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The Challenges of Online Learning

Supporting and Engaging the Isolated Learner

Jenna Gillett-Swan
Queensland University of Technology
jenna.gillettswan@qut.edu.au

Abstract

Higher education providers are becoming increasingly aware of the diversity of their current and potential learners and are moving to provide a range of options for their engagement. The increasingly flexible delivery modes available for university students provide multiple pathways and opportunities for those seeking further education. In changing between and across modes, a one-size-fits-all approach is often used. That is, internal content is converted into a form deemed suitable for an external delivery. However, there is a significant problem with the one-size-fits-all approach for external students who feel or experience isolation. When compared to their internal counterparts, these students often face a number of barriers to their full participation in coursework units. These barriers may not be experienced by those engaging in these same units via face-to-face or blended enrolment modes and therefore present another type of learner to consider in the planning and implementation of learning activities online. The barriers to participation appear particularly evident in groupwork activities. The online environment also presents challenges for many academic staff who increasingly require higher levels of technological competency and proficiency on top of their regular academic workload. Drawing on reflections of several years of facilitating student learning online, this paper provides one lecturer's perspective and critical commentary on some of the challenges faced by external students and the implications of an increasingly online delivery framework for practice.

Keywords

external students, isolated learners, technology, challenges, online learning, competence

Introduction

Higher education providers are becoming increasingly aware of the diversity of their current and potential learners. This is demonstrated by their providing a range of options for their engagement. Increasingly flexible delivery modes are available for university students provide multiple pathways and opportunities for those seeking further education (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012; Napier, Dekhane, & Smith, 2011; Schmidt, Tschida, & Hodge, 2016). This could be through "traditional" face-to-face delivery (internal), online (external), or mixed (blended) modes of enrolment. Even within these enrolment modes, students often opt to undertake different units (subjects) in different ways (Schmidt et al., 2016). As universities increasingly move towards fully online and blended teaching modes, there is much discussion as to what this means for pedagogy (Gregory & Salmon, 2013; Jaques & Salmon, 2007; Kirkwood & Price, 2014; Salmon,

2011, 2014). While many of the practices that are used in face-to-face contact modes can be adapted and utilised in the online context, it is not simply the case of applying a "one size fits all approach" which is what teaching staff relatively unfamiliar with the online environment tend to do. This is where either the content or delivery used in other, usually face-to-face contexts, is adapted to a seemingly compatible online format and therefore deemed suitable for all learners and cohorts across each mode. Instead, scales of adaptation and differentiation within the approach should be used to better differentiate between different learners as well as different contexts of teaching via online and live modes.

When it comes to technology, Orlando and Attard (2015) stated that "teaching with technology is not a one size fits all approach as it depends on the types of technology in use at the time and also the curriculum content being taught" (p. 119). This means that the incorporation of technology provides additional factors for consideration in terms of teaching pedagogy and construction of learning experiences. Despite this, it is "often taken for granted that technologies can 'enhance learning'" (Kirkwood & Price, 2014, p. 6) with the prevailing assumption becoming that technological incorporation, learning enhancement, and student engagement are mutually and inextricably linked. However, in creating individually tailored differentiated instruction for each learner within and across each cohort, additional workload pressures on those seeking to engage with the online environment can be created as teaching staff seek to respond, often reactively, to the individual learning and engagements needs of each cohort.

The problems with a "one size fits all" approach are particularly highlighted in collaborative learning tasks (group work) where individual differences between and across cohorts can be highlighted. This may be because the generalised pedagogical assumptions associated with collaborative learning tasks are often applied to the online environment where there may be less focus on the delivery and more attention to the task/content (Graham & Misanchuk, 2004). Therefore, the assumption that students will both know and be able to work in groups regardless of mode prevails through a seemingly universal one-size-fits-all application. In addition to the typical challenges that students can experience in group activities regardless of mode, the online environment presents added challenges for the external or isolated learner particularly through considerations around their engagement, access, community, and support. In reflecting on a lecturer's perspective for facilitating learning online, this paper offers strategies for those preparing to teach in an online environment focused around pedagogical strategies for supporting learners through the development and facilitation of group presentation collaborative learning activities. Based on several years of experience, the following insights are provided to encourage those with uncertainty or inexperience in facilitating an online learning environment a starting point so that they can understand and support their learners.

The isolated learner

The barriers to participation that external students may experience are particularly evident in collaborative learning tasks through group work, group presentations and group assessments (Davidson, 2015; Graham & Misanchuk, 2004; Jaques & Salmon, 2007). Some of the issues experienced can be personal such as: anxiety associated with using technology; being out of one's comfort zone; (perception of) inequity in assessment, particularly in "group" assignments; and, the (perceived) inability or difficulty in peer interaction, particularly in presentations. Despite the best intentions of teaching staff to provide equitable and beneficial learning experiences for all students, regardless of enrolment mode, many academic staff members feel apprehensive and not suitably equipped to teach via wholly (or mostly) online particularly as they themselves may be still learning to use some of the platforms (Jaques & Salmon, 2007; Little-Wiles & Naimi, 2011; Rucker & Downey, 2016; Schmidt et al., 2016; Thorsteinsson, 2013). This can leave learners in an isolated place where they may also have varying levels of competency and proficiency using different forms of IT and are therefore somewhat on their own when it comes to the online learning environment through different Learning Management Systems (LMS). This is particularly highlighted in collaborative learning tasks where individuals may be barely managing to navigate the system on their own, let alone needing to traverse the complex environments of group

interaction and social negotiation (Graham & Misanchuk, 2004; Jaques & Salmon, 2007). While group work is an important element within education that aids in developing numerous interpersonal and transferable employable skills, an increasing number of potential hurdles to achievement beyond those commonly associated with traditional group work experiences may serve to further alienate isolated learners causing their disengagement, withdrawal, or ultimate exclusion from engaging with and accessing the course materials and associated learning activities.

While the online environment provides opportunities for the ways education is delivered and accessed by learners, assessment practices are often limited in the variety and modes in which they are allocated in the online environment (Williams, Cameron, & Morgan, 2012). For example, where group presentations within the tertiary environment have been traditionally conducted via predominantly face-to-face mediums (Cazan & Indreica, 2014; Milman, 2014; Napier et al., 2011), the online environment presents additional opportunities for summative assessment with group presentations (Jaques & Salmon, 2007; Park & Bonk, 2007; Williams et al., 2012; Zapalska & Brozik, 2006) that are not limited to a solely live option. Even so, online group presentation assessments do not appear to be common practice which may be due to some of the difficulties experienced by both students and academics in using an online delivery platform (Jaques & Salmon, 2007). This is where "the sharing of 'good practice' and 'lessons learned' among members of the higher education community can help academic teachers concentrate on effective uses of technology and to avoid the unnecessary duplication of effort and expense" (Kirkwood & Price, 2014, p. 7).

University students choosing to undertake study online have indicated a preference for online assessment and often perceive their learning experiences to be enhanced through online media (Boyles, 2011). However, the preferences may be different for those with limited choice in delivery mode because of additional work or the family commitments that may restrict their ability to engage in alternative and perhaps preferred face-to-face or blended enrolment modes (Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler, & Sturmer, 2015). Within the context of pre-service teacher education, the implementation of online assessment also serves to enhance their knowledge and understanding of ways to use new technologies in their future teaching practice (Blackley & Sheffield, 2015; Boyles, 2011). Extending this, it might also provide preparation for Business graduates in their future participation in online meetings or collaborations. This experience, in turn, provides additional benefits for student learning beyond the unit level. An increasingly digital world highlights the importance of proficiency in interaction and experience using technology as a communicative medium.

Increasingly, students in all disciplines, including those in business, management, and education, are choosing to study while engaged in varying degrees of employment (Stoessel et al., 2015). These students have the flexibility of opting for part-time and/or external modes of study to provide increased options for interaction, participation, and ultimately completion of their degree programs (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). This range of additional factors therefore serves to further isolate the multitasking external student as increasing numbers of barriers to success are put in place. It is therefore vital that focused consideration of these cohorts and ways to better facilitate their participation are discussed (Stoessel et al., 2015). Many of these students also bring with them varying levels of confidence and familiarity with using technology to engage in university units and despite communicated preferences for online submission modes, also exhibit apprehension and anxiety around completing group assessments online.

Alongside the increasing digitalisation of many workplaces, new "types" of learners emerge who may be more digitally competent than previous generations due to their "digital native" status (Orlando & Attard, 2015; Prensky, 2001). However, assumptions around technological capacity and proficiency serve little benefit when considering collaborative learning tasks. Instead, the focus should primarily be on how the interactions and group work tasks can be supported and facilitated, rather than the mode or means for doing so. To this end, the importance of facilitating and supporting social interaction and relationship development is important (Jaques & Salmon, 2007; Stoessel et al., 2015). The assumption that growing up around technology and having

greater access to technology would make one more digitally capable is erroneous as individuals may still have a preference for non-technological mediums, and have varying levels of competence and capacity with digital platforms. Furthermore, external student cohorts may also consist of mature age (non-digitally native students), which further complicates the assumption of digital preference, digital competency and digital ability for online learners. Therefore, regardless of the demographic of the cohort, assumptions around technological preference and capacities should be sidelined at least until the necessary social and peer support mechanisms are in place. Adapting to the online environment can be a challenge for both facilitators and students alike (Jaques & Salmon, 2007; Kirkwood & Price, 2014).

This does not necessarily mean that a facilitator with less proficiency or confidence in navigating digital technologies will not be able to provide suitable and beneficial learning experiences for external students. Jaques and Salmon (2007) described the significance of recognising the importance of understanding learners and their capabilities as comparable to choosing what technologies to use. The importance of building relationships in the online environment both between facilitator and student(s) and student/student is reinforced if seeking to facilitate group activities, as relationships are central to effective group work.

In addition to social relationship building as enhancing the student experience online, other factors that play a significant role in student success in the online space include cognitive complexity and intellectual stimulation. As Boling et al. (2012) described, "it is now more important than ever for online instructors to provide students with experiences that challenge their higher-order cognitive skills as opposed to simply transferring content to them" (p. 118). The ability of an instructor to facilitate and develop student higher-order thinking skills is equally important in both online and face-to-face delivery modes particularly when seeking to engage students in group activities. While the specific scaffolding may be slightly different for internal and external student cohorts, the outcomes still seek to optimise student learning while making use of the potential of the electronic platform in different ways (e.g., synchronously or asynchronously). Drawing upon the advantages and flexibility inherent within the online environment provides wide-ranging opportunities for assessment that can incorporate a range of technologies that are not limited by the technological limitations present in a more traditional, face-to-face environment and presentation modes (Benson & Brack, 2010; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Crawford-Ferre & Weist, 2012; Napier et al., 2011).

The range of synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication that can be used in the online learning environment present additional opportunities for interaction and participation for externally enrolled students particularly in relation to group work activities (Jaques & Salmon, 2007). This is in the ways that students interact with one another, interact with the teaching staff, and interact with the content/subject matter through multiple formats (Anderson, 2004b; Jaques & Salmon, 2007; Little-Wiles & Naimi, 2011; Schmidt et al., 2016; Zapalska & Brozik, 2006). Additional benefits such as the ability for both facilitators and peers to offer help in "real time," the adaptability of the environment in catering for individuals, and the ability for students to have a greater participatory role in the design of the learning environment, each contribute to the rationale for incorporating online learning approaches in education (Anderson, 2004b) and as a way that both students and facilitators can better support the isolated learner.

Online Group Assessments

The ability for immediate feedback to be provided through the online environment also enhances the potential for assessment delivered and submitted in this way (Anderson, 2004b). Problems of assessment such as technical issues, complexity, sequencing of activities and learning a new medium have been identified as presenting obstacles to the incorporation of multimedia application and assessment in the learning environment (Boyles, 2011; Fahy, 2004; Jaques & Salmon, 2007). However, greater student participation and access to learning may be enabled by removing some of the barriers experienced by externally enrolled students, particularly in the

context of online group assessments. Providing additional scaffolding to support the student online learning experience (Caplan, 2004) as well as embracing the flexibility inherent in the online environment can also support these processes (Anderson, 2004a; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Crawford-Ferre & Weist, 2012) and more fully involve the isolated learner in the online learning and group work experiences.

There may be an assumption that students studying externally will be disadvantaged in group presentations when compared to the group presentation delivery and activities that can be completed by their face-to-face peers. As such, group presentations are less frequently incorporated in the online assessment repertoire than other types of group work activities. When considering group assessment for example, it appears to be slightly more complicated to facilitate real-time online interaction when you may have students "dialling in" from different time zones who each have varying Internet capabilities and speeds. When provided with multiple study and enrolment options, the "isolated" student is often one who opts to study in this way to provide increased flexibility in engagement and participation to cater for their other commitments such as work, child-care, travel, volunteer work, international study, or other caring responsibilities. How then can equitable and comparable group assessment experiences be provided that do not disadvantage either cohort of student (internal/external) and similarly do not cause any additional undue stress or tension beyond what could be reasonably expected when completing any university assessment task?

It is becoming increasingly apparent that even students who are enrolled internally are choosing to engage as a group using their own forms of technology to facilitate their own learning experiences and interactions online (Napier et al., 2011). This is done through online mediums such as *Google Communities* or *Facebook Groups* where, despite having access to face-to-face interaction options, students plan, meet, practice, research, discuss, and prepare their group presentations in the online environment. This provides an opportunity for those involved in facilitating online learning environments to rethink the way that assessments are constructed between and across cohorts as well as ways to collaboratively involve both internal and external cohorts. Supporting this is the notion of "boundary-less groups" (Eunice, Kimball, Silber, & Weinstein, 2009; Jaques & Salmon, 2007) where different modes and models of group formation and outcomes are enabled. These groups involve flexibility in technology and face-to-face interaction in the ability for group work to be facilitated in different combinations of same time/same place (in person or online), same time/different place through synchronous communication mechanisms, or asynchronously accessed at different times, in different places. As Jaques and Salmon (2007) explained, "as long as each individual has time not only to become relaxed with technology, but also to other members of the group without meeting, there are many advantages" (p. 20). This, in turn, supports the isolated student by way of technological proficiency and competence, social support, interaction, and skill development.

As students are increasingly tending towards using online media in ways of their choosing, there is tremendous potential for both internal and external students to be able to work together for group presentations as a collective cohort, particularly if there is no blended mode offering. This internal/external hybrid option via "boundary-less grouping" should be considered differently to blended enrolment modes as the cohorts of internal and external students can still operate as both distinct and hybrid forms within and across the various enrolment modes offered within each unit. In the same way that students studying online can choose to meet face-to-face if they can arrange it, those studying face-to-face are increasingly choosing to meet online. This challenges assumptions around disadvantage in groupwork when completing units externally as there is no difference between the ways that students studying externally have to engage and the ways that those students studying internally choose to engage. The only difference then between the cohorts is the element of choice in the decisions. Even this can be mediated through staff providing (and accepting) a range of submission modes that are open for all cohorts such as face-to-face, video, or Skype/live online presentations (Salmon, 2011).

An applied example

As a consequence of continual improvement and redesign of units to maximise student-learning experiences, student preference for using online media in combination with a staggered face-to-face approach was able to be tested for two units across two universities. This emerged through a significant change to each unit where, instead of offering both external and internal modes of enrolment, all students were provided a face-to-face class at the start of semester and flexibility in engagement with the teaching staff and peers throughout the remaining weeks using online platforms of their choosing. While the reflections and observations discussed thus far were not the driver of this significant change in learning design, they did enable further observations to examine whether both internal and external students were tending towards online engagement regardless of their enrolled delivery mode. The findings could therefore be used to inform subsequent practice and external unit delivery.

Despite previous anecdotal evidence and a prevailing assumption that so-called millennials (with birth dates in 1977-1995 (Neilson Media)) have a preference towards technological media, there was a significant decrease in engagement, participation and interaction when this flexibility was provided. For example, based on LMS analytic data, interaction and participation from a class of 40 students decreased significantly within a 3-week period from around 95% interaction in the first week dropping to 37% interaction by Week 3 with no interaction using the agreed platforms from Week 5 onwards. This is despite each class group of students choosing their platform (e.g., Google Community, Facebook, Collaborate, and Wiki) and the facilitator encouraging interaction through weekly prompt questions and topics in the same way they would engage in face-to-face classes.

This is also despite all students (internal and external alike) indicating via either anonymous online survey or live class poll at the start of semester that their preference would be to make more use the online delivery platform. In each unit, while the content/subject-matter did not change, the flexibility in accessing the content did. That is, all content for all weeks of each of the units was available from the start of semester. This meant that students could engage with the content at a pace of their choosing provided they completed (at the minimum) the topic assigned to the week. The increased flexibility provided through the freedom to engage and the open accessibility of content may have instead meant that many students deprioritised engaging with the content as they could do it "at any time" rather than via a gradual release.

While the assessment for one of the units remained the same, the assessment for the other unit changed from a group to an individual presentation. While it could be questioned whether the noticeable decrease in interaction and engagement was also due to the change in assessment from a group to individual presentation (live or video) in that students no longer "needed" to interact with their peers to succeed in the unit, this conclusion may only be able to be applied to one of the units as the assessment for the other unit did not change. This presents an interesting dichotomy where students may be increasingly tending towards preference for the online medium when it comes to group presentations and group assignments, but ultimately still prefer the face-to-face and live interaction of individually focused units/tasks. This is somewhat ironic when the online medium appears to favour individualised rather than group tasks to enable greater engagement and flexibility in interaction.

Questions around structured versus self-directed and self-regulated learning (Broadbent & Poon, 2015) and group versus individual tasks further complicate an already complicated area of online delivery and practice. In this space, catering for the individual learning needs and individual differences of each of the learners may present some additional challenges than in a face-to-face context. While students can go "underneath the radar" in both online and face-to-face learning environments, unless a student reaches out or makes their issues known to the facilitator, the online environment means that students that may benefit from additional support or assistance may be missed. A struggling face-to-face student may turn up to class and not ask any questions, but the facilitator can still determine that they are in need of support through observing the interactions, participation, and circulating during the learning activities. The student's physical

attendance may be their silent request for help. This is in contrast to the online learning environment where the facilitator may never actually "see" any of the students. They may see the posts online or various levels of interaction and engagement, but without being able to use tools commonly used by teachers to identify those in need of further assistance or support, those in need of help may go unnoticed. This may be despite the facilitator making regular individual contact with each student, checking for understanding, and offering various support or access to external support. Does the flexibility inherent in the online environment then serve to further isolate the already isolated learner? While the insights above reflect on the implementation and redesign of two units, previous and subsequent delivery of these and other units online reveal that these are consistent challenges observed and experienced by both students and facilitators alike.

Reflecting on implications for tertiary educational practice

Online media can provide multiple benefits for both staff and students in supporting students' learning experiences particularly for isolated students (Graham & Misanchuk, 2004; Jaques & Salmon, 2007; Salmon, 2011, 2014). Despite student acknowledgement of the benefits in supporting their learning through the technology, a difficulty arises through the limits around the technical capability of the software particularly in terms of its functionality. As revealed through student feedback and experience from numerous online classes over several years, this can often be a source of frustration for students and facilitators/staff as it can make normally simple tasks such as viewing a video increasingly complex. Additionally, when completing assessments, such as group presentations online, the comparatively limited ability to interact face-to-face and draw upon non-verbal cues and body language of the audience can be an inhibiting factor. Even so, the importance of being able to engage your viewers/listeners/colleagues using an online, sometimes not visual (e.g., teleconference) format is an increasingly important skill in the modern workplace and emphasises the importance of clear, concise, and focused communication skills (Salmon, 2011, 2014). The accessibility and ease of access of the online medium tends to make it an easier platform for a group assignment than providing limited or no focused support. Some of the ways that these barriers can be reduced involve regular emails (weekly from pre-semester), drop-in sessions, step-by-step instructions for how to access and use each of the platforms and technologies, overviews of how sessions will be run, expectations, ability to access information and sessions at other times, reminders for what should be prepared for each week, interactive schedules through the LMS, user-friendly layout in LMS, and opportunities for consultation (online, off-line and via email). For this reason, a number of strategies (such as those outlined above) can be incorporated that require little facilitator expertise and competency but can have significant effects on supporting students and their learning outcomes in the online space (Jacques & Salmon, 2007; Salmon, 2011, 2014).

With an apparent increase in both internal and external student preference for using online media (e.g., through social media) in the preparation, establishment and management of group assignments, additional possibilities for assessment are potentiated (Napier et al., 2011). For example, blended delivery classrooms with blended group presentations or cross-mode presentations where the internal students deliver to the external classes and vice versa. Future delivery could offer opportunities for group formation to consist of both internal and external students moving towards a more "blended" approach embedded in multi-offering units rather than the internal and external student cohorts being considered as wholly distinct and different. Experience with a wider range of delivery modes and exposure to less common assessment methods would be particularly useful for these students in developing their pre-industry experience to enable a wider repertoire of work-ready skills to be developed.

However, when considering the earlier example where students engaged less with technology despite having additional flexibility and freedom of choice, it becomes apparent that it may not necessarily be the medium that is the preference. Instead, the medium may merely be the mode for facilitating interaction among students to aid in developing a sense of community where mutual goals can be obtained (Boling et al., 2012; Napier et al., 2011). The students then experience a sense of belonging to the online group and an intrinsic desire to engage, participate and actively

contribute to the learning experiences. A challenge therefore remains for the facilitator to find a platform that can effectively encourage and develop a sense of community online amongst the students and with the facilitator while also extending their skills, confidence and capabilities utilising the online form to reduces the anxieties associated with engaging in learning in this way.

Challenges in the online space and limitations of specific LMS software such as BlackBoard Collaborate (e.g., video features/capabilities) can slow down interaction and provide limits to functionality while also adding to the time limitations and frustrations experienced by both facilitators/staff and students. It may also contribute to the sense of community and shared frustration with the cohort. In this way, students and staff are brought together to collaboratively overcome challenges experienced in the online space in the same way they might work together to overcome technological challenges together in their future work environments. Even though the planning and delivery of activities in tutorials can be adapted to cater for the technological limitations of different software, the online experience could be more streamlined and smooth with using more features and functionality with the software or a greater ability to work to the existing capabilities of the software and still be able to deliver a comparable experience.

Personal factors can also impact on student access and participation in the online learning environment (Stoessel et al., 2015). Commitments such as caring for young children or being called into work can affect the attendance and participation of students in regularly scheduled tutorials/live sessions. In the same way that the external student pathway offers increased access, flexibility and convenience in that students can more easily manage their commitments while engaging in education, this increased flexibility can also cause additional issues through distractions and an inability to fully participate in any live, scheduled contact hours per week. This occurs even if students nominate specific days/times (often well before/after hours) to have a live session each week so they could schedule it in. Some examples of personal factors that impact student ability to participate include, caring responsibilities (e.g., “Sorry guys, the baby is crying, I’ll be back in a while”) or employment responsibilities (e.g., “Work just called, I have to go”). A question then arises as to whether providing flexibility in ways to access education (i.e., online rather than face-to-face) can provide students with as complete an education as if they were participating in a distraction-free environment. A comparison of attendance records over the semester across a sample of internal tutorials for the same unit revealed that there was significantly higher consistent attendance in the weekly tutorials than the attendance in the sample internal tutorials. This indicated that while the external students may have short term personal factors that may have distracted or directed their attention away from the learning experiences provided through the live sessions, as a whole they were significantly more committed to attending and making the most of the opportunity provided through flexibility in engagement. It is better that the students have opportunities to engage with some/most of the available content than not at all.

Transferability to “real world” contexts

Even with the ever-evolving tertiary education landscape in the online environment across different university contexts and disciplines, it is apparent that students have an ongoing desire to learn and develop practical skills – an area that students often feel is underrepresented through their degree outside practical work experience opportunities (Cavanagh, Burston, Southcombe, & Bartram, 2015). While the links between unit content, assessment and discipline specific knowledge is clearer in some disciplines than others, student feedback suggests that, as a whole, they often see theory and practice as separate rather than interrelated and interwoven elements.

The 21st century world is becoming increasingly digitised which is another reason why it is important for academics to be more aware of the specifics of their cohorts and learners and find ways to engage with and support isolated learners. The tools and techniques used throughout each unit’s program can be used in reciprocal ways where students can provide feedback to the teaching staff, receive feedback from the teaching staff, and also see how their feedback informs subsequent practice and delivery in real-time, rather than for the (potential) benefit of future students. These are strategies that also replicate what they will likely experience in the workforce regardless of

discipline, from management (e.g., 360 degree feedback processes), teaching (e.g., behaviour management, student feedback and assessment), to general communication skills (e.g., responding to emails, pitching ideas, developing professional relationships).

Even though a facilitator may incorporate a range of activities and learning experiences that explores unit content in a variety of ways, explicitly indicating the real-world links and articulating how specific industry skills are being developed through the activities and making those connections clearer for the students aids in demonstrating relevance of the content and increasing student engagement (Cavanagh et al., 2015). Incorporating flexibility within learning environments allows discussions to evolve when deconstructing content and a number of ways to explore the subject matter to develop while also fostering the sense of community and building relationships.

Diversity in their own learning and assessment experiences adds to university students' work-ready toolkits in providing them with direct experience of different ways to cater for a diverse range of individuals in a variety of contexts and settings that they may interact with in their future work environments. Further diversification of assessment tasks that include both internal and external cohorts may be a worthwhile implementation for academics seeking to engage with the online space in different ways and planning online teaching practices. This would also aid in addressing some of the interaction limitations identified by external students in their preference to have access to a range of ways to interact with their peers.

Conclusion

The reflections presented throughout this paper have provided an overview for considering some of the contexts around external student cohorts and how some of the (perceived) barriers to external student participation can be overcome. Through emphasising the importance of providing considered and focused support for isolated students from a lecturer's perspective, a number of insights can be gained.

The reflections throughout this paper potentiate the ability for the perception of difference between internal and external student cohorts to be minimised and the potential for maximising student learning regardless of discipline, mode of enrolment, or type of task. There remain a number of opportunities to minimise student barriers to participation even with differing levels of facilitator technological confidence and competence. The importance of continued critically reflective academic practice to assure the best learning outcomes possible for all student cohorts is also emphasised in focusing on social relationship and community building in the online environment, rather than a dominant concern with the technological complexities of the online space. In doing so, some of the student anxieties and issues associated with external delivery modes may be overcome and benefit the students through the pedagogical methods employed in the online environment.

Each of the strategies described throughout the paper require very little technological capacity on behalf of the facilitator, but each aid in developing the sense of community and belonging that may be needed to better facilitate an interactive and engaging online learning experience for external students and seek to reduce the barriers often felt by isolated students. This may therefore encourage student intrinsic motivation to participate in the content and make meaningful contributions to different online communities of learners.

Sharing reflective experiences of assessment and delivery with others becomes an important part of enhancing student learning experiences and developing strong communities of practice within higher educational contexts. As a firm believer in the importance of lifelong learning and development, the importance of ongoing and continual critical reflective practice and improvement is crucial. This aids in providing relevant and current examples of practice, while also ensuring that students are being equipped with knowledge and skills that are relevant, beneficial and enable them to exhibit best practice in their own future work endeavours. Through focusing on ways to

support learners in a variety of contexts, across a variety of modes, the transition to more fully online learning experiences can be more seamless for both students and facilitators alike.

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