Pacific Journal of Technology Enhanced Learning, 2022, 4(3).

BSL Case Study: Criminology- Drugs and Justice

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Keywords: Blended synchronous learning, pedagogy, technology

This Master of Criminology subject has a mix of postgraduate students with a wide range of learning strategies, skillsets, and experiences. Half the students were physically located on campus and the other half were online in a Blended Synchronous Learning (BSL) environment. Although the subject suffered technology failure across the first seven weeks of the 12-week semester, and subsequent changes to the structured learning experiences, the students kept turning up for class. The student cohort worked out ways to engage even when the technology prevented them from engaging in the intended way. In response to the technology fail, the subject coordinator, (me) reverted to a more didactic approach, reducing risk associated with learning, proportional to the risk associated with the technology. Unfortunately, the most important element of the subject design, was also the first technological component to be dropped. The lessons learned included thinking carefully about the vulnerability of the pedagogy in the BSL subject; always have fall back options for interactivity and protect the most essential features of the pedagogy. The deeper lesson however, was that the technology fail allowed for a new set of relationships to emerge in the learning environment. Within the knowledge ecology of the space the cohort responded and adapted through their personal knowledge networks in ways not previously envisioned. The student experience is important – by keeping a focus on the experience (rather than the content), the students will remember it and have a better learning experience.

Introduction

The subject is an elective taught in the coursework Master of Criminology. The subject has 30 students: composed of domestic and international students with approximately half the class being fee-paying Australian domestic students. The two-hour weekly seminar was attended by an on-campus group ("roomies") and an online group ("zoomies"). The cohort is a mix of postgraduate students who are either continuing directly from prior undergraduate studies and those who are upskilling in the workplace (from non-technical corrections, police or other government agency). They are motivated, however have a wide range of learning strategies, skillsets and experiences. Some are returning to the University environment for the first time after an extended absence. This is not an elite entry course. Approximate half the students are not from a research higher degree background.

Description of the BSL learning environment.

This BSL class was held in a newly-constructed room in the Gilbert Building at the University of Melbourne https://maps.unimelb.edu.au/parkville/building/104/g21. Installation of communications hardware for the purpose-built BSL tutorial space was completed in the week prior to the start of teaching. The room can accommodate up to 50 students with each table accommodating groups of six to eight students with two projectors directing content onto a single wall surface behind a lectern. Zoom was used as the synchronised interactive environment platform. Content was introduced by the subject coordinator to the class via the main instruction projection which was shared to the Zoom stream to the "zoomies". The online presence of remote students was also projected back to the "roomies" through room audio and video. Roomies engaged as a group through the coordinator's Zoom presence through room microphone and camera monitoring. Individuated "roomie" student Zoom interactivity, had to be conducted via chat functions in zoom, otherwise there would be audio feedback problems (unless student's used headphones). The establishment of Zoom breakout rooms allowed for the formation of small groups in the physical room and online groups for both small group discussions and large group style discussions. The main zoom session was run from the primary computer at the lectern.

Face to face room layout diagram.

The collaborative learning room has 6 tables with space for around 6-8 students per table (Figure 1) . Students in the room are able to hear and see the presenter using main screen. The session was recorded on Zoom and used as a resource for students. Online students were able to see in-room students via the room camera and hear their discussion via the room microphones.

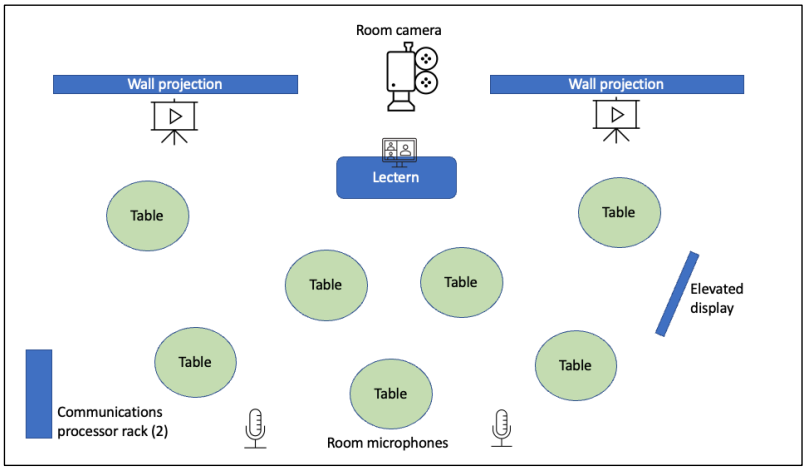

Figure 1: Schematic of room layout.

Key Interaction Strategies

A design approach was taken to structure the interaction strategies. The principle underpinning the design approach was to create a variety of mechanisms for interactions to occur both in physical and online settings. In practice this meant to create both large and small group discussions. Supporting these discussion settings would be technologies that encouraged dialogue and the sharing of experience and viewpoints: polling of students with Zoom poll questions; discussion boards and Padlets for noting discussion items. Another technique was the use of text annotation of video materials to "model" a type of critical reading of cultural texts such as that used in the narrative of a Star Trek episode (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Modelling how to interact with a cultural text. Annotations ask questions during the runtime. Still frame from Star Trek (1967), Episode 24, season 1, *This side of Paradise*.

The class was structured around a weekly two-hour seminar. Each week, students engaged with on-line reading materials and material from a non-linear PowerPoint slide deck facilitated through a problem-based activity stewarded by the subject coordinator. The activity may, for example, be to deliver a hypothetical briefing to a government minister at the end of the two-hour session. Each small group would be tasked to come up with a recommendation based on the content they developed during the two-hour session. The groups would make a five-minute report back to the main group at the end of the session, summarising their findings.

BSL learning design when mapped to the BSL design framework (Bower et al., 2014; 2015) focussed on aligning the anticipated outcomes with technology-facilitated interactions. Storytelling was a central motif that knitted the subject curriculum to the subject design framework. Weeks 1-4 were used to break down established myths in the knowledge domain (addiction and illicit drugs). Weeks 5-8 were used to build content knowledge in specific case studies and weeks 8-11 for rebuilding critical perspectives. Integrated online and in-room storytelling activities (as students explored policy problems), were meant to tie together the curriculum content with student experience and learning experiences.

Weeks 1-7 were however dominated by technology failure. Technology challenges presented differently each week: Zoom call audio could not be heard in the room, room video would not project to screen or to the Zoom stream, room microphones could not capture room interactions, and in-room video could not capture room interactions.

Although my response was to revert back to didactic instructional modes, more importantly, the students engaged in finding technological and practical workarounds, such as running interactive zoom from their own laptops, and setting up their own connections with their online colleagues, irrespective of what was happening at the lectern.

The results of the scheduled subject experience surveys conducted at the completion of the semester, reveal a satisfied reporting student cohort. The likert score for the evaluation question about interaction[1] was strong (4.7/5) and the qualitative comments were very positive. Overall, the student evaluation responses were as strong, if not stronger, from previous years.

Key pedagogical strategies

In the absence of face-to-face interactions, the class and the instructor (me) had to find ways to connect with each other. The tenor of our joint activity was focussed on solving problems. Luckily, this participatory epistemology bound us together in a common purpose. We did not speak of this explicitly in the class, it emerged from the student's finding ways through the frustration with the technology. This also had a profound impact for how the student's engaged and connected with the content of the curriculum.

A key feature of knowledge making in the alcohol and drug policy discourse is the concept of piling up of scientific explanatory rationalities. In most health policy arenas, key scientific advances often displace previous orthodoxies. In alcohol and drug discourse, old orthodoxies are often maintained, even in the face of new evidence-based practices (Valverde, 1998). This characteristic is sustained in Australia by a consensus-oriented policy making process, sometimes called a policy community approach (Fitzgerald, 2005). This process gives priority to minimising public conflict between experts and maintaining consensus between stakeholders. In this way, old drug policy knowledges and practices, even though they may have no efficacy, can coexist with new practices that are effective and have a strong evidence base. One example is the belief that drug addiction is a disease. This can create a very confusing environment for students. Old knowledges and new knowledges coexist seemingly without regard for evidence or rationality. In order for students to gain a foothold in this discourse, the pedagogical approach is focussed on the profundity of narrative/storytelling in shaping the positioning of different rationalities.

Small group discussions and large group dialogues are central pedagogical strategies in achieving the learning outcomes, as they use the form and practice of story to disentangle the power of narrative to structure policy discourse. In addition, modelling how to critically engage with cultural texts (such as TV clips of canonical drug discourses, e.g. Star Trek figure 2) was undertaken to broaden the concept of storytelling from an individual practice to a cultural practice. The discussion of annotated media was used to support the development of critical skills.

Expertise in the cohort varied widely. Some students were current drug treatment clinicians, whereas some had rarely encountered illicit drug use. Student-student experience was essential in stewarding the possibility for learning from peers within the cohort. I could sense an emergent quality in the class: the cohort was listening in a profound ecological sense. The material provided to students in the form of weekly PowerPoint slide decks, curated video resources and recommended readings was loosely structured and encouraged students to find their own path and develop their own personal knowledge network (Chatti, 2012). Similarly, the students could choose

[1] Question: "There were opportunities for useful interaction and engagement with other students in the subject".

their own essay topic for assessment. Curated resources were available in the subject website, and students were encouraged to find their own way into the curated materials. Students were encouraged where possible, to team up with like-minded colleagues who were working on similar topics, and share links to references and sources.

Under the conditions of technology failure, I underestimated the degree to which students would pick up on this participatory approach to their knowledge ecology. Their communitarian behaviour to assist buddies in the learning environment could just be a pragmatic impulse, or it could reflect a deeper attribute of relational pedagogy (Hickey and Riddle, 2021) that I certainly did not fully appreciate when originally designing the subject.

When Hickey and Riddle (2021) examined relational pedagogies in the classroom setting they examined "specific modes of interpersonal encounter as foundational to the relational pedagogies they invoked". More specifically, these modes were focussed on "affectively mediated commitments to learning". Informality was one mode of interpersonal encounter in their identification of relational pedagogy in learning settings. In addition, they focus on moments of relationship activation when traditional power structures are broken, and reciprocal trusting relationships are formed. Considering the wider context, it is maybe not that surprising that the students responded in the way they did. Perhaps what has emerged in these informal spaces in pedagogical structures, is a snapshot of beings-in-relation that would usually been ignored, or squashed beneath a highly-structured learning design.

Lessons Learnt

When technology failed, the first category of activity to the dropped in the BSL environment was small group activity. Maintaining communications with breakout rooms on the Zoom platform when synchronous audio and/or video was compromised was simply too difficult. Consequently, the most important element of the pedagogical strategy was also the first technological component to be dropped. The lessons learned were on the one hand pragmatic: think carefully about the vulnerability of the pedagogy in BSL; always have fall back options to the interactivity and try to protect the most essential features of the pedagogy.

However, the development of emergent behaviour of the student cohort in response to the tech failure is perhaps the more important lesson. The students were motivated to solve problems together, and they focussed on each other – i.e., they were keen to include each other in the experience. Keeping a focus on the student experience, rather than on the delivery of content, enabled a level of flexibility and the students remembered the subject as a great experience, rather than a subject of failed technology. If I was able to keep a focus on the experience (rather than the content), and they would remember it. The "uhh-huh" moment of being able to see the world differently is there, if the design allows it to happen.

When originally designing the subject, I believed that I could design in "uh-huh" moments in this subject. As much as the folly of this belief reveals the false confidence of a poor educator, it also reveals a certain arrogance. The focus also incorrectly was on the individual rather than on the ecology of the space. The "uhh-huhh" I was so focused on, was contingent on a set of relations, not just a bunch of atomized individuals seeking out sovereign experiences. This observation perhaps lends itself more correctly to more relational pedagogies, not just between instructor and student but between all elements in this specific knowledge ecology.

What will you modify next time?

My first modification is a change in my expectations. I have a deeper appreciation of the affective impact of a shared struggle to learn, and how this can bring a group together.

Modularising the informal elements of the learning environment may be a better strategy for next time. Keeping informal elements in the interactional strategy, somewhat separate may be a valuable resource.

Certainly, avoiding testing new rooms prior to the commencement of semester is highly preferable to new-built rooms. Re-thinking the strategies for relational pedagogy is perhaps the key learning, and approaching the learning space more like an emergent space, rather than a programmable space. From the outset, strategies such as avoiding the conceptualisation of a single large seminar rooms as a single interacting room. It is too hard to expect the "zoomies" to be able to engage with a room full of interacting people. The starting point should not be, lets design the experience around the size of the room. The focus should first be on the learning experience and then the physical considerations be developed from there.

Conclusion

The student cohort was motivated to learn and worked out ways to engage even when the technology prevented them from engaging in the intended way. More than just figuring out workarounds, there was a more profound set of interactions occurring. The emergence of a shared sense of purpose was a product of the cohort experiencing learning as a shared activity. It evolved from the group working together to solve the technological problems. Perhaps the response to the technology failure revealed the emergent pedagogy that was developing in the ecological learning setting. Unpredictable and always valuable, it certainly has provided some extra learnings.

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