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Institute of Teaching and Learning

CRAIG MORLEY
**STUDENT USE OF
WEBCAMS DURING
LIVE ONLINE
SYNCHRONOUS
TEACHING**

ITL FELLOWSHIP 2021/22

**PROJECT
REPORT**

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ITL Fellow 2021/22

DR. CRAIG MORLEY

Craig (now Head of Academic Skills at the University of Chester) was a Learning Developer in the University of Manchester Library at the time of his ITL Fellowship. He taught on the My Learning Essentials and My Research Essentials programmes and the PGCertHE unit *Open Knowledge in Higher Education*. Craig is particularly interested in academic reading and online pedagogies. He is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA), editor for the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* and chair of the Academic Skills Community of Practice (Academic Libraries North).

Fellowship Student Partner Intern

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STUDENT USE OF WEBCAMS DURING LIVE ONLINE SYNCHRONOUS TEACHING

ITL Fellowship project

Context

This project sought to enhance our shared understanding of how to gauge student engagement in online teaching, by investigating staff and student perceptions of webcam use. The project was not about coming to a decision on whether students should or should not use webcams (which is a personal decision for each individual student), but ensuring we support students to engage fully whether they decide to use webcams or not.

Student use or non-use of webcams and the impact this might have on student engagement during live online sessions was one of the biggest talking points of online teaching during the emergency pivot to online teaching and learning during the pandemic, amongst staff and students alike.

As noted in the University's Our Future vision, **online learning is an essential element in providing Lifelong and Flexible Learning**. In offering increased student choice through blended combinations of on-campus and online learning, it is important all these options give equal opportunity for innovative teaching, effective learning and building a sense of community / social presence amongst students and teaching staff. Enhancing practices around the use and non-use of webcams in live synchronous sessions, therefore, has the potential to play an integral part in ensuring online learning is just as engaging a choice as on-campus learning, for both staff and students.

Objectives of the Fellowship project

The underlying objective of this project was to crowd-source knowledge and perceptions of online learning from as many stakeholders as possible. This included teaching staff from all backgrounds (subject lecturers, academic developers, learning developers and librarians) and students from all levels and faculties, both within and beyond the University of Manchester.

This shared knowledge would then be used to create community sourced / co-produced profiles of best practice aimed at staff and students, respectively.

For Students

- Benefits of webcams when learning online.
- strategies to show engagement in live online synchronous sessions when webcams are not used.

For Staff

- Methods to encourage webcam use where appropriate.
- Strategies to gauge student engagement in live online synchronous sessions when webcams are not used.

Project activities

1. Scoping Review

- An initial scoping review was conducted by both the staff and student project partners which looked at a variety of sources (research articles, blogposts, conference papers and presentations).
- This was used to help identify and create relevant questions for surveys and focus groups.

2. Online Surveys (Anonymous)

- Separate staff and student surveys were created using Qualtrics and launched in February 2022. The staff survey had 82 participants and the student survey had 46 participants.
- These questions were designed to help understand staff and student perceptions of webcam use and identify strategies used to gauge /show engagement in online classes.

3. Online Focus Groups

- Separate staff focus groups (x2) and student focus groups (x2) were hosted in April by the staff project partner and student project partner respectively. Both staff and student groups attracted 8 participants.
- The focus groups were used to generate deeper conversations around perceptions and practices of webcam use, engagement strategies and specific trends and patterns uncovered in the survey.

Challenges faced

The key challenge was ensuring that both staff and student voices were heard equally, and securing a spread of participants across faculties and teaching backgrounds. Parity between staff and student participants was achieved in the focus groups; however, almost double the number of staff took part in the surveys compared to students. All faculties were represented in the surveys, although most participants came from Humanities. It was pleasing to have all levels and roles within teaching and learning represented.

Challenges faced (cont....)

Faculty-based participants:

- Humanities - 22 staff participants; 31 student participants
- Science & Engineering - 8 staff participants; 6 student participants
- Biology, Medicine & Health - 11 staff participants; 3 student participants

Other staff participants:

- Learning Development / Academic skills: 11 participants
- Academic Development: 4 participants
- Librarians: 8 participants
- Student Services: 7 participants

Student participants:

- Undergraduates: 31 participants
 - Postgraduate Taught: 5 participants
 - Postgraduate Researchers: 3 participants
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Student partnership

Ffion Neal, my Student Partner, was instrumental in all aspects of the project. The success and completion of this project would not have been possible without her hard work, commitment and insights. I would particularly like to thank Ffion for keeping the project on track while I was on paternity leave.

Student partnership (cont...)

Ffion was essential in all the major activities of this project, from the scoping review, analysing the survey results and hosting focus groups. Her insight as a current student ensured we were able to create survey and focus group questions that would generate important discussions and contributions from student participants.

Her connections with and knowledge of other student groups and networks was essential in ensuring we were able to recruit student participants from across the student body. Elsewhere, Ffion took a leading role in hosting the student focus groups and organising the raw data and transcripts from all 4 focus groups.

Collaborative work

- The **Library Student Team** played an important role in helping to promote the project and solicit student participants, and in the creation of the staff-facing infographic.
 - **Dr Mario Pezzino** (Director of Teaching & Learning, School of Social Sciences) contributed invaluable insights and advice as the project's Critical Friend. Mario's support was particularly helpful at the start of the project as a sounding board for avenues and channels the project might explore and helping to identify relevant networks to advertise the project to staff participants across the university.
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Outputs

1. Student-facing infographic

- [Benefits of webcam use](#)

2. Staff-facing infographic

- [Encouraging webcam use](#)

3. Open access to all research data

- [Figshare](#)
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Impact

The initial impact of the project was encouraging discussions around the use of webcams in live online teaching between staff and students both within and beyond the University of Manchester.

The infographics and openly available findings and results showcase that, in contrast to the perceptions of early discussions, social media discussions and educational blogposts, staff and students have relatively similar ideas on the benefits of webcam use in online learning and how further use can and should be encouraged, where and when appropriate.

Going forward, the impact of the project can be measured through tracing behaviour change in students and teaching approaches used by staff because of interaction with the infographics, openly available results and future-planned workshops.

Reflection

I believe the project has been a success in regards to meeting its objectives and synthesising ideas and perspectives from staff and students. Our overall analysis across the surveys and focus groups can be grouped into four categories

1. Clear expectations (and explanations) of webcam use are needed
2. Webcams are the goal, not the standard expectation
3. Other ways of gauging engagement should be more active / reflective
4. Online learning should not try to replicate the in-person, it should have its own approaches and values

The project has underlined that there are surprisingly similar attitudes towards webcam use, and the advantages and disadvantages they can have on teaching and learning, between staff and students.

Next steps

- The next steps for the project are to host a series of interactive workshops (both openly available and tailored to different schools and faculties) to disseminate the findings and suggestions to teaching staff in more detail and allow discussion.
- The next steps for student-facing advice are to identify suitable locations and opportunities for the student-facing infographic to be embedded for student use.