

Developing a Community of Learning through the 4 Cs Model: Context, Contingency, Collaborative Learning and Contribution

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The COVID-19 pandemic has engendered change in the ways universities approach teaching and learning. In many respects, much of the change that has taken place in the past few years was already in place but accelerated by the exigencies of the emergency. In particular, digital technology has been viewed by many within Higher Education as a pragmatic way of delivering the curriculum to students. Such a view fails to appreciate the opportunities presented not just using digital technology but also through new approaches to teaching and learning and the empowerment of students as learners. This paper reports on a Foundation Programme in Business and Management that sought to develop a student-driven community of learning through the use of digital technology. The application of Flipgrid, Padlet and Google Slides engaged students in an exercise that built community identity and a sense of belonging whilst developing new skills. This paper summarises this approach in terms of the 4 Cs model of Context, Contingency, Collaborative learning, and Contribution.

Introduction

Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021, p. 133) report that:

The Covid-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in human history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 200 countries.... This has brought far-reaching changes to our lives

How then can we reflect and learn from the actions taken during the pandemic? Is what we have done becoming transient or permanent in the way we approach teaching and learning, and can we apply our actions to other contexts? These questions underpin much of the reflection process academics have engaged with since 2020 and are important as we all look to the future of higher education curriculum delivery. A great deal of literature has been published reporting how universities responded to this challenge (Paulde, 2021; Bartolic *et al.*, 2021, and Tang *et al.*,

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2020). However, a successful curriculum necessitates more than delivering subject content and assessing students' progress. The importance of belonging is increasingly recognised as a significant indicator of student engagement and satisfaction. As universities shifted from campus-based to online and later to blended forms of teaching and learning, the challenge presented became more complex and immediate. The fundamental research that underpins this paper evaluates an approach to developing a community of learners who had been periodically isolated from academics and their peers. This paper aims to provide an insight into the actions taken at a business school in order to facilitate a high-quality student experience and develop a community of learning for a new Business and Management Foundation Year and the integration of a blended learning approach. In an original contribution to the discourse on post-COVID higher education, this paper offers a model of practice that focuses on four key themes: context, contingency, collaborative learning, and contribution.

Literature review

Creating a new community amongst strangers

The initial experience for students who had joined the foundation programme in September 2020 can only be described as disjointed. In the first week, seminars were held on campus but attracted very poor attendance. At the end of the first week, the national media were reporting that 770 students had tested for COVID-19 and were isolating in student accommodation (BBC News, 2020). As a result, the university chose to move its delivery for many study programmes to online delivery, although later in the year when the level of infections declined, this approach would be modified into a blended format. The challenge to integrate students who had only recently arrived at university became more pronounced and immediate.

The literature on learning communities is often linked to the seminal work of Lave and Wenger (1991) on communities of practice (COP), or the community of inquiry (COI) framework provided by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000). The problem with this body of work is that it is often tied to professional work-based contexts and not directly to particular student populations such as those enrolled onto a foundation programme. Importantly, Clark (2007) acknowledges that the idea of community is founded on the notion of belonging. Clark (2007) describes how the concept of community has developed from one predicated upon physical proximity to one that is conditioned by a variety of social and economic factors. With reference to social network theory, Wellman (2001, p. 227) considers that:

We find community in networks, not groups In networked societies: boundaries are permeable, interactions are with diverse others, connections switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies can be flatter and recursive ... Communities are far flung, loosely-bounded, sparsely-knit and fragmentary. Most people operate in multiple, thinly connected, partial communities as they deal with networks ... Rather than fitting into the same group as those around them, each person has his/her own personal community.

Social network theory (Granovetter, 1983; Wellman, 2001) provides an understanding of the nature of contemporary community and offers an insight into the development of student-based community. It also infers a need to understand the nature of connection between individuals in evolving social networks, particularly those that are enabled through digital technology. The literature on social network theory can be linked to other theories, such as connectivism and the idea of individuals as discrete nodes within an interactive information-based system

(Siemens, 2005; Downes, 2010). Importantly, Granovetter (1983), considered that a key determinant of the efficacy an individual's network is the delineation between strong and weak ties. This idea of strong and weak ties is particularly apposite when engaging in a discussion of the delivery of the curriculum and expectations of students' involvement. Fundamentally, however, we cannot escape the rationale in Delanty's (2003, p. 177) observation that "networks are built by the choices and strategies of social actors".

The advent of digital communications technology has transformed the ways in which communities are formed, share information, and develop a collective identity. Moore (1989) defined the nature of online learning in terms of three dimensions, student and educator, students, and student learning materials, and thus highlights the complexities and challenges in delivering online learning. Moreover, one of the key challenges in curriculum innovation is how to provide sufficient structure without overwhelming students with information. In facilitating the emergence of new forms of social network, digital technology is increasingly viewed as an important and user-friendly mode of communication and engagement with students (Stoten, 2019). For Ally and Wark (2018), students interact as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) with resources, academics, and their peers in a "digital habitat" within which the learning eco-system is enabled through apps, university-based virtual learning environments (VLEs) and discussion boards (Stoten *et al.*, 2018), as well as the internet more generally. A notable development in recent years is the use of smartphones by students as an alternative to the PC or laptop (Chao, 2019; Glahn and Gruber, 2019; Montilus and Jin, 2020). Hitherto, although many academics on the foundation programme had used a VLE prior to the pandemic, few had developed an extensive repertoire beyond its use as a repository of resources. The challenge was therefore how to engage students through an understanding of what could be.

Discussions of outcomes

Guiding Principles and Philosophy of the Programme

Delivering a study programme at foundation level requires a particular perspective on student needs and aspirations. Although all foundation programmes at this university must comply with the Programme Framework for the University's awards, as well as its education strategy on learning and teaching, this programme sought to establish new ground.

Two main principles underpinned the approach taken in devising the new curriculum. The first was to prepare students for their undergraduate degree at FHEQ Level 4 and the second to enhance lifelong learning skills and employability as part of the university graduate attributes framework. These two principles served as the golden thread that tied the curriculum together.

Context

The first dimension of the 4Cs model relates to the 'context' of around 150 students enrolled on a newly validated Business and Management programme in the academic year 2020. When evaluating the demographic data against direct entrants to Level 4, it was evident that 14.1% of foundation year students identified as having a disability compared to 12.4% of Level 4 students, and 5.4% of Foundation Year students have a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia compared to 4.3% at Level 4. For the previous two years a lower proportion of foundation year students have come from areas with the lowest participation rates. In 2020-21, 39.1% of foundation year students were in POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 compared to 40.3% of Level 4 students. A higher proportion of foundation year students came from areas with the highest participation

rates and in 2020-21, 25.2% of foundation year students were in POLAR quintile 5 compared to 22.4% at Level 4. Data also identified that between 2019-20 and 2020-21, the proportion of students on the foundation year who identify as BAME increased from 13.3% to 16.9% whereas the proportion of Level 4 students decreased from 14.4% to 13.1%. The UCAS entry level points ranged from 72 to 116. Furthermore, the pandemic encouraged mature students to return to education as evidenced by one student who suggested:

I took five years out of education and I went to work full time and then I decided during covid and after the birth of my child that I would go to university but I never studied business at school or college so I didn't want to study with a lot of people that had a lot of knowledge already, I kind of wanted to ease into education so I opted for the foundation year.

Thus, whilst the student had practical and vocational experience, they believed they lacked the academic credentials and considered the Foundation Year to be more suitable. A survey identified 11% of the cohort who acknowledged they were returning to education following a break in study whereas 43% of the cohort gained entry to the FY through clearing compared with 19% applying directly and 13% accepting the FY from a dual offer when applying to a Level 4 programme. The programme team therefore recognised the importance of developing a community of learning due to the diverse demographics, motivations to study and shift to online delivery. The Foundation Year in Business and Management involves team and group work, and the creation of a learning community was therefore paramount.

Contingency

The objective to create a community of learning focussed on student engagement, and opportunities to share ideas and provide peer support facilitated through group work and online presentations. The team wanted to achieve an environment online which would replicate as far as possible a classroom experience. The university VLE, Blackboard Collaborate, provided a platform for the delivery of workshops and webinars but as the students were relatively new to this learning environment and each other, the team wanted to ensure that students would feel confident to speak online and engage with the learning environment. Whilst Blackboard Collaborate provides an opportunity to use breakout rooms and interactive whiteboards, it was soon evident that students were reluctant to switch on their cameras or speak in virtual classrooms. To encourage communication, the team urgently required a contingency and sought alternative forms of technology to encourage engagement and opted to use Flipgrid and Padlet within a Professional Development module.

Collaborative Learning

One of the learning outcomes for the Professional Development module was to develop presentation and communication skills. Students can be fearful of presentations in a seminar but given the use of TikTok and other social media platforms, it was envisaged that students might find the challenge of recording a video using Flipgrid more appealing. The cohort were therefore asked to record a three-minute presentation on a topic of their choosing with the proviso that they had to demonstrate how to do something. On completion of this, the students were asked to provide feedback on Padlet on their experience and the findings were quite surprising: one student identified that they thought they would find this easy due to their use of social media and TikTok, however, when challenged to do something in a more professional setting, they found it more daunting, and it took several attempts. The range of topics included how to check

the oil level on a car, how to cook perfect pasta and check it is cooked (throwing it at a wall to check it sticks!), beauty regimes and football line up squads.

A member of the module teaching team initially expressed disappointment as they had expected the presentations to be of a more academic nature. However, on reflection the presentations broke down barriers and improved communication between students. There was greater engagement with each other, and virtual friendships and peer support groups formed. Within the seminar sessions, students were asked to view presentations by their peers and provide feedback which developed their communication skills of giving and receiving feedback. The use of Padlet to obtain feedback on this exercise demonstrated the value of having a platform for students to share their ideas, and this was subsequently utilised for a team building workshop. During this task, the students were required to work together in a virtual environment and develop a team building activity. This again developed communication and presentation skills, and a noticeable improvement in engagement. For example, one student demonstrated during this activity the use of Google Slides in virtual seminar groups, and this provided the teams the opportunity to work together and contribute to the development of a PowerPoint presentation for delivery online through the VLE.

Padlet was also utilised in an activity to share ideas about time management and staying focused. Techniques and methods such as Cold Turkey Writer, Pomodoro technique and Written Kitten* were discussed in a virtual environment and students provided feedback on their usefulness and shared other tools to support learning. A community of learning in a virtual environment was therefore formed using technology and experimenting with different platforms.

Contribution

The use of tools such as Flipgrid, Padlet and Google Slides facilitated an adaptive virtual learning environment. The teaching team were new to the use of such tools and online technology but were able to create a community of learning to encourage communication and provide an opportunity to develop transferrable academic skills. The module which utilised these tools provided the platform for their continued use in Semester 2 where the students were engaged in other online presentations and group work. In September 2021, a blended approach to learning returned whereby lectures were generally online and seminars/workshops took place on campus. However, owing to the benefits of using online tools such as Flipgrid, these were still utilised on campus and considered a great opportunity for students to gain confidence in recording a video and presenting it to their peers for feedback. Many employers and graduate training schemes require a video presentation as part of the application process and through improving presentation skills in either a formal or informal environment such as Flipgrid, it provides a much-needed opportunity for students to practise in a supportive environment. Moving into the new academic year in 2022, teaching returned to the classroom and there has been an increase in the use of technology such as Google Slides, instead of using flipchart paper for workshop exercises. When peer reviewing a member of staff engaging in this practice, it was evident that the students welcomed the use of the technology to share their ideas. During the academic year 20-21, programme leaders for progression programmes utilised Flipgrid to provide an oversight of the programmes which students can progress to which proved invaluable for students to seek out information to support their development and transition at Level 4. Based on the success of this during lockdown, it has been further utilised on returning to campus and provides an accessible platform for all students to review.

*If you, like I, need a bit of help with these techniques, check out the 'Time/Task Management Tools' section on this website: <https://formanschool.libguides.com/c.php?g=388294&p=8049343>. [Editor]

Conclusion

This paper reports on the actions taken to develop a community of learners under extraordinary circumstances, as such it provides an insight into how to adapt the delivery of the curriculum in a pragmatic and imaginative way. Much of what is written about the impact of digital technology on education focusses on the functionality of online delivery and its capacity to link students to resources and each other. An over-emphasis on technological determinism is, however, myopic since all communities are dependent on the choices made by individuals. The nature of cyber-communities, whether this is fully online or in a blended format, is changing our conceptions of teaching and learning. With the temporal and spatial context changed and the mode of interaction fluid, students now look to engage with their peers, academics, and resources in an accessible manner and at a time of their choosing.

The changing context of learning means that universities must look to new ways of engaging students that will not only stimulate their academic interest but develop their sense of belonging as part of a community. The approach taken in this example, can be summarised in terms of the 4 Cs model of curriculum innovation: Context, Contingency, Collaborative learning, and Contribution. Within this model, we must recognise that engagement and belonging are important elements within a successful foundation programme as students recognise how these inform their wider personal and academic development. Although students may enrol onto a foundation programme with an instrumental outlook that prioritises progression onto Level 4 study, it is arguably not until later in their studies that they realise that engagement with a foundation year supports their academic achievements.

The example presented in this paper serves to illustrate how engagement, a sense of belonging and skills development on a foundation programme may be enhanced through the innovative use of digital technology.

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