

VOICE 2021 conference: What impact, if any, has online learning had on course learning communities?

Background

The sudden shift from face-to-face to online learning due to the pandemic created an entirely new set of circumstances for students whose expectations of life at University were fundamentally challenged.

For teaching staff, there was a focus on practicalities around learning new technology platforms. Existing teaching schedules and processes were re-imagined for the online environment. There were varying degrees of guidance from each higher education institution on how the existing curriculum and timetable could be redeveloped. In some instances, there was limited strategic direction or guidance behind this process.

This poster outlines some of the key issues associated with the impact of virtual learning on student engagement, with particular regard to Wenger's communities of practice. What is the evidence of student collaboration and online learning groups? Can learners develop a rapport and a sense of belonging to a community or student support group when they are studying on a Zoom platform?

Our research methodology is outlined below. We are aware of the limitations of our research and that our findings vary significantly by subject domain and student type. Nevertheless, we identify some key themes and areas for future research.

The process of the literature review and perspectives from our primary research (involving in-depth interviews with a small number of students) have allowed us to comprehend the depth of the topic. Where possible, we have identified key practices that have helped or hindered this sudden pivot from in-person to virtual learning as well as examining the impact on student health and wellbeing.

Methodology

The data was collected via in-depth interviews with 14 students; 5 male, 9 female; across L4, L6 and L7; 60% UK students, 40% International Students from India, Pakistan, China, Sweden, Czech Republic and USA, from 3 different Higher Education Institutions.

There were three key questions asked of all respondents:

Question 1: How has the last year been compared to what you were expecting of university?

Question 2: Can you describe your experience of communication and collaboration online?

Question 3: Some people say they have felt part of a group. Some people say they have felt isolated. Can you tell me how you feel about it?

The findings were analysed and organised into 6 themes: Community, Collaboration, Formal Learning, Informal Communication, Domain, and Mental health and wellbeing.

Learning theory

The thematic analysis of the interviews was guided by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave's communities of practice.

Wenger understands learning to be a 'fundamentally social phenomenon' and suggests that groups who 'learn and do' together develop identities that aid learning, resulting in a real, alive, felt experience of 'participation in the world'. They learn how to do it better as they do it together (Wenger, 1998).

A community of practice, as defined by Wenger, are groups who learn and do together in a shared 'domain'. The group share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Wenger suggests that this definition reflects the fundamentally social nature of human learning.

Wenger and Lave identify the three components to describe a community of practice: the 'domain', the 'community' and the 'practice'. Socially situated learning reaches a higher level of involvement where all three exist simultaneously.

Talking about online communities, Wenger comments that the medium through which members of a community connect is less important than the ability of participants to recognise the practitioner in each other and act as learning partners.

I didn't feel like I was talking to anyone apart from literally a few weeks ago when we were coming in... Everyone's so excited to see everyone

6. Informal communication

- Tutor-free zones are highlighted as a recurring theme, whereby students are able to socialise and get to know one another (particularly highlighted as important at the beginning of a course).
- Students described needing a separate space to work together.
- Students communicate via several social media platforms, including: WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat.
- WhatsApp is the most frequently cited.
- In some cases, WhatsApp is used to 'speak every day and support one another', however in others, participants described feeling not 'close enough to like message each other'.
- Although social media is used to communicate, on-campus interactions (such as getting coffee together, or going to the library) is mentioned as an important form of informal communication.
- Some participants described their social life as being 'lost' and much harder to reinstate following lockdown.

1. Community experience

- The community experience for most was mainly task related.
- Students (especially L4 and L7) said there wasn't an opportunity at the start of the academic year to get to know one another making it difficult to form a community.
- Making friends online was particularly difficult for quieter people who felt overshadowed by the dominant students.
- Students gravitated to students with the same level of talkativeness and acknowledged it would have been very different if the teaching had been in person.
- Students didn't have the chance to get to know students from other courses - to meet people from different disciplines - for the social and academic side.
- During formal learning, students wanted to have spaces to have conversations with each other, without the tutors who do most of the facilitation.
- Students missed the hustle and bustle of the campus and the opportunity to have casual conversations after lectures or over a coffee.
- Studio based students missed the opportunity to work, learn and socialise with their peers.
- Studio based students missed the final project experience where there is a lot of team bonding creating a show or exhibition.
- However, those students who have just gone back to work on campus felt a sense of excitement, and said people starting talking and they felt a real sense of community.

Online teaching breaks this connection – we are strangers; people don't know one another and we need human touch to create the culture of a community

2. Collaboration

- Responses to the advantages and disadvantages of online learning groups varied significantly according to domain and student type.
- Creative arts students missed the real-life studio space, where they are accustomed to interacting and creating together.
- Learners on courses based around lectures and seminars were less likely to see disadvantages of virtual lectures. They were more likely to appreciate the convenience, interaction and greater depth provided by synchronous virtual lectures, but missed the intimacy of the face to face seminars.
- Non-traditional students (eg students with full time jobs and/or childcare responsibilities) were very positive about using virtual learning technology.
- Use of break-out rooms as the basis for online learning communities was positively received by many non-traditional students. However, size of group, clarity of task and teacher/student synergy were all important variables. Some students spoke of the unsatisfactory experience of being part of a group as large as 15 people (although this could have been problematic in a classroom situation too).
- Optimum group working practice included the following factors: composition of groups to include a nominated leader or co-ordinator, clarity of task and teacher/student synergy.
- Some students spoke of isolation and lack of participation in group tasks. For example, students would join a break-out room and find that no-one was prepared to engage cameras or microphones. However, others felt there was greater participation and engagement from a wider section of students because status barriers between students were reduced, and it was seen as a less intimidating environment than contributing in a classroom.
- Students with experience of virtual and in-person teaching missed the social aspects of group working, but conceded that groups were often more efficient with less distractions than in a classroom setting.
- According to the OFS Report (Feb 2021) on digital teaching and learning, 'digital delivery will become the norm as the world moves to blending digital work and life with place-based activities.'

Key findings:



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4. Mental health and wellbeing

- Online platforms are new ways of delivering courses for students who have to adapt swiftly, making students feel anxious and frustrated.
- Meeting new peers online (who have never seen each other in person) makes students feel uncomfortable. In addition, new classroom rules such as turn on the video and turn off sound have made students nervous and embarrassed compared to physical classrooms.
- Online social opportunities are needed to help students navigate mental health issues.
- Students expect in-person social opportunities and teaching activities to release them from anxiety and pressure.
- Some students reported that fully online teaching cannot replace physical teaching in terms of students' mental health and wellbeing.
- The key to online communities is to help students build up social bonds and emotional connections with tutors and peers during the pandemic.

3. Formal learning

- Benefits:
- the flexibility of time and place
 - ease of managing and organising study tasks
 - the ability to replay and revisit teaching materials, especially lectures
 - the improved ease of watching demonstrations due to close up camera working on a personal screen
 - increased autonomy through captioned lecture recordings and playback options
 - in small groups only, the ability to collaborate and form connections with peers
- Difficulties:
- a fractured community of learners, especially for practical studio-based learning (e.g. performing and visual arts)
 - lack of autonomy and intuitiveness in participatory work
 - hyper-connected practices suffer from lack of contact with other courses
 - uncommunicative practice by peers e.g. cameras off and lack of contribution
 - de-personalisation of the learning experience
 - pressure on students to talk/lead
 - pressure on students to speak in front of an audience

Lectures are good online - you don't need to go to uni for these- but then I think things like tutorials and seminars would be nice to have face to face

Literature review

Marshalsey, L. and Sclater, M. (2020) Together but apart: creating and supporting online learning communities in an era of distributed studio education. *The international journal of art & design education* . 39 (4)

This article considers how the fast-tracking of blended and distributed learning due to Covid-19 is affecting students' ability to perform to the 'depth and rigour required for creative art and design practice' (Giroux & Aronowitz, 1986, cited by Marshalsey and Sclater, 2020). One of the key findings is that the loss of social connection and community has had detrimental effects upon both staff and students' mental health, and participants describe feeling 'distant', 'alienated', as if 'a wall had been put up' (Marshalsey and Sclater, 2020, p.388). The authors suggest that a strong sense of place is inherently linked to a sense of belonging and the 'friendly, informal, day-to-day social interactions with peers and staff in their situated studio community are integral to their collective and individual learning and practice' (Marshalsey and Sclater, 2018, p.77). Whereas, forms of hot-desking and temporary online communities are found to decrease sense of belonging and increase feelings of vulnerability amongst participants.

Williams, J. and Murdock, A. (2011) Creating an Online Learning Community: Is it Possible? *Innovative Higher Education*, 36: 305–315

Although this study was carried out in 2011, the central question (whether it is possible to create online learning communities) is very relevant to our research. Results indicate that it is indeed possible to create an online learning community and this was attributed to 'careful consideration to the development of assignments and activities that would nurture the development of a sense of community development' (Williams and Murdock, 2011, p.311), the encouragement of student-instructor interaction and 'giving students the opportunity to work together on projects, fostering reciprocity among students and encouraging them to take a leadership role during the course' (Ibid.). The emphasis is placed upon communities which are 'created when a group of learners set out to achieve a common goal and learn with each other, despite the educational setting' (Ibid., p.307).

Conclusions

Course learning communities play a vital role in facilitating students' academic and social experiences in the university. Online learning cannot fully satisfy students' creative, emotional and social needs, especially for studio-based courses. A variety of digital platforms have been adopted to deliver teaching activities, such as Teams, Zoom, and Facebook. However, these kinds of online learning methods appear to have various benefits and difficulties in terms of the ways of learning. Educators need to make the most use of digital platforms wisely and effectively to motivate active learning. Otherwise, students may suffer from the digital learning environment where students may not feel comfortable with the virtual experience of learning. Educators need to be aware of students' wellbeing and mental health when delivering courses and learning activities in online learning communities. Respect, support, and social connections are key in managing online learning communities to provide a better learning experience. This research has interviewed 14 students across three different learning levels. It has explored the in-depth understanding of students' experiences of online learning communities. However, most of these students come from the courses the researchers are teaching. Students need more support and encouragement to achieve authentic expression and express negative feelings and experiences. Further research could recruit students widely from different courses by using questionnaires to generalize the findings from this research.

Further Research

- Even this small sample showed distinctly different uses for various digital platforms. For instance, snapchat was used for social video sharing, and Instagram was used to share domain image products, and often split into domain and social accounts. This suggests there is further value in researching how various digital platforms evolved different uses during the pandemic. In addition, a larger research cohort would allow for a more diverse and inclusive sample of the digital practices of higher education communities.
- The use and understanding of digital space vs real space is in ongoing flux. How this changes the power dynamics and the nuances of educational community practices would yield useful insight into the increasing use of digital platforms and their impact on higher education. A research proposal that investigates digital spatial cognition in higher education, covering a diverse and inclusive research cohort, as well as differing domains, is recommended.
- Different domains showed different experiences of space and lack of particular kinds of spaces. Students in creative practice disciplines that usually used the studio as a standard pedagogy were impacted detrimentally and the loss of real space could not be replaced by a digital equivalent during the year. As a result, a study investigating how different domains translated existing pedagogies into a digital arena would prove valuable.
- Understanding how social media communities work and how they have evolved may provide interesting insights into how digital communities evolve over a considerable time period and may allow educational practitioners to foresee potential opportunities and problems ahead of time. The work of anthropologists such as Dr Crystal Abin and Tama Leaver (Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures, 2020) may prove worthwhile in this regard.
- Digital environments can allow for the virtual documentation of material from quite large groups of students. Therefore, the practice of collective mapping knowledge and practices, as suggested by Wenger and Trayner, would prove a valuable subject for research to survey how the educational community are using the digital potential to provide cloud-based learning practices and potentially new pedagogies.
- Further research is indicated that revolves around flipped classrooms, or where Monet-Viera (2021) uses Paulo Freire to argue for students co-creating content. Additionally, Orr et al (2014) conceived of reverse transmission with specific relevance to art and design teaching to fully understand the studio pedagogy. How this can be translated to an online environment is assumed to be highly problematic, yet a blended approach where apps and programs are used to develop more creative interactions between students and students and students and tutors in addition to the practical and physical studio may well prove very valuable in the aftermath of the global pandemic.