Students as co-creators: utilising the student voice and digital skills to create teachable content

Helena Beeson
University of Northampton

Abstract

There has been a significant move away from sustained didactic teaching in Higher Education in recent years. However, due to ongoing pressure to teach course material this shift has largely plateaued with anecdotal examples of student-generated workshops being facilitated and then evaluated in academic literature. Our learners are expected to bring an understanding of academic processes to assessment formats without necessarily having had any prior experience of them. Adapting the process of learning and teaching to a collaborative and active partnership between students and facilitators is a key goal for this case study's authors. Learning Development teams can help with the theory of the processes plus some pragmatic tips, but there can still be a gap in students' appropriate knowledge and its practical application. This case study discusses a recent collaboration at the University of Northampton between a Learning Development Tutor and a Learning Technologist which aimed to utilise student voices to create interactive video content to focus on strategies for groupwork practice.

Introduction

The concept of digital capability for all is promoted by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC, 2015) in order to "thrive in today's world". This notion incorporates six elements to consider on an individual level plus six on an organisational level which explore the skills and attitudes required to succeed in a digital society. The individual elements are:

- ICT Proficiency
- Information, data and media literacies
- Digital creation, problem solving and innovation
- Digital communication, collaboration and participation
- Digital learning and development
- Digital identity and wellbeing

We, a Learning Development (LD) tutor and a Learning Technologist (LT), recognised that these values would work well as a foundation for a workshop to promote peer-learning and content creation. Students are increasingly expected to create video assignments as part of their curriculum, often in groups, which provided a real opportunity to align our approach constructively with expected learning outcomes. Biggs and Tang (2011) encourage this, asserting that tutors have the responsibility of creating an environment and activities where expected specific learning outcomes are supported.

Groupwork can be a complex task for students as there is no perfect approach or formula that works from one team project to the next. Over many years, we observed that individuals undertaking assignments with others would seek advice from support networks outside of their groups, rather than discuss issues with their immediate peers. It became clear through discussions with these learners and their tutors that there was no focused intervention for

practising these social interactions, which are essential in most industries, outside of assessment. We therefore aspired to enable this, utilising digital opportunities.

At the University of Northampton, staff and students can utilise support systems through Library and Learning Services, either timetabled in their module and / or through bespoke sessions on request. This includes Learning Development, a team that advises on the academic processes associated with courses, and Learning Technology staff who advise on educational tools such as Virtual Learning Environments and mobile technology.

LD tutors do not see the same cohorts of students regularly. Therefore, it is important to maximise engagement in sessions to promote us as an approachable team for individuals to contact for support. Traditionally, our workshops had been very much tutor led with one or two small group tasks to practise the skills being taught. These collaborative opportunities have increased in recent years with a wider group discussion, yet retain the teacher / student hierarchy. Situativity theory promotes that learning must take into account existing experience and environment of the learner, (Durning and Artino, 2011) and this offered an opportunity to change our approach.

We were keen to investigate how teaching could adapt to consider the student voice combined with a different environment, but without being too prescriptive in the style of Biggs and Tang (2011). In late 2019 we secured some funding from our Institute of Learning and Teaching to work with students to design a student-led workshop with a focus of groupwork skills. This funding included the hiring of a third-year student with video creation experience to liaise with peers and promote the video production outside of the workshop time. The LD and LT partnership sought to combine our different perspectives and bring together contacts in the Faculty of Business and Law, expertise in video creation, experience in teaching digital skills knowledge around groupwork theory and practice, plus access to students' timetabled workshops. Pirhonen and Rasi (2017) claim that university students who produce videos as part of their studies are more empowered to enable their own learning via positive emotions, and that this is linked to higher attainment.

A pilot study was implemented which laid the foundations of how we could focus the workshop. We surveyed students across the Faculty of Business and Law using a mixed methods approach of open and closed questions. The questions focused on how technology had been used throughout these experiences. Forty-one responses were received, and from these we identified five areas of groupwork conflict which we could develop into scenarios. These scenarios formed the basis of our activity.

This article will investigate how this teaching approach has developed and evolved, from our initial research gathering lived experiences to adapting the session to run online.

Project aims

We started the project with five aims:

1. Facilitate students to explore approaches to video production in conjunction with critical thinking to generate potential teaching material for future learners.
2. Enable groups to practice the skills associated with groupwork freely outside of assessment.
3. Create key principles to inform successful collaborations utilising technology.
4. Liaise with faculty tutors to promote student-led workshops throughout the institution.
5. Identify barriers for students in the Faculty of Business and Law to collaborating effectively.

To achieve these aims, we created an activity for small groups which could be used when we are invited in to a timetabled module session. The goal was to respond to the given scenarios (Beeson and Byles, 2021) which had been identified by 41 different students through surveys at the start of the project. Each scenario posed a groupwork problem and asked for a right answer, a wrong answer and a ridiculous answer. One example of a groupwork problem was that a group member turns up late and hungover for meetings. It was anticipated that discussions around team bonding, empathy, support and difficult conversations might emerge around a 'right' approach.

To respond to scenarios groups had to collaborate with each other utilising key groupwork skills such as leadership and negotiation, in order to achieve a collective response. This then provided the content to create an interactive video using mobile phones and the Kaltura Paths editing tool, something which could be used as teaching material for future students. We therefore identified the opportunity for the LT to also discuss some key principles of video production such as lighting, audio and camera placement. This took the form of peer-to-peer advice as well as guidance from us.

Druckman and Ebner (2013) argue that the opportunity to incorporate students' experiences and concerns into the scenario design can aid their understanding and make them feel more comfortable with the process. They also observe that combining role-play and influencing the design of the session enhances motivation and concept learning, and can also help with retention. However, the authors also note that this approach can be time consuming for facilitators to introduce the task clearly and should also be supported by other modes of learning. This is supported by the Universal Design Guidelines (CAST, 2018) which advocate fostering collaboration, optimising autonomy, the use of tools, and that background knowledge should be supplied.

We refined our input at the start of the process to discuss the most common reasons groupwork assignments fail and showed as an example a short interactive video to guide expectations (Kaltura, 2020). This comprised of four brief clips; one to give context and three separate responses, although students had a significant amount of flexibility and ownership when creating videos. Once the videos were created and shared with other groups, the LT provided feedback and technical suggestions to inform any reshoots. We facilitated the learning experience, but the task was socially constructed to enable a negotiated response. (Vygotsky 1978) The activity was, fundamentally, led by students as they played an active role. Each student may take away slightly different messages, but the process reinforces the fact that there are a range of aspects to group work and their peers in future groups may interpret tasks differently.

Implementing the workshop online

With the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020, teaching on campus was halted and we could no longer facilitate the workshop. Therefore, we attempted to translate the session to an online format instead.

The first iteration of the teaching online provided the same background information about why group projects fail but was delivered through a virtual learning environment. This changed the format of the workshop but, as noted by Blau and Shamir-Inbal (2018), digital environments have the potential to equalise the power dynamic between teachers and students, something which could be seen to further enable the student voice. Our activity used the same scenarios and required individuals to work together in groups to populate a

Padlet, a flexible Learning Technology tool, with the same responses. Padlet was chosen as it offered a collaborative online space to build content on instead of video, the authors had previous experience with it, and, as Lowe and Humphrey (2018) have observed, it is useful for collaborating and presenting information visually.

Although arguments were developed in groups in response to the task and the content produced was visually engaging and creative, utilising gifs and copyright-free images, the workshop felt flat and less effective in comparison with the initial active workshop. This was because it was less focused and had lost its performative nature due to the content being merely explained rather than performed. Blau and Shamir-Inbal (2018) argue that continuing to disseminate power to students is key to advocating the student voice and an academic partnership, especially when combined with fostering their leadership skills. The LT had previous experience of creating successful radio plays and we therefore adapted the task with this in mind. Yang and Wu (2012) identified that the use of digital storytelling can improve listening and critical thinking while practising the skills being taught. Our next iteration of the session was devised to be performed online, rather than just explained,and could be recorded if students agreed to creating something that could be utilised in the future.

Results and Evaluation

Face-to-face session

Thirteen students were interviewed about the video creation workshop and their feedback was largely positive. The students:

- were pleased that staff recognised and validated some of the problems students face
- appreciated the opportunity to practise a skill without being graded was
- felt that getting out of the comfort zone was positive
- found the discussion around the quality of video production useful
- agreed it was helpful to do something that will be needed in employment (e.g. leadership and delegation)
- wished they had had the session in their first year
- noted the importance of prior planning for content creation

There were some other points to consider, namely a need to mix up student groups so that they were more diverse, depending on the nature of the cohort, and also that the activity was somewhat simplistic. We therefore aim to develop more complex scenarios for future workshops.

After the session was undertaken three times with different students from the same cohort, we interviewed the tutor who had observed them. She was inspired to use our approach as part of her assessment. After analysing her responses, we found the following points significant for us:

> *“[I am] going to incorporate elements of the activity into the design of a group work assessment. By getting them to focus on a task to be completed in the session - it would be a business scenario with a case study.”*

> *“I thought it was innovative and interesting, it's not something they'd done before and got them to think outside of the box. Having a worksheet worked well because it was*

> *a guide and they probably wouldn't have been able to create the videos without a structured approach."*
>
> *"The teams worked together organically, as a smaller group needed some help filming and the other group had finished so they shared skills."*
>
> *"During the workshop the students became very interested and keen to learn new skills that would help them with submitting their assignment. Those that were already very aware of how to record and frame a piece to camera were able to help others in the group and those that were a little unsure developed more confidence during the workshops. As a programme leader … embedding digital literacy into the programme in order to enhance the subject area has been a priority going forward."*

Therefore, our adapted in-person session worked well for this course. We did run the session with other courses too which provided informal positive verbal feedback from students and staff. Several impressive videos were created, but we did not get permission to reuse content from all students involved as many left the campus at the start of the pandemic. The student we hired to promote the production of content had storyboarded and found actors for video shoots but left the university before sharing with us what he had created.

Online radio play

Group members created and embodied characters whose conversations were documented and performed to peers. This promoted more accountability than the first iteration with focus and structure. In addition, the creation of character roles necessitated the the consideration of wider perspectives.

Only two students provided feedback via a separate Padlet when asked, but they noted it was reassuring that other students had similar issues and that the application of theory to an exercise was valuable.

We also ran this session online with colleagues from across the university to share the format and encourage them to try the technique themselves, thus enabling more student content creation. Attendees were surveyed and nine participants provided feedback. We were reassured by the comment "very inspirational session," as this reinforced the fact we had presented an approach which was new to some of the participants. Other observations from colleagues praised the flexibility of the format and noted how it could be utilised to apply theory to a role-play practice; appreciated the opportunity for inclusivity and for participants to take different roles, as well as the fun elements of producing and performing the content.

Academics experiencing the session in the student role expressed considerations about how they would utilise the role-play format in their modules. They noted that the workshop would be time consuming for tutors, that there would be significant challenges in promoting inclusivity in an online environment (although no example was given).

The possibility of students getting bored if the format was used excessively, and difficulties in managing more dominant members of the group were also raised. Interestingly, we did not receive these comments from students in their timetabled workshops.

The researchers acknowledged these concerns relating to how the format might be expanded to other uses, and addressed them by making the task more clearly defined, but still student–led and flexible. We adapted our input to the needs of each group through prior liaison with module tutors and by engaging with student groups' discussions, in order to emphasise the importance of creating an environment where organic discussions can flourish.

Managing dominant members is a useful example of a potential conflict that could provide discussion material for the activity. It is the role of the facilitator to encourage all voices within groups and suggest a variety of roles such as mediating, filming, or editing. This flexible approach illustrates that strict learning outcomes for the exercise could limit discussions and experiences.

Lessons learned and conclusions

There were some interesting observations that emerged from the process as a whole.

- Do not assume (lack of) knowledge or experience.
- Consider mixing up student groups to enhance the cultural diversity of a group.
- Encourage flexibility and keep learning outcomes general. Learners will make their own meaning from the process including: subject content, leadership, digital, negotiation and empathy skills amongst others.
- Be prepared and structured with clear guidance for the task at the start of the process so students can take ownership of the rest of the session to create material.
- Request student permissions to share content through a video release form early whilst reassuring learners that it is not mandatory.
- Digital skills can be enhanced through the collaboration of LD, LT and academic tutors
- Not all active learning sessions have the same result. Being flexible and adaptive looks easy but can be challenging.

We achieved our initial aims and noted that several students' voices were reflected when videos were produced and discussed. The format of the activity overall was well received. Students engaged positively, identified practical and thorough solutions to given open scenarios and developed both their digital and teamwork skills. The exercise highlighted the importance of staff preparation and upskilling, if necessary, alongside the importance of providing clear guidance from the start. This guidance included discussions around shared collaborative space online to store content.

One frustration was that we did not manage to get students' permissions to create a bank of reusable content for future groupwork workshops, but we did discover a collection of key reasons why our students have struggled with groupwork assignments which can be shared going forward. Since the research for this article was conducted, the workshop has been successfully adapted for other subject areas by an LD tutor and a student mentor.

Furthermore, we have established a format for the delivery of key group skills that challenges students' communication and critical thinking skills through the use of role-play. By combining the desire to embed key pedagogic learning approaches with the JISC principles of developing digital literacies, the researchers have produced and delivered a session that is creative, engaging, innovative and useful. A LD at the institution has since recommended that practical guidelines for delivering the workshop are made available for all modules, which we are in the process of creating.

In the future we would be keen to empower students to facilitate the session themselves and to establish genuine reusable teaching and learning materials in this area. It is hoped that giving learners flexibility and autonomy when forming their professional collaborative and digital skills will become increasingly widespread across the HE sector, through effective and focused facilitation.

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