Fostering collaboration amongst off-campus students

P. Craig McIntosh
Faculty of Higher Education, Lilydale
Swinburne University of Technology

Debbi Weaver
Swinburne Professional Learning
Swinburne University of Technology

While the importance of developing and giving feedback on generic skills is widely recognised for on-campus students, this is still largely ignored for off-campus students, primarily due to the practical difficulties involved. This paper reports on a pilot project that introduced a compulsory group work project into an off-campus unit, delivered through Open Universities Australia. Wikis were used as the technical tool to facilitate the project, which was mostly successful for students, albeit stressful and time-consuming for staff. While all participating students successfully completed group projects, only one group demonstrated high levels of collaboration during the process.

Keywords: online collaboration, wikis, open learning

Introduction

As with most other higher education institutions, Swinburne University intends that our graduates will develop strong generic skills in several areas, including teamwork. While a great deal of focus has been placed on how to help students practice these skills, and how to give useful feedback on their progress, this has largely been concentrated on our on-campus students. Fostering teamwork skills for off-campus students is often ignored, or considered too difficult, especially since these students are often completing different components of their studies at different times during semester. Off-campus students are often working full-time or have full-time family responsibilities, and, especially for those enrolled through Open Universities Australia (OUA), are at widely different academic levels and with diverse motivations for undertaking individual units of study. Nevertheless, many of these students intend to graduate with a degree from one of the contributing universities, and are therefore expected to have attained the required key generic skills. We can no longer afford to ignore the needs of these students for opportunities and feedback in developing these skills. This paper reports on a trial project introducing a compulsory group work project into a unit delivered through OUA. It was hoped that the project would not only require students to develop their theoretical understanding of a chosen topic, but that students would also have the opportunity to develop their teamwork skills through collaboration. To encourage this, a proportion of the total marks (15 of 55%) for the project were awarded for evidence of teamwork and collaboration.

Current trial

Wikis were used as the collaboration platform, following on from success reported by others who have used these for on-campus students (Brack et al 2007). Wikis provide an easy-to-use online facility for students to develop a web-site, where all members of the group have full access to view and edit pages within the site, and to create new pages as required. All members are able to view the history of each web page (showing any alterations made and by whom), which allows staff to easily view who has contributed and to what extent. Additionally, each page has an associated discussion forum, where group members can comment on work done, suggest changes, or ask questions of each other. This facility also allows staff to assess who is providing leadership in the group (e.g. acknowledging work by fellow team members, suggesting additional content, setting up online meetings etc).

A 12-month private license was purchased from Wikispaces (http://www.wikispaces.com/), which allowed us to create unlimited 'private' Wikis, where only invited group members could view the content of the Wikis. The major disadvantage in this arrangement was that all members of our Wikis (staff and students) were required to create their own free user accounts on the Wikispaces site. While this was not an onerous task for any individual, trying to ensure all students read and responded to their email invitations, and more importantly, recorded their account details proved to be an organisational

nightmare. Setting up the Wikis, inviting students to join, and providing support in using the Wikis was a relatively easy task, compared with the management aspects of ensuring access and of creating student groups!

The group project

SSK 13 (Learning and Communication Behaviour) is a study skills unit offered to students who are beginning a degree course through OUA, with a final enrolment of 88 students during this project. Students were asked to complete initial individual research on a chosen topic, in the form of an essay. This essay then formed the basis of their source material for a subsequent group assignment, completed using the Wiki tool. The project extended for six weeks, with other course work continuing at the same time. All students were encouraged to participate in weekly online chat sessions with their tutors, and reminders about the group project were frequently provided at these sessions.

Group allocation was performed in week 7 of semester, by which time we hoped that all late enrolments had been processed, and (incorrectly as it turned out) that any likely withdrawals would have been completed. Students were assigned into 17 groups of seven, with an expectation that through attrition most groups will reduce in size by an average of two, making them more workable (group sizes ended up from 3 to 7). Initial hopes of using online personality tests to facilitate the formation of the groups was quickly dropped, as this was thought too difficult to implement in a trial project. Instead, the geographical location of students was used as the initial divider –since most students were only available for real-time meetings in the evening, we tried to organise groups around time-zones, to help cater for this. There was a small element of self-selection based on participation in regular weekly online chat sessions, where regular participants in these sessions built a rapport with each other, and hence requested to work together.

The initial (individual) task was to write a broad history of globalisation up to the present era, as a basis for developing an understanding of the modern manifestation of globalisation, to be developed further in the group project. A number of areas of research were suggested to the students to explore the expression of globalisation in the world (e.g. Celebrity, food, popular movements such as Live Aid, Make Poverty History, etc). We hoped that this group process would provide the opportunity for students to produce a genuinely collaborative piece of work through participation in the research and writing process, by editing their peer's initial contributions, and collectively exploring a number of the expressions of globalisation. The final collaborative stage was the preparation of a conclusion, linking different aspects together.

All Wiki groups were 'private' to start with (where only the group members and teaching staff had any access), but were opened up to be 'protected' sites after the due date for the assignment. This meant that other groups were then given read-only access to each other's finished product.

Student support

An introduction on using Wikis was recorded and made available as an online lecture, supported by a step-by-step manual on the technological aspects of Wikis, and followed by an online chat session with key staff. A second live chat session was offered about half way through the project, when students were beginning to explore the capabilities of the technology. Participation in these sessions was optional. Ongoing and personalised support was also provided on demand, both via the unit's Blackboard site, and via email and phone contact with the project managers (the Unit convener and the Academic Developer). The usual access to tutors and the convener was also maintained so that the students had a continuing access to support throughout the Wiki construction process.

Assessment

As we discussed above, there was an expectation that students would engage in the construction of the Wiki pages in a truly collaborative spirit. Initial discussions of the teaching team agreed that an outstanding assignment was one which engaged with the topic in an academic and technological way, with evidence of group collaboration an essential element. The writing should be academically based, i.e. claims were referenced, with sources generally from peer-reviewed sources. An average assignment in this context included few quality references and peer-reviewed journals. This was the first hurdle that an assignment needed to pass in order to achieve a higher mark. The other main criteria was avoiding the overuse of multimedia as a substitute for written discussion. This displacement of written appeared to be the result of having IT-skilled students in a group, but was possibly also the result of a lack of direction by the teaching staff, who did not foresee the extent to which this displacement would occur. Completed Wikis were assessed by a panel of the teaching staff (considered necessary since this was our first

experience in assessing Wikis), who collectively agreed on criteria and standards after viewing all 17 Wikis. The group project was allocated 40% of the semester marks with an additional 15% allocated for individual efforts in relation to the group work. Criteria for this aspect included evidence of leadership, organisation, editing colleague's work, etc.

Results of Wiki trial

Feedback from staff

Uptake by students was mixed until the middle of semester, with only about half the cohort actively accessing their group Wikis by mid-project. Early indications were that students had a surprisingly poor understanding of how a Wiki could be used (or at least, how we expected it should be used). Many students were using the home page as a discussion area, rather than use the inbuilt discussion forum available for each page. As semester progressed, students discovered the features available and how to incorporate different online elements into their web pages, so the final products showed good usage of hyperlinks, images and multimedia files. Not surprisingly, there was a late rush of activity, with much of the content and extra features being added in the last few days. We believe that copyright infringements were rife (in the use of images and multimedia animations without source attribution), so we were relieved that we had chosen the private license.

Only one group appeared to be truly collaborative in all aspects of their assignment – most groups were very strategic in their organisation, with each student contributing a page on a separate topic, and minimal effort made to read each other's work or to link the disparate elements effectively. The single collaborative group appeared to do two things well: firstly, the group worked as a team, in both the writing and the editing phases, evidenced in their posts to each other and in the history of their Wiki pages, which demonstrated the complex collaborative nature of the construction of their group work. The second aspect of their work that was impressive was their effective use of peer reviewed journals. This was an important aspect of the course which a number of groups did well but not in combination with the collaborative approach used by this group. Many students did demonstrate good project management skills, and the discussion forums showed strong evidence that they built relationships with each other.

Feedback from students

No formal feedback was sought from students; however many students did provide feedback as part of a reflective essay, and via email or via the unit's Blackboard site. All feedback was broadly positive. Students saw the value of the exercise and felt that the Wiki approach was innovative and up-to-date. They felt that the skills acquired through the Wiki process widened their skill-base in a way that they did not expect. Students reported the expected reservations about the division of labour within the groups and some consternation about "silent" members. These students are a particular OUA phenomenon -some students remain enrolled despite having made a decision to no longer participate. Since staff are usually unaware of this decision, these students are allocated into groups, but of course are not active members.

Discussion

Despite initial reservations and student fears, the student response has been generally positive. The outcome for students from the collaboration has been beneficial (as reported in unsolicited student feedback, and supported by staff perceptions), but the process has been difficult and the gestation is unsatisfactory. These difficulties arise from two key sources: the use of an external Wiki provider, and the difficulty in communicating with our students. This process revealed the extent to which OUA students did not engage with the course material or communication. The nature of the private Wiki required that students be "invited" to join through an email sent to their student accounts. The invitations were pre-empted by an official announcement placed on the Blackboard front page. This methodology of contact revealed a hitherto unexpected state of affairs: that a significant percentage of students did not engage with these basic and essential portals of communication. This was a surprise to the teaching staff who felt that their experience of OUA students over the last five years was that they were highly engaged and responsive to the communicated material.

We had hoped that students would collaborate in the writing of the Wiki, but most students took a strategic approach, preparing individual pages and cobbling these together at the end of the process. While it was difficult to get a definitive sense of the students' strategy, many indicated that the difficulties of distance and perceived variable standards from other group members meant that the choice about whether to collaborate or not was rendered expedient to the necessity to finish in a timely manner. Some

students thought that if they produced quality individual work, this could an argument for a better mark if the group project was inadequate or incomplete.

Would we do it again? After reflecting on the project as a whole, we would still like to persist with the Wiki, but only if we can use an in-house system, utilising the students' existing Blackboard accounts. The project team provided all technical support for this project, which while not difficult, was certainly time-consuming and not sustainable. And with much of the early support being required just to ensure access to the Wikis, an in-house system would solve this problem.

What would we do differently? Students need more explanation about what a Wiki is, and what it can be used for, including examples to view. We were surprised that students were nearly all unfamiliar with the concept of how a Wiki is structured, and naively had thought describing it as a 'web-site' would be sufficient. We also need to provide clearer instructions on the need to engage more genuinely in collaborative work. Elgort et al (2008) also found that "the use of Wikis was not enough to counteract some students' preference for working alone rather than as part of a team", indicating that we need to work on justifying to students the need to demonstrate their team work skills. We also need to develop our processes for giving feedback to students on their progress with these skills – in future, we would prefer to give feedback to students earlier in the project, rather than after completion**.**

Interestingly, our students appeared to manage the technical aspects of creating and editing their Wikis quite well, once they comprehended what was required. This contrasts with the findings of Choy & Ng (2007), who found that technical expertise was a much larger factor in the uptake of Wiki use by their Open University students. However, we do strongly agree with their suggestions that the participants' roles in the collaborative work must be considered carefully. Our students did indicate that they shared similar pride in their finished Wiki (similar to that reported by Brack et al, 2008), and that the supportive interaction with peers was a valued aspect of the project:

> … I really enjoyed participating in Group 14's Wiki. It was good reading the other members of the group's essays and then discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each. Knowing their marks also put into perspective where I can improve my future essays. … The group was very supportive of each other with some having to travel interstate several times with work and also covering for me …. Ultimately I believe that we produced a very good product. (Student comment in a reflective essay)

References

Brack, C., Stauder, A., Doery, J. & Van Damme, M-P. (2008). Collaborative learning online: Integrating media in case-based learning for clinical biochemistry. In C. Montgomerie & J. Seale (Eds.), *Proceedings of World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications 2007* (pp. 187-192). Chesapeake, VA: AACE.

Choy, S. & Ng, K. (2007). Implementing wiki software for supplementing online learning. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 23(2), 209-226. http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet23/choy.html

Elgort, I, Smith, A. & Toland, J. (2008). Is wiki an effective platform for group course work? *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology,* 24(2), 195-210. http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet24/elgort.html

Authors: P. Craig McIntosh. Faculty of Higher Education, Lilydale, Swinburne University of Technology' Mail L100, Locked bag 218 Lilydale, Vic 3140. Email: pcmcintosh@swin.edu.au Debbi Weaver, Swinburne Professional Learning, Swinburne University of Technology, Mail L100, Locked bag 218 Lilydale, Vic 3140. Email: dweaver@swin.edu.au

Please cite as: McIntosh, C. & Weaver, D. (2008). Fostering collaboration amongst off-campus students. In *Hello! Where are you in the landscape of educational technology? Proceedings ascilite Melbourne 2008*. http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/melbourne08/procs/mcintosh.pdf