

Abstract

Assessment and feedback is consistently highlighted as an area where students feel Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) could improve and regularly scores lowest of the key criteria for student satisfaction (Grove, 2014). Furthermore, group assessment, where students not only need to learn assessment requirements, but also social skills required to work collaboratively (Reiser, 2017), can create additional challenges. The majority of university students have grown up as digital natives, with 81% of students reporting use of mobile devices whilst studying (Al-Emran, Elsherif & Shaalan, 2016). There is a requirement to consider more brave and innovative technological approaches to supporting students. This working paper explores whether adopting an industry tool Slack, a Computer-Mediated Communication platform, can be an effective tool in group assessments. More specifically, can Slack facilitate an innovative and collaborative group learning community for mediating and supporting group assessments amongst level 5 undergraduate marketing students and additionally develop graduate competencies. Proposing a programme of qualitative inquiry, using a multi-method case study approach, data will be collected through six focus groups of 8-10 students and two semi-structured individual interviews with members of the teaching team in order to evaluate the use of Slack in supporting and engaging students in group assessments.

Word Count: 200 Words

Keywords: Group assessment, Slack, Mobile Learning Environments, constructivist pedagogy

An exploration into the use of the digital platform Slack to support group assessments and feedback and the impact on engagement - Working Paper

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Research suggests that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) need to improve how they operationalise student assessment and feedback. Indeed, National Student Surveys (NSS) data reveals that student satisfaction scores relating to assessment and feedback are regularly the lowest rated metrics (Grove, 2014). Bloxham and West (2004) argue that students' dissatisfaction with assessments methods is often due to uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the coursework. With the diversity and complexity of the current student population this situation is often exacerbated with many of them coming from less traditional backgrounds and often facing challenging social, personal and academic issues (Watts, 2011) which can act as a barrier to their understanding and their engagement. These barriers can pose particular problems during assessment activities.

Blair and McGinty (2013) see assessment as an important mechanism for learning how to learn and not just a measurement of learning. This is particularly evident in group assessments where students need to understand assessment requirements as well as the social skills required to work collaboratively (Reiser, 2017). Joo (2017) cites inequitable work contribution, non-participation in meetings and not undertaking allocated tasks as key reasons why group assessments are not successful, with Reiser (2017) indicating the principle failure of group work being down to inadequate measures of individual achievement. Consequently, the potential for social loafing is high. To counteract these group-work issues, more transparency and monitoring is needed. Therefore, it is important to consider ways of encouraging increased accountability and equitable participation between group members, whilst also offering a way of providing additional resources and more accessible peer/tutor support, encouraging students to learn from the process as well as the assessment.

Research indicates that the majority of university students have grown up as digital natives with 81% reporting the use mobile devices while studying (Al-Emran et al., 2016). Consequently, students increasingly expect technology to be integrated into their learning and assessment activities (Ahern, Feller & Nagle, 2016). Willemse (2015) indicates that digital technologies can increase the choice, convenience and personalisation capabilities of the learning experience, therefore it could be argued that educators should strive to provide flexible learning environments which leverage digital technologies. Echeverria, Nussbaum and Calderon (2011) suggest that expanding the learning environment onto mobile devices facilitates access to supplementary content and permits more fluid information sharing and provides the opportunity for anytime and anywhere learning (Motiwalla, 2007). Importantly, the use of these technologies offers a different form of engagement and the potential to expand traditional teaching environments into virtual spaces which facilitates mediated conversations and polymediated classrooms (Denker, Manning, Heuett & Summers, 2018). Therefore, mobile technologies can support a collaborative, constructivist approach to learning (Cochrane & Bateman, 2010), with Liu, Peng, Wu, Lin and Ming-Sheng (2009) arguing that the use of mobile learning environments offer students far more than just access to resources, but also have the potential to encourage group activities and discussions. Ahern et al. (2016) suggest that students at all levels are enthusiastic about adopting digital learning technologies that deliver rich user interfaces and the ability to expand learning beyond the classroom can remove some of the limitations associated with classroom learning environments (Rajasingham, 2011). The formation of interactive learning communities can facilitate peer-to-peer support and

reduce students' inhibitions to participate in classroom discussions (Gachago, Strydom, Hanekom, Simons & Walters., 2015). These reduced communication barriers and greater levels of transparency offer the potential to address some of the issues associated with group assessment (Dabbagh & Reo, 2011). Engaging with digital technologies also provides learners with technical skills that may later be useful in the workplace.

HEIs aim to offer programmes of study that are designed to develop students' competencies and skill-sets, with the view to creating a smooth transition to the workplace particularly in vocational subjects such as marketing. Gaining a familiarity with software solutions used in industry is therefore important as it provides the graduate with the technical skills needed to perform in the workplace. Slack is a Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) tool widely used as a collaborative tool in creative industries. CMC tools such as Slack are typically used to share work, disseminate content, and support task planning (Hrastinski, 2008). Teckchandani (2018) argues that it can also be used effectively in the classroom, as students will often find their own way of communicating with each other around an assessment which normally includes a combination of texting, email, and cloud-based services. Peer-to-peer interactions are particularly important when assessments involve group activities and interaction (Huang, 2017). However, Teckchandani (2018) also argues that the ad hoc use of multiple communications platforms can exacerbate collaboration and communication challenges, restricting team effectiveness due to conflict and social loafing, proposing that Slack is a solution to the communication and collaboration issues. In comparison to more traditional digital platforms, Slack offers enhanced communication and collaboration capabilities through real time messaging (Gofine & Clark, 2017). This communication platform is available on desktop or mobile applications and is used to streamline communications across the different communication platforms that exist in the workplace.

Slack has been found to effectively support postgraduate students during project work (Tuhkala & Kärkkäinen, 2018). The researchers found that synchronous, bi-directional communications between users (tutors and students) increased feedback response time and promoted high levels of transparency during assessment activities. The availability of Slack on mobile devices also permitted tutors to disseminate important information directly to students. This reduced students' threshold for asking questions and helped the students to quickly source important information relating to the assessment. Slack facilitates the targeted dissemination of information and therefore has the potential to reduce the large volume of emails generated by asynchronous communications platforms within HEIs. Stemming the rising tide of student emails is important, as they frequently cite information overload a reason for not being able to access/locate key information relating to assessment guidelines. Therefore, this suggests there is potential for using Slack to support learning around assessments in group situations where peer to peer support is being encouraged and greater transparency and clearer channels of communication are conducive to limiting freeriding behaviours (Zhang, Meng, de Pablos & Sun., 2017).

Research Aims and Objectives

This research project aims to explore the use of a CMC platform in supporting students in group assessments in Higher Education (HE). More specifically, the current research aims to evaluate the use of Slack as an additional CMC support tool for group assessment and feedback activities for undergraduate marketing students. To date, few studies have explored the potential of Slack in supporting feedback and assessment activities among undergraduate students. This research project aims to address this gap in the literature. The objectives of the current study are as follows:

1. To assess the effectiveness of Slack in supporting real time, formative feedback.
2. To assess the effectiveness of Slack in monitoring student progress.
3. To explore students' engagement with Slack as a channel for supporting assessment, feedback and group collaboration.
4. To explore the potential of academics using Slack to track group members' personal engagement and contribution within a group assessment and support the learning process.

Methodology

The study will adopt a process of qualitative inquiry due to the exploratory nature of the research objectives and the iterative process required to reach meaningful results around student and academics' engagement with Slack. The study will adopt a single case study approach which Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011 p. 298) argue provides 'a unique example of real people in in real situations' and Yin (2003) providing further endorsement, arguing that case studies provide exploratory insight into a more comprehensive study. In this study, the case will focus on the use of a CMC platform Slack, in supporting students with their assessment on a level five undergraduate advertising module at a post 1992 University. Data will be collected by adopting a multi-method approach using 6 focus groups of 8-10 students and 2 semi-structured individual interviews with members from the teaching team. Both methods will involve a number of predetermined questions however also allow the interviewer to probe and explore answers in more detail (Berg, 2009). Respondents for both the focus groups and in-depth interviews will be selected using a non-probability, purposive sampling technique allowing the researcher to select both student and academic respondents based on their use of Slack on the designated module in the case study (Cohen et al., 2011). The focus groups and interviews will be audio recorded using an encrypted device and then transcribed. Subsequently the data will be analysed, dissected, sorted, reduced and displayed (Miles and Huberman, 1984). During the analysis the data will be categorised using a coding process in order to examine, compare, conceptualise and categorise the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Summary

HEIs must consider more innovative technological approaches to support the digital natives that now represent their student base. Previous research has demonstrated how Slack has provided postgraduate dissertation students with additional assessment support. However little research has been undertaken to assess the ability of Slack to facilitate group work among undergraduate students. The current study aims to explore the use of Slack in providing assessment support and feedback to second year marketing students, tasked with undertaking a group assessment. As such, the research aims to make a valuable contribution to the literature in this emerging area of research in marketing education.

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