

Developing online communities of practice through relational pedagogy

In this presentation, I argue that using online discussion forums as a relational pedagogical approach can be as effective as the shared enactment, discovery and collaborative imagining that occurs in the physical space of a drama studio. These forums are essential processes of social exchange for successful learning.¹

Using examples from a module delivered entirely online between 2020 and 2022, I discuss how discussion forums on Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Moodle and Learning Experience Platform (LXP) Aula were used to create shared dialogues and processes of learning. Consequently, I argue, communities of practice are developed, which Etienne Wenger (1998) suggests, include the three dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

The online context

- Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) and Learning Management Systems (LMS) have been a part of education for many years although they are often under-utilized by both staff and students, often being considered an adjunct rather than integral teaching and learning component.
- More recently, Learning Experience Platforms (LXP) such as Aula have focused on making virtual learning more social.

The remote nature of students' experience in the context of online module delivery might suggest that it would be difficult for social engagement to take place, and this is a problem I wanted to explore. The nature of learning in drama, theatre and performance often supports interaction and social exchanges, particularly in practical work. The highly social nature of practical learning amongst students in this discipline also carries over into more theoretically focused modules. As such, peer-to-peer interactions are an important means of ensuring learning occurs. A problem, then, might be presented when these opportunities for in-person social interactions are unavailable.

SLIDE 3 Shared practice and collaboration are of utmost importance in Drama, Theatre and Performance. In practical workshop processes, the concept of ensemble is, according to John Britton, when people 'work together for an extended period, rather than a single project' (2013, p. 5). Robert Cohen concurs, adding that 'ensemble [...] a day-in, day-out collaboration in shared living, thinking and creating' (cited in Britton, 2013, p. 5). In contemporary art practice, Nicholas Bourriaud suggests that artists' work that is relational 'bring into play modes of social exchange [...] processes of communication in their concrete dimensions as tools that can be used to bring together individuals and human groups' (1998, p. 165). They offer 'spaces where we can elaborate alternative forms of sociability, critical models and moments of constructed conviviality' (1998, p. 166). **In other words, Bourriaud is talking about the reciprocal nature of art as a means of making it meaningful. In teaching, then, it makes sense that there is a similar dynamic.**

¹ Ultimately, this relational approach contributes towards the building of successful and sustainable online communities of practice which can be used interchangeably with in-person interactions and communities.

In a similar way, 'drama is a relational pedagogy that opens possibilities for dialogue and shared imagining among students, teachers and community. Drama involves creating alternative presents and futures through processes of shared enactment, discovery and collaborative imagining' (Prentki and Stinson, 2016, p. 5). Whilst this is largely accepted in terms of practical exploration of the subject, these possibilities are less apparent in theoretical exploration of drama which, in many instances, has moved online. Despite the obvious differences between in-person and online teaching and learning, the possibilities - for relational pedagogy to be utilised are just as enticing.²

Communities of practice

For Wenger (1998), there are three dimensions of communities of practice: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire.

Mutual engagement

He suggests that membership of a community of practice is "a matter of engagement. That is what defines the community" (1998, p. 73). In in-person settings, geographical proximity can assist with engagement although it's not always the case that being in the same room equals interactions, meaningful or otherwise.

Joint enterprise

Key to constructing an online community of practice is that participants are part of the process and it's this collaboration that sustains the group. In this process, the participants have a sense of ownership of the community they are building as well as an awareness of their mutual accountability.

Shared repertoire

Patterns of behaviour, routines of working, and shared language become important aspects of communities of practice. It's difficult to identify when shared repertoires become fixed and part of a community, perhaps because they are dynamic and reflect the constantly evolving nature of real people in real situations and, is 'a condition of negotiability and thus a condition for the very possibility of meaning' (Wenger 1998, p. 83).

² Relational pedagogy definition and context

Karen Bell (2022) discusses improving student satisfaction through relational pedagogy and notes that approachability, empathy, and staff-student interactions are strong indicators of student satisfaction. She notes that caring, sensitive and proactively engaged staff and students support a culture of belongingness.

Mark Ingham argues for students having 'more agency in their own learning and becom[ing] agents in all of the learning spaces and places they inhabit while at university' (2020: 49).

Aitken et al's study suggests that '[r]elational pedagogy in the Arts occurs when teachers work alongside [learners] to explore where learning *may* go rather than teachers determining where it *will* go' (2007: 16).

What I did (context and methods)

- Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Level 9 module, part of BA (Hons) Performance programme.
- Module explores critical reception of theatre and live art from Postmodern and Postdramatic perspectives.
- Use of a forum as an asynchronous activity became central to online teaching and learning.

Using flexible activities such as contributing to discussion forums, watching and interacting with video material and posting extracts from draft essays for peer review leads to some blurring of lines between social and learning contexts. It is the increased utilization of a VLEs and LXPs, using forums as both learning and social spaces that created opportunities for communities of practice to emerge.

Method

To assess the ways in which students interacted on the module, I took an observational approach which was qualitative rather than quantitative, observing the interactions between students on the forums.³

Results / key findings

- Rather than logging the volume of observations (although I noted that it seemed higher than in previous sessions), my qualitative assessment of the content in discussion forums has been organised into the following thematic areas: depth and breadth of contributions, reciprocity and shared understanding, improved student engagement, and development of critical dialogues.

Depth and breadth of contributions

- From the sample of posts examined, they were more detailed than brief comments, with posts of 300 words or more, addressing a wide range of ideas and concepts, often supported by reference to relevant literature.
- Often, comments referred to previous posts. This did not always mean that students agreed with each other; rather, they counteracted opinions (often with evidence), having an effect of offering provocations for further discussion.

Evidence of reciprocity and shared understanding

- The content of the interactions suggested that students were operating in a supportive and collegiate manner, the tone of the written comments being mutually supportive.

³ Rather than noting the actual number of interactions, I focused on the nature of them. For example, the depth and breadth of exchanges between students, observing how they were connecting ideas, offering feedback and mutual support, and developing a shared understanding of the ideas and concepts explored during the module.

- Through the process of peer support, a sense of the group working towards a shared understanding of the module content was apparent, if only through a qualitative appraisal of the language used in the posts.

Improved student engagement

- There was improved student engagement and many of the forum posts were substantial, presenting ideas and opinions in some detail.
- Even if students were less active in contributing to a forum, the posts proved useful as students were able to review module material as they prepared their assessment submissions, something flagged up in module evaluation responses.

Regular writing practice and the development of critical dialogues

- Evidence suggests that participation in forums offers opportunities for regular writing practice, where language can be used to persuade, argue and convince of a position.⁴
- All students could read their peers' work and benefit from essential critical dialogues, opening many possibilities for debates to emerge, supporting the development of a community of practice.

Discussion

My observations of the students' interactions revealed mutual support and respect for everyone's contribution to the learning process.⁵ The communities of practice, I suggest, began to emerge in these kinds of exchanges through appreciation for each other's involvement, cultivating a sense of togetherness.

Mutual engagement

Pre-pandemic, the physical classroom environment created opportunities for useful peer-to-peer communication such as discussions, although this was often limited to small clusters of students. The online forums enables engagement in a community of practice that's diverse, and it's this diversity of participants and their contributions that is important.

Joint enterprise

Everyone plays a part in the success of building a community of practice. Based on my observations of students' online forum interactions, the participants seemed willing to invest in this community in ways that support, nurture and show kindness to others within it.⁶

⁴ Having access to an overview of students' writing at an early stage in a module also provided valuable opportunities for diagnostic assessment and identifying potential support needs.

⁵ This reciprocity was demonstrated by the students' responses to posts which, importantly, happened both asynchronously and during the live sessions where discussions took place as part of usual class activity.

⁶ Participation in the online forums may come in various forms and there is certainly a degree of difference in the detail and quality of the posts, although it is significant that the process remains a joint enterprise. Without the interaction between students, there is little opportunity for a community of practice to develop.

Shared repertoire

As students contribute more to a discussion forum, followed up in live online conversations, the possibilities expand for recognizing the shared processes, language, and tools being used to shape a community of practice. The students' interactions demonstrated a sense of new relationships emerging and, in doing, new skills in collaboration were forged and shared languages emerged.

Conclusions

My experience of utilizing the discussion forums online has highlighted the crucial role such interactions play in developing a community of practice that is meaningful and focused on supporting students in accessing a social interface for learning. The bigger picture might suggest that we should use the communities of practice developed online as a means of cultivating 'live' face-to-face communities. Using online communities of practices as a bridge to this on-campus world is an opportunity not to be overlooked.

Based on these initial findings and conjecture around the ways in which online communities of practice can be developed alongside on-campus settings, I note two key learning points:

1. Online learning is not simply an adjunct to or substitute for face-to-face delivery. The co-existence of online and on-campus worlds is mutually beneficial. Both worlds should be afforded the same importance so that they work together effectively.
2. Being remote does not need mean being isolated. In the first lockdown of 2020, many people appeared to seamlessly continue their social lives by moving to online platforms. Whilst this was, of course, no substitute for face-to-face interactions, this demonstrated that it is possible to make an online world an extension of a 'normal' world. Again, significance here is placed on the connections between these two realities; if there is link between what is experienced in person and what happens online, a digital experience does not need to feel detached. Therefore, if students can make connections (however small) between the screen and the physical classroom, this may have a positive effect on both experiences.

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