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‘We had a good laugh together’: using Teams for collaborative learning

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Abstract

This case study describes the journey of an undergraduate module in its transition from an in-person lectures-plus-seminar configuration to an interactive, online format using Teams. I show how I created a sense of community and the opportunity for online group interaction by establishing small study groups that carried out weekly online group tasks in their own Team ‘channel’. Weekly roles were assigned to group members to spread the workload and ensure equal participation. Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and students particularly appreciated the opportunity to interact with their peers, during a potentially lonely time, for summative marks. Limitations to the model are discussed and potential solutions are offered.

Keywords: online learning community; student collaboration; MS Teams.

Introduction

In March 2020, most UK university teaching staff had to make a quick switch to emergency remote teaching. For many, this shift happened alongside extra caring responsibilities, home-schooling, illness and even grief. Without much experience or training in the online delivery of learning, and given the constraints on my time (and patience), my online teaching experience during the initial lockdown period mostly consisted of uploading recorded lectures and existing classroom resources, resulting in largely disengaged learners and dissatisfaction and frustration on my part. It quickly became clear that the pandemic was not going away, and there was a need to move beyond ‘emergency remote teaching’ and to ‘adopt [technology] in a way that works for learning’ (Mosley, 2020) for the next academic year. Through attending training events over the summer (e.g. *Designing Online Learning Materials; Online Teams Training; Engaging Students Online)* and reading

literature related to online learning and teaching (e.g. Bach et al., 2006; Gillet-Swan, 2017), I realised that adapted, not replicated, content and assessment was key to providing an environment where learners could engage in and feel part of an online learning community. It also became clear that effective online teaching and learning ‘requires a carefully designed classroom that promotes student engagement with faculty, peers and course content’ (Tanis, 2020). This case study describes my navigation of a final year undergraduate module on second language acquisition (*Language Learning and Teaching*; LLT hereafter), in its transition from a typical in-person lectures-plus-seminar configuration to an interactive, learning-by-doing online format, using Teams.

My teaching is influenced by my background and scholarship in English Language Teaching. My teacher beliefs as a result of this training and experience are that: teaching should be learner-centred, sensitive and adaptive to different learning styles or approaches (Biggs, 2003; Harmer, 2015); and learning occurs most effectively when learners are actively and cooperatively involved in the learning process (Thornbury, 2006; Johnson and Johnson, 2008), an approach which also has been shown to improve student engagement and outcomes (Prince, 2004; Felder and Brent, 2009). Further, when learning activities are flexible and vary in task-type, it is more likely that they will accommodate learner diversity (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983/2015; Borg and Shapiro, 1996). I have developed my teaching over the years to reflect these principles, such as incorporating flipped-learning activities, investigative groupwork and peer-feedback, but these activities, until now, were carried out via in-person teaching. So the real challenge for the 2020-21 academic year, was to incorporate these principles into an online format.

Background to the module

I developed LLT in 2015. The module investigates theories and practical issues relating to second language learning and teaching, with an emphasis on learner differences and best practice in individual contexts, and attracts 60+ final year undergraduate students per year. As I am very familiar with the learning outcomes and the content of the module, I was able to focus its adaptation on the mode of delivery and assessment rather than the content. In pre-Covid times, the in-person delivery of this module comprised two 50-minute lectures and one 50-minute seminar (with around 20 students per seminar group). I have always tried to create lecture conditions that are conducive to active learning, in order to

engage students in meaningful and deep learning (Biggs, 2003). As such, I always incorporate in-lecture pair work tasks to break up the somewhat passive experience of being 'talked at' for 50 minutes. In terms of the online model of teaching delivery in my academic School, there was a timetabled 45-minute live session per seminar group (of around 20 students) per week, with most of the 'content' being delivered via short Panopto recordings, required readings, and other online tasks and videos, ahead of the live session.

The transition from in-person to online teaching and learning

Findings of a *Pearson/Wonkhe* survey (2020) following the initial lockdown showed that 41% of the UK higher education student respondents had struggled to manage their wellbeing in the absence of in-person engagement with friends, peers, and lecturing staff. These findings reflect feedback from students from my own institution during the emergency remote-teaching period, which showed that many students felt isolated, lonely and generally disengaged from their learning, lecturers and peers. With this in mind, and after researching principles of online-learning and teaching, I decided to establish systems for the 2020-21 academic year which would encourage online group interaction and collaboration, create an online learning community, and increase student engagement. Indeed, evidence shows that group-based or student-student learning interactions have many benefits to individual student learning, including: increased motivation, self-concept and self-knowledge (Biggs, 2003, p.90); more creative thinking and deeper understanding (Slavin, 1996); and social outcomes such as increased social cohesion and development of new friendships (Biggs, 2003, p.90), which seemed all the more important in an online learning context in a global pandemic, where social interaction was very limited.

After considering the affordances and challenges of different online platforms to establish these systems, I settled on Blackboard as a repository for the materials (which included module-maps, recordings, links to online tasks, readings, and videos) because I wanted to use a platform with which all students were familiar. I presented these materials in a weekly Microsoft Sway presentation on Blackboard. Sway offers an interactive web-based canvas which allows creators to present text, video recordings, links and images in one 'storyline', which users simply scroll through. This means that the Sway is, in principle, read as part of a narrative, not individual elements, as they might be in a PowerPoint, a

feature I thought would be helpful in an online learning context to provide a clear thread through the week's content. Sway also allows you to embed voice-recordings so I was able to present instructions and content orally as well as visually, which is important for learner diversity. The following figures show examples of some of the Sway 'cards' I created for the LLT module:

Figure 1: Embedded short lecture recordings.

Figure 1 illustrates one card of the Sway presentation, in which I embedded links to three short lecture recordings (in Panopto). There is also an audio recording which explains the connection between the three lectures themselves and other content.

Figure 2: Interactive content.

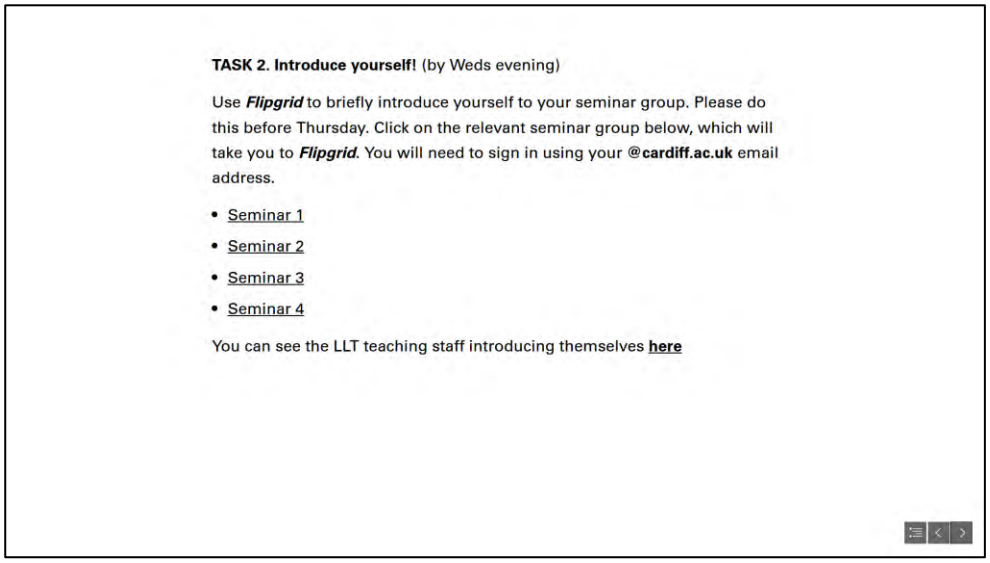
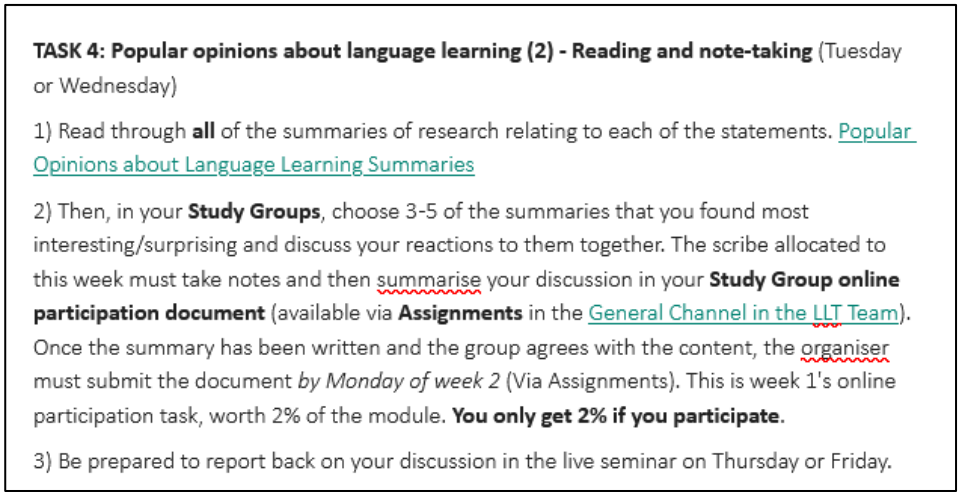


Figure 2 shows an example of an interactive task where a link takes students to a Flipgrid (a video discussion platform) to record a brief introduction of themselves for their seminar group.

Figure 3: Instructions and links to online pre-seminar tasks.



TASK 4: Popular opinions about language learning (2) - Reading and note-taking (Tuesday or Wednesday)

1) Read through **all** of the summaries of research relating to each of the statements. Popular Opinions about Language Learning Summaries

2) Then, in your **Study Groups**, choose 3-5 of the summaries that you found most interesting/surprising and discuss your reactions to them together. The scribe allocated to this week must take notes and then summarise your discussion in your **Study Group online participation document** (available via **Assignments** in the General Channel in the LLT Team). Once the summary has been written and the group agrees with the content, the organiser must submit the document *by Monday of week 2* (Via Assignments). This is week 1's online participation task, worth 2% of the module. **You only get 2% if you participate**.

3) Be prepared to report back on your discussion in the live seminar on Thursday or Friday.

Figure 3 shows a Sway card which explains that week's online group task and provides links to everything students need to complete it.

Student feedback shows that presenting the week's content in a Sway was well-received. Having one place where students could find everything was appreciated, perhaps because there was considerable variety among teaching staff in terms of the teaching and learning platforms they used, and Sway offered something that was easy to follow:

> *Sway presentations and module maps make the module easy to follow and make sure no tasks are missed out.*

> *It is handy having all of the content/instructions available on Sway because it is easy to follow in order and all of the material is all in one place.*

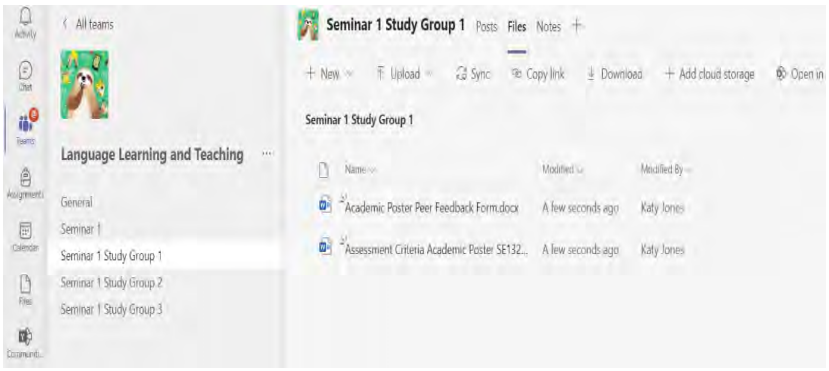
As noted earlier, to create a sense of community and allow students to consolidate knowledge through discussion, I wanted to recreate the groupwork experiences of the in-person seminar classroom as closely as possible. However, as we only had 45 minutes of weekly live contact time per seminar group, I was reluctant to use this time with students in breakout rooms: synchronous 'live' interaction is important for relationship building (Fawns et al., 2020), and what is more, community-building needs to start before the synchronous

session (Fawns, 2021). The challenge was then, how to facilitate student-student interaction and groupwork in an online space, which did not eat into the short live time we had together each week.

After consulting our digital learning team, MS Teams was decided to be the best choice for the virtual classroom and live sessions because it offers a space for students and staff to meet, collaborate, create content, share resources, and submit tasks. For ease of access, a link to Teams was embedded in each week's Sway presentation. As can be seen in Figure 4, seminar groups had their own channel in Teams, where we held the live session each week. To create the opportunity for student-student interaction, I then divided each seminar group into 'study groups' of six or so students, and assigned a private channel for each study group.

Figure 4: The Teams space.

Each student was able to see the **General** channel, their **Seminar Group** Channel (where live-sessions took place), and their own private **Study Group** Channel (where they carried out the online group tasks).



Study groups met weekly, ahead of the live sessions, to carry out online groupwork tasks, which were connected to learning outcomes. I ensured that tasks were varied to maintain motivation and cater for learner differences, and collaborative in nature, so students had to work together to complete them. Tasks included: summaries of group discussions; peer-feedback on formative assessment tasks; and reflections on and syntheses of texts/videos (see Figure 3 for an example). However, I had had mixed success with previous attempts at getting students to work in groups outside of the in-person seminar room, with complaints of some peers not pulling their weight while others did all the work. To mitigate this problem, I attached summative marks to the weekly group tasks. Each of the 10 weekly online groups tasks was assigned 2%, which totalled 20% of the overall module mark. As a further measure to ensure equal participation and workload, I assigned roles to

group members. These were *organiser* (who set up the meetings, confirmed participation and submitted the completed task); *chair* (who ‘chaired’ and kept the discussion going); and *scribe* (who had the most challenging task of writing up the task after the group meeting/discussion). Roles alternated each week to make sure that everyone contributed. To achieve the 2% each week, the group task had to be completed successfully (i.e. measured against task requirements and the learning outcomes for that particular task), and the organiser needed to confirm participation of each group member. If a group member failed to participate, then the individual did not achieve the mark, but the rest of the group did.

We used the live 45-minute sessions for consolidation, extension and feedback on the group tasks. Because study groups had met up prior to the live session to at least start the group tasks, they had had the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the content, discuss it with their peers and support each other’s learning. The knock-on effect of this pre-seminar group work was students, on the whole, actively participated in the live sessions. Students also felt the benefit of this procedure:

> *The seminars are run brilliantly and the questions to discuss and prompt within study groups prepare us so we feel more comfortable contributing in the seminars.*

> *The in-seminar tasks have been helpful in tying together our study group tasks and lecture content.*

After the live sessions, study groups had several days to finalise their group tasks, before the scribe wrote it up and the organiser confirmed group participation and submitted the tasks via *Assignments* in Teams.

It was a pleasure to see how engaged students were with the tasks, producing some excellent work as a result of the groupwork. In fact, 45 out of 60 students achieved full-marks for this part of the assessment, which demonstrates excellent outcomes. However, for those students who felt unable to participate in the groupwork (for reasons of anxiety, for example), I adapted the tasks so that they could submit an individual piece of work, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility.

Student feedback on the online groupwork was overwhelmingly positive, with students particularly appreciating the opportunity to interact with their peers, in a potentially lonely period of their lives:

> *So good to collaborate with others and 'have' to meet with the study group weekly. I would have loved to have 'had' to do this in other modules! Thank you!*
>
> *Having the study groups and online participation being part of the assessment was a great idea!*
>
> *I've also enjoyed meeting as a group each week to do the tasks, if anything it's just nice to interact with other students again as right now learning feels incredibly isolating.*

As can be seen from these comments, as well as the opportunities for social interaction being a key motivator, the summative nature of these tasks acted as a good incentive for students to participate in them. On the other hand, there were a couple of less favourable comments centring on the amount of work that these online tasks required, which these students felt was excessive for 2% of the module mark each week. However, as I explained at the beginning of the module, the weekly tasks and participant roles were divided between the study group (approximately 6 students), so the workload should not have been too heavy for any one student.

Problems and potential solutions

Of course, any new, untested teaching and learning systems could have teething problems, and while this use of Teams for group work and community-building resulted in very high levels of engagement, excellent results and very positive student feedback, it was not without limitations.

The first issue relates to the assigning of marks for what could be seen as marks for ‘participation’. The group tasks were not marked as such, but rather marks were awarded if a student participated and the task outcomes were achieved, meaning that 2% was very achievable each week. However, there was a cautionary word from the external examiner

over this 'all or nothing' attribution of marks, which resulted in 75% of students receiving 100% for this part of the assessment. But without the summative marks attached to the groupwork, participation in the tasks would have been far lower, as confirmed by several students in their feedback. So the challenge for the next academic year is how to make the group tasks summative, without awarding marks for 'participation'. There are several options:

1) To take a portfolio approach. That is, students carry out weekly group tasks, but then select four for assessment at the end of the semester for summative assessment. That way students will still have a concrete incentive to participate but the four tasks can be assessed more thoroughly;
2) For students to submit all of the weekly group tasks for 1% participation (10% for participation seems to be acceptable), and at the end submit a reflective task about their contributions and learning journey, worth 10%;
3) To replicate this year's system, but mark the submissions with 0 (failure to participate or submit), 1 (participated but did not achieve the task outcomes), or 2 (participated and achieved task outcomes). Half marks could also be awarded for partial achievement.

Portfolio assessment has a great deal of pedagogic value, and if 'carefully assembled', can become 'an intersection of instruction and assessment' (Paulson et al. 1991, p.61), communicating what has been learnt and why it is important. However, there are difficulties in turning a group task into an individual submission, and careful measures would need to be taken to avoid collusion. In terms of option 2, the weekly task requirements would need to be reduced considerably in order to reflect the 1% decrease in marks. It might be challenging to come up with meaningful tasks each week for 1% of the module mark. Finally, simply allocating separate marks for participation and successful task completion would be the most straightforward for the coming academic year (2021-22), which remains filled with Covid-19-induced uncertainties and potential change. So given the current situation, option 3 is the most viable solution for this year, but I will certainly explore the use of portfolios in a more settled year.

A further potential limitation of this set-up is the composition of and cooperation between group members. I assigned group members randomly because of the complexities of having students select their own groups (e.g. some students not having friendship groups

in the module). While my method had the potential for a lack of social cohesion and compatibility in some groups, the feedback pointed to the contrary: it was clear that, on the whole, groups got on well, and there were even comments that the study groups offered a good opportunity to work with peers they might not ordinarily have chosen to work with.

Concluding remarks

While the negative impact of Covid-19 on our academic and personal lives will likely be felt for many years to come, it is clear that the enforced shift to blended or online teaching and learning in higher education has also presented some opportunities. University structures are often the biggest impediment to meaningful change, and academic teaching staff often do not have the time to embrace new ways of teaching, resulting in repeating the same course content in the same format, year after year. While many of us update our materials regularly, it is a very different matter to change the mode of delivery, not least because it is very time-consuming work. But with the urgent need to switch to remote delivery in order to offer meaningful learning opportunities for our students came an opportunity to speed up the wheels of change. We found ourselves having to think creatively about technology to transform our practices in order to offer inclusive, accessible, authentic and collaborative learning opportunities. Many of us realised that technology can actually **enable** learning, if used in a meaningful way.

This case study is one example of just that thinking. By being forced to think creatively about this new mode of delivery, I adapted my module into an online format so there were opportunities for social interaction, inclusivity and collaboration, and where assessment was integrated holistically into the curriculum and weekly online activities. The result was very high levels of student engagement, excellent outcomes and very positive feedback. Now, I strongly agree with Jackson (2021) that there is ‘little sense in reverting back to the way things were before’. Even if the complete resumption of in-person teaching ensues, I will certainly retain the use of study groups in Teams (with the option of course to meet up in person should students wish) to create learning communities. In this case study, I have shown that it is ‘eminently possible to create an inclusive connected community online if the right learning design and lecturer training is put in place’ (Jackson, 2020). All it takes is a bit of research and training, clear structures, systems and instructions and a small leap of faith. Here’s a final word from one of my students:

> *It was a great way to feel more 'normal' in terms of the social side of a degree and I know my group really enjoyed catching up every week. We had a good laugh together.*

In a global pandemic, I'll take that as a win.

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