

Authenticity and connection online

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Project Snapshot

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Project Overview

This project arose from the COVID-19 context of all learning moving online. As a lecturer in counselling and psychotherapy and as a clinical psychologist, I was interested in how the synchronous online environment shapes our self-awareness and relating to others: our authenticity, identity, sense of connection, engagement, belonging and consequent ability to learn. Factors such as telepresence (the sense of being physically together with someone in the virtual space: Turkle 2004), self-consciousness (of own image), unnatural frontality, bonding and body visibility, implications of no videos on trust and engagement, the online disinhibition effect, abrupt transitions, the blurring of public and private space and digital inequalities are crucial to navigate in ways which promote inclusion and belonging for all students and staff.

This project researched the application of these factors to synchronous online learning environments to support staff to develop pedagogically informed digital practices and facilitate students' learning.

Project Objectives

- To evaluate the impact of introducing psychological phenomena of online relating to educators and students
- To facilitate a series of two self-selecting cooperative inquiry participatory action research groups: one of teaching staff across the university and one of students.
- For these groups to share experiences of online learning and discuss how to apply the psychological phenomena of online relating to the education context, to facilitate student engagement, sense of belonging, inclusion and learning online.
- To develop guidance for best practice for online learning for educators and students.
- To develop a framework for the continuous evaluation and improvement of online environments to make them engaging and inclusive.



Methods

Two action research groups were facilitated between September 2022 and March 2023; one of students and one of educators. All participants had experience of teaching or learning in online synchronous sessions. Participants are also referred to as co-researchers in this methodology, emphasising the democratic nature of the research. Each group met on six occasions for two hours each time. Themes discussed were contact, authenticity, connection and inclusion. The project student intern did a fantastic job pulling together extant publications about the psychology of synchronous online learning and creating engaging presentations for each group to introduce each theme. The researcher then facilitated a discussion about the relevant psychological issues which was recorded. Later, the researcher pulled out the themes and recommendations from the discussions with help from LITE research assistants. These were presented in the final groups and adapted in response to feedback from co-researchers and became the recommendations.

Key findings

- Co-researchers were overwhelmingly positive about their participation, reporting enjoying the groups, feeling involved in the creation of the research output and reporting that participation had changed their practice in online learning and teaching.
- The biggest recommendation was to set explicit expectations for online learning culture and how to use synchronous sessions to best promote active learning and engagement.
- A student protocol for online synchronous learning was developed to set out expectations and explain pitfalls.
- A sway for educators gives suggestions for best practice in the areas of designing the curriculum, facilitating student engagement and addressing inequalities online.
- Relating and active learning online in synchronous sessions are certainly possible and different from face-to-face learning. If these differences are explored and acknowledged, this will maximise the potential of this setting.



Implications for practice

- A sway has been developed for educators to think about their practice and get tips for designing synchronous online sessions to maximise student engagement. This particularly focuses on design of synchronous sessions and how to promote active learning for students with discussion. See [sway](#).
- A protocol has been devised for students and educators for synchronous online learning. This set up structures to maximise engagement and learning, such as avoiding distractions, including breaks and transition activities and thinking about camera and device set up in advance. See [online learning protocol template](#)
- University leaders need to consider the resource implications for synchronous online learning, with respect to geographical spaces on campus, preparation time, student and educator support and addressing digital inequalities.
 - Private, sound-proof spaces are needed for educators and students to access these virtual learning environments, both for attention and confidentiality.
 - Educators need workload time to prepare a coherent curriculum for online courses to integrate synchronous discussion time within other resources, lectures and discussion boards.
 - Laptops with webcams and headphones need to be available on loan for students.
 - Wifi access needs to be predictably good across campus, in student residences and dongles available for students with wifi problems (including international students).

Outputs

- [A sway for educators](#) is an output of the research which includes principles for how to use synchronous sessions and includes tips for promoting student engagement.
- [An online learning protocol template](#) for modules or programmes to adapt and then share with students has also been produced.
- There are two documents which accompany these resources to provide further background information.
 - One [is a summary of the psychological paradoxes in online relating](#).



- The second is a [summary of pedagogical approaches and how these link to online synchronous learning.](#)

These resources are available for anyone who would find them useful and Gillian would really like any feedback about these resources either by contacting her directly or by [completing a feedback form.](#)

Challenges

Engaging student and educator participants took some time and was undertaken by offering seminars on the subject and publicising the call-out for co-researchers in as many places as possible. Recruiting educator co-researchers was more successful and attendance was good, which was helped by the groups being experienced as engaging and helpful to practice. Recruiting student co-researchers was much harder despite offering vouchers to compensate for time attending groups. The groups were not always the same participants each time but this resulted in a higher diversity of voices overall and a small group of students did attend most of the groups. Ongoing communication and reaching out to individuals who did not turn up to any particular group helped to re-engage students and reminders about groups via email and in a Teams group also helped. Again, facilitating a welcoming environment where each co-researcher was acknowledged and encouraged to contribute resulted in most participants feeling valued and part of the research experience.

Next steps

These outputs will be disseminated across online and hybrid programmes across the university and their usefulness evaluated in practice.

Bibliography

Susman, K., 2021. Between the tiles: the psychology of the virtual room. Appropriating and subverting the digital sphere for authentic and meaningful encounter. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, 20(4), pp.327-344.

