Reflexive Report on the Online Collaborative Project

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This essay is a reflexive report on my experiences of working on an online collaborative project. Our group researched, designed and made a sharable resource, which aims to provide students and lecturers information to signpost them to mental health and wellbeing services (i.e. online, telephone, apps). In this reflexive report I will reflect upon my digital literacy skills, the potential impact on my current / future practice, and the issues involved when working with a group online.

I consider myself to already have good digital literacy skills, as I utilise online and social media in teaching, research and my own personal life too (see https://twitter.com/gemcommane, https://gemmacommaneportfolio.wordpress.com/statement-of-effective-practice/ and https://gemmacommaneportfolio.wordpress.com/interactive-teaching-and-learning/). Despite me already using digital technology and social media, I have never used social technologies as a student or in a group context. This gap needed to be addressed, particularly because online environments have become integral to the student experience, curriculum design and the changing landscape of HE in teaching and learning (Kemp and Grieve 2014; Lundberg and Sheridan 2015; Yamagata-Lynch 2014; Zhang 2013). Students are perceived to be digital natives who are already literate, although David White (see https://gemmacommaneportfolio.wordpress.com/mo3-training-curriculum-design/) maintains that students' use of social technologies for teaching and learning is low due to the prevalence of social technologies being used for leisure only. Students are, therefore, looking to us for guidance and leadership in how to use these technologies in a teaching and learning context (see Yamagata-Lynch 2014:195 and https://gemmacommaneportfolio.wordpress.com/mo3-training-curriculum-design/). It is important to also consider colleagues too, as colleagues are looking to more digitally literate colleagues for guidance and leadership in using digital and social technologies in a learning environment. Thus, being an online participatory learner can be a new experience for anyone (Yamagata-Lynch 2014).

There is an assumption that online environments optimise student learning, decreases anxiety and increases meaningful interaction (see Lundberg and Sheridan 2015). Online technologies and platforms are viewed as allowing greater flexibility in learning, exchanging ideas and support (Kemp and Grieve 2014; Lundberg and Sheridan 2015; Yamagata-Lynch 2014; Zhang 2013), particularly when engaged in collaborative projects with other students. From my current teaching practice, I advised some students to use GoogleDocs when their take-away activity was a group essay. My advice was in response to an issue raised by students, who found that email exchanges were disruptive because they did not know which edit of the essay was the latest version. They also wanted the option of working remotely both in real-time and at a time of convenience. GoogleDocs enabled flexible learning in an informal context that suited student needs (supported by Kemp and Grieve 2014). From our group experience, having a sight-impairment can limit the interaction of some students, resulting in the group adapting and using other platforms to share ideas and resources. The use of several platforms to communicate meant that there was some miscommunication and fragmentation of ideas. Missing out on key decisions can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration, demonstrating limitations to the flexibility presupposed in online contexts. Srichanyachon (2014) explores the limitations of online 'flexibility' through examples of delayed interaction (of users) and the lack of support or technical assistance on the platform itself. When thinking about suitable platforms and technologies for certain projects or classroom activities, it is important to research and reflect upon what platforms work, what their limitations are, how students can interact and for what reasons they are going to be used.

From my experience of creating a collaborative project online, it is apparent that online learning is more leaner-centred as it breaks down the traditional teacher / student dichotomy (Kemp and Grieve 2014 and Lundberg and Sheridan 2015). This allows students to have a greater sense of ownership over the direction and facilitation of the learning (Barr and Miller 2013; Kemp and Grieve 2014; Srichanyachon 2014). Also, the online collaborative peer-to-peer space provides 'neutral' ground

where students may not feel as intimidated as they would when talking to, or sharing ideas with, a teacher (Zhang 2013). As our group already knew each another, we already had established rapport and a shared sense of community (see Barr and Miller 2013; Kemp and Grieve 2014; Lundberg and Sheridan 2015; Srichanyachon 2014; Yamagata-Lynch 2014; Zhang 2013 for support). However, this does not fully reflect situations when students do not get on with their peers or find themselves in a group with people they do not know, which means I cannot take-for-granted the outcomes of my own experience, as it is one of many that students can encounter in the variant contexts of learning. Shared feelings of community and positive engagement are not there automatically (Yamagata-Lynch 2014),which means that online group work can be complicated when students (from various cultures and backgrounds) find themselves having to work together for an assignment (see Zhang 2013 on Chinese students' experiences of HE in America). This is further supported by Srichanyachon's (2014:15) research on distant learners as she states that in *'knowing the characteristics and demographics of the distance learners helps us understand the potential barriers to online learners.'* What this means is that the instructor must be prepared but also consider the various ways in which students interact and exchange ideas flexibly, and in different spaces. In relation to flexibility in learning environments, we found meaningful interaction within face-to-face contexts, which is assumed to increase via online contexts only (see Lundberg and Sheridan 2015).

Our group preference in meeting face-to-face to discuss ideas and issues reflects Kemp and Grieve's (2014) research on undergraduate students preferring face-to-face meetings. The students in their research felt face-to-face meeting to be more engaging and built a greater sense of community. Face-to-face meetings and online contexts, however, do not always facilitate flexibility, an enriching learning environment (Barr and Miller 2013) or an informal learning style (see Yamagata-Lunch 2014 on asynchronous learning). An example of this is an issue I found in online learning and this is to do with feedback to research and work you have shared. Online feedback from all group members is important as you can take time to reflect upon their suggestions (Barr and Miller 2013; Kemp and Grieve2014 Lundberg and Sheridan 2015) and then edit changes to enhance work. Delayed feedback to posts from some group members and the absence of some members in key meetings, made the process difficult and their feedback contradictory. As a result, using informal platforms does not mean that student's will feel less intimidated (Kemp and Grieve 2014; Lundberg and Sheridan 2015; Yamagata-Lynch 2014 and Zhang 2013), as they could feel defensive about their work or apprehensive about sharing. To tackle this as a teacher, I would be mindful of using a variety of spaces where students can share and discuss ideas or concerns with one another, but also with me too. Some 'structure' for feedback may be beneficial, with the module page suggesting a template for giving ideas for informative feedback, which could be decided by the students at the beginning of the module to help facilitate online learning. In any case, peer-to-peer relationships need to be carefully thought about when designing course content, as the use of social media or online platforms will not simply rectify issues that are barriers to learning (i.e. cultural, social, generational or gendered) or automatically open positive and flexible dialogue between students.

In conclusion, I have provided a reflexive report of my experiences of working on an online collaborative project, taking into account issues, digital literacy and the impact on my present and future practice. Having 'digital literacy' skills is an ongoing process and we need to recognise the multiple contexts that students experience in online learning environments. I have established how understanding my own limitations and the current literature on online learning, has made me more aware of elements that I need to consider when integrating online learning in curriculum design.

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