new challenges and opportunities.

I will draw on the following literature to provide a theoretical framework for my research and discussion: