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Integrating digital learning hubs to support the student learning journey and build community

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Abstract

In reaction to the global health pandemic, UK higher education has seen a shift to blended learning. An urgent need to develop meaningful initiatives which would support students in their learning journeys through creative community building online emerged. In response to this shift a digital learning hub initiative was designed and integrated into the unit 'Introduction to Womenswear' for two cohorts of first year BA Fashion Design Technology: Womenswear students between 2020-2022. This case study outlines this initiative which aimed to support teaching and learning whilst building a sense of community in a hybrid teaching and learning environment at UAL (University of the Arts London).

Keywords

higher education; blended learning; online teaching tools; community building; peer-to-peer learning; digital technology

Introduction

In response to our 2020 NSS (National Student Survey) results, developing a learning community emerged as a key focus area for the BA Fashion Design Technology Womenswear team. This was an area which we wanted to work on across all year groups so that all students would feel a stronger sense of community throughout the course.

As Year One Leader my focus was to develop more opportunities for our first year students to feel part of a learning community. Due to less in-person opportunities and with many of our students working remotely because of the global pandemic during this period, we needed to do this in a virtual way.

Designing learning activities that fostered a sense of belonging was important if students were going to feel as if they were part of course community. Bunting and Hill observed that at this time UAL colleagues wanted to create less formal teaching spaces so that students could interact as equals (Bunting and Hill, 2021).

Navigating a digital only learning environment presented challenges when the opportunities for social interaction that would have formerly occurred on campus disappeared overnight. We addressed this challenge by creating student-led hubs where peer-to-peer learning, interaction and connections could occur in a more relaxed, online learning environment.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) theoretical framework (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000) sets out social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence as the three key elements of any educational experience. As a concept it can be used to design and measure the effectiveness of online learning experiences. Within the context of this case study, social presence is particularly

pertinent as it emphasises the importance of the learning community which was a key focus area for our interventions. Garrison defines social presence as:

The ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of protecting their individual personalities. (Garrison, 2009, p. 352).

Online learning spaces require built in opportunities aimed at facilitating social presence. Embedding these opportunities within the unit's scheme of work enabled us to set goals connected to the 'common goals of the course and group' which Garrison identifies as crucial to social presence in the context of the Col framework.

The Intervention

We began by reworking the scheme of work for 'Unit 1: Introduction to Womenswear', a unit which I have co-led for the past three years. I felt there was an opportunity within the unit to build in community-enhancing learning activities with the aim of developing this area in year one. As it is the first unit students undertake when joining the course, it is very important in terms of not only introducing students to the discipline, but also in terms helping them to orientate to study at Higher Education level more generally.

My priority was for students to feel part of a learning community from the very start of the course, in order to set a precedent that could be continued throughout year one and beyond. I wanted our first year students to feel a strong sense that they were part of a community of fellow learners who would support one another on their individual learning journeys.

Motivated by this aim, we adjusted the unit scheme of work so that students were required to work collaboratively for three weeks from the beginning of the project (in previous years they had worked independently for the entire five-week unit). We believed working collaboratively would give students the opportunity to get to know one another before they focused on their individual work.

On the course we had five tutor groups of up to twenty-four students in total. Each tutor group was divided into four sub-groups and students were instructed to meet weekly on Microsoft Teams to discuss and progress their ideas. I requested that the weekly meeting was a timetabled session called the 'Hub' and that it should be in place for the duration of the unit even after students had finished working collaboratively.

To support tutors co-ordinating the hubs I created the following hub guidelines.

The hub session should be:

- A place for students to work together/discuss/negotiate their ideas.
- A place students can get to know each other and make connections.
- A space where students can meet independently to discuss, connect, give feedback to one another.

The hub shouldn't be:

- A tutor-led group tutorial session.
- A space where the tutor is guiding the discussion or getting overly involved.

Each weekly hub was one hour in duration and had a set focus that was communicated in advance to the students. The weekly focus connected to the content of the unit and complimented the scheme of work. For example, week one served as ice breaker session where students were asked to introduce themselves to one another and share their background and aspirations for the course. In week two which had a research theme, students were asked to discuss research sources and to share their initial primary and secondary research. In week three students were asked to reflect and discuss how their written assignments were going and were encouraged to share tips with one another.

I provided guidance to the year one teaching team on the best approach to managing the hubs. I requested that each tutor facilitated their group's hub session by being present at the start, verbally setting the focus question and then letting the students get on with working as a group independently. I wanted the hubs to be led by students to allow for peer-to-peer learning opportunities and independence, but I recognised that we needed to scaffold this. Being present for the initial hubs helped us do that. We could ensure that students knew what they needed to do and that they could confidently navigate the technology. Once I was confident that the hubs could be run by the students, we then instructed the students to meet with their mini group on Teams independently.

I wanted the students to know that I was available if they had any questions so I advised them that they could add me to their group call, and I would be available to answer during their timetabled session if they needed to ask me something. I used the chat box function to communicate with my own group and to set the weekly focus. I instructed the other tutors to follow the same approach which they did.

The hubs were intended to stimulate active learning through student interactivity. In a recent article published by JISC (the UK government body focused on the development of digital higher education) Barrett defines active learning as:

The opposite of passive listening. It focuses on what our learners are actually doing in our classes; what activities people are taking part in during our workshops; and how students are interacting with peers and resources outside class time. (Barrett, 2020)

Barrett goes on to state that active learning in the digital world can help with:

- Empowerment and confidence
- Accessibility and inclusion
- Lifelong learning
- Lifelong employability
- Health and wellbeing
- Social integration and citizenship. (Barrett, 2020)

A recent article on student engagement and post-Covid digital practices outlines the findings from a focus group where discussions between staff and students focused on the importance of connectedness and inclusion in online spaces. The focus group established three core values that should be inherent in digital education at UCL Institute of Education. They determined these to be: connected, questioning and inclusive (Gourlay *et al*, 2021). The design of our womenswear hubs met these objectives as they facilitated opportunities for connection on a weekly basis. They were inclusive as every student was allocated a mini group and was encouraged to attend and participate and involved questioning through the weekly focus topic engineered to stimulate discussion, debate, and a sharing of perspectives.

Evaluation

The 'Hubs' initiative ran over the two years of the pandemic. At the end of the first iteration of the unit, I evaluated its effectiveness. Student feedback was positive with student representatives highlighting that students were enjoying these sessions. In tutorials many students said they found the hubs helpful particularly because they could discuss what they were learning *with* their peers. Following the integration of the hubs, the pass rate for the 'Introduction to Womenswear' unit was much higher than in the previous year which was an indication that the changes had had a positive effect. Due to the success of the hubs in the first unit we decided to keep them going for the rest of the academic year and similar initiatives were trialled in other year groups.

As a platform Microsoft Teams was very successful. The benefit of having a space on Teams meant students could communicate easily with one another when off campus, which was especially helpful during collaborative projects. Microsoft Teams chat was a fast and effective way to communicate with all student group members. Unlike long email threads it was easy to navigate old messages therefore increased productivity and making communication clearer. Meetings could be synced with the students' Office 365 calendars making it an efficient way to plan and organise meet ups. Group conversations via the chat feature encouraged peer-to-peer conversation whilst the ability to tag individuals enabled tutors to alert specific students to important information if they were not following the chat feed regularly.

One of the challenges of the hubs was attendance. During the first term the attendance was mixed across tutor groups with some groups notably engaging more frequently than others. Groups that were frequently encouraged to attend their hub had better attendance. I have recognised the importance of consistent messaging regarding the hubs and regular promotion of these sessions to remind students of their value throughout their learning journey.

Attendance decreased towards the end of the first term when students began their next unit. In response to this we reallocated students to new subgroups. I informed the students that this would be a good opportunity to meet other students on the course. The students were put into new mini groups that would be their same as their collaborative working group for a project in block two. Mixing up the groups had positive effect and attendance gradually picked up again in response to this change.

We timetabled the hubs with consideration of time zones, to be as inclusive as we could be in terms of students who were studying remotely. This had a positive effect on the attendance of remote students in these sessions. Selecting Microsoft Teams as a platform also worked well as some students informed us that they could access this platform more easily than BB Collaborate and that there were less connection issues on Microsoft Teams.

In 2021, we continued the initiative for a second year running. At the start of the academic year, the student cohort was a mix of students studying remotely and in person. The first unit Introduction to Womenswear was predominantly delivered online and during this time there was good overall engagement with the hubs, with students using them as an opportunity to virtually collaborate on their project and to form connections with their peers. The hubs proved to be especially important for our students who were physically remote as they offered a more informal touch point whereby, they could connect with their classmates who were studying on campus whilst still progressing and developing their unit work.

As more and more students returned to on campus study the attendance of the hubs began to decline. There was less of a need for an online space for students to interact with more in person opportunities becoming available. In response to this shift at the end of the first term we made the

hubs optional so that students could still utilise them if they wished, or they had the flexibility to meet in person as they preferred.

Future plans

Having run the hubs for two consecutive years and in different environments of study we have observed the benefits and challenges of this initiative. We are keen to continue developing the hubs so our focus is now on next academic year and deciding how we can continue to integrate and evolve the initiative in response to returning to an on campus learning environment.

In a recent reflective session with the Year One cohort, I asked the students for their perspective on the hubs and for their suggestions for the redesign of these next year. Most students who responded in the session expressed keen interest in having in-person hubs that could occur before or after an in-person session on campus. Some students felt that having both online and in-person opportunities was important, and there was a suggestion regarding alternating modes across weeks - one week online being followed by one week in person.

I believe having an online space but extending this to also include opportunities for physical hub meet ups could further enhance the students learning experience and continue to develop a sense of community both online and offline in future academic years.

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Biography

Crimson O'Shea is a Senior Lecturer on BA Fashion Design Technology: Womenswear at London College of Fashion. An alumnus of Central Saint Martins BA (Hons) Fashion Design: Womenswear and MA Textile Design at the Royal College of Art, Crimson is a multi-disciplinary designer working in industry across both womenswear and textiles. She has an extensive portfolio in Fashion Design education and research interests that span across visual, material and museum anthropology and digital teaching practice.