Chapter 20

Integrating Online Group Work into First-Year Music Studies in New Zealand: ‘This IS a University’

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores students’ and instructors’ perspectives on an online group work project in a first-year, general education music course at the University of Auckland. From both perspectives, the project was effective in helping students to understand, experience, and apply the benefits of collaborative research. The project also helped students to feel part of a larger community of university-level learners. Several barriers to effective online group learning, and differences of perception between students and educators, were identified. In particular, students did not necessarily subscribe to the social-constructivist ideologies that underlie much literature examining online group work. Four general guidelines are given to help instructors design online collaborative tasks that are, from all perspectives, clearly appropriate for university-level learners.

INTRODUCTION

A student near me ... in the space of 15 minutes played solitaire, did some on-line banking and accessed and then updated her social networking site. ... However, when you talked about the assignment she did suddenly log into CECIL [the university’s online learning platform]! (Teaching Observation Report, 2008)

I was surprised and not just a little shocked by this incident of laptop usage in my classroom. In this book, which broadly scrutinises the ‘human-machine’ interface, it is useful to begin this chapter by noting that in university settings teachers may not have a good intuitive appreciation of where, when, how, and how well E-learning environments affect student behaviour. Recent research into higher education, discussed below, has exposed a new potential online energy in university classrooms; yet, as the laptop-user incident shows, there is now a new potential mismatch between the perspectives and
Integrating Online Group Work into First-Year Music Studies in New Zealand

desires of teachers and those of the students. This chapter probes students’ usage and perceptions of online environments with the aim of channelling student enthusiasm for these environments such that the socio-educational course outcomes may be better achieved.

The research presented in this chapter draws on case study methodology to examine a relatively large (159-student) first-year university music course, which was designed to introduce students with little or no background in music to thinking and writing about music. This course lacked provision, in terms of staffing or timetabling, for tutorials. Hence the only ‘contact’ hours for the course were weekly two-hour, face-to-face lectures. To address this challenge, online group work was introduced to boost students’ active involvement in the course and engagement with the subject materials. To achieve this, an assignment sequence, ‘Listening to History’, intended to help students understand music research as an extended and multifaceted process, was created. This assignment sequence, which enabled students to play an active role in knowledge creation, was related to two of the main learning outcomes for the course:

1. To experience the value of collaborative research, extending critical discussion of key ideas in the course beyond the classroom
2. To be able to write clearly and with critical insight on a topic relating to Western music, integrating the findings of collaborative research into a discussion essay

In turn, these course objectives were related to core research and writing skills that are considered to be key ‘graduate attributes’ at the university and in New Zealand.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the motivating factors that influenced the structure of the online component, contextualising the project within social constructivism and design-based research methodology. Next, student and teacher reactions to ‘Listening to History’ are presented. Finally, four general guidelines for instructors who wish to integrate online group work into undergraduate courses, especially first-year courses, are offered along with suggestions for future research in this field.

BACKGROUND

Research about university students in universities from the United Kingdom (UK), Romania, Finland, and Hungary has revealed high levels of technology usage and competence, and a propensity among students to integrate seamlessly the latest communication, information, and management technologies into their daily lives (Andone, Dron, Pemberton, & Boyne, 2007). The digital student generation or ‘Net Generation’ (N-Gen) (Tapscott, 1998) is perhaps most obvious in the United States (US). Edmundson (2008) has characterised the online environment as a highly desirable space of unlimited potential, in which his students take pleasure in skimming through sites, subjects, and conversations. This fusion reaches a state of ‘white incandescence’ at the most elite North American universities, where students are perpetually ‘hooked’ into this space of endless openings and endlessly deferred closure of communication and information retrieval possibilities (Edmundson, 2008, p. B7). Both of these scholars, Tapscott (1998) and Edmundson (2008), have voiced concerns about the N-Gen. Edmundson (2008, p. B7) wanted to make students slow down, taking them off the online hook and getting them to ‘stop and think’. Andone et al (2007) wanted to meet students out there in cyberspace, and use their enthusiasm to enhance and stimulate learning. Yet, like Edmundson (2008), they worried that ‘the trend away from predominantly analytic knowledge towards primarily synthetic knowledge implies a loss as well as a gain’ (Andone et al, 2007, p. 52).