Conference Report: TEALfest 2021 (Technology Enhanced Active Learning), University of Warwick, May 2021

Marianne Talbot, School of Education, University of Leeds

Abstract

TEALfest was a week-long "online festival for sharing technology enhanced active learning practice, research, ideas and experiences", organised and facilitated by the University of Warwick's Learning Design Consultancy Unit in May 2021 (University of Warwick, 2021). The festival consisted of a series of 41 events led by colleagues and guest speakers, focused on the theme of 'Beyond the bubble'. The organisers aimed to expand their horizons and look for inspiration outside their own practice, disciplines, university and indeed beyond the UK. The conference was free to attend and was hosted almost exclusively in MS Teams. I attended 11 sessions during the week, and I have collated my key learning points and 'lightbulb moments' from those sessions, with the aim of sharing best, flexible, and innovative practice in the online higher education learning space. I will do this by drawing out some of the key themes from the conference and reflecting upon my experience of attending a purely online conference.

My experience of attending TEALfest 2021

Serendipity, also known as LinkedIn, led me to TEALfest, hosted by my local university, the University of Warwick. That was of course immaterial, as it was held entirely online, so I and it could have been anywhere in the world. At least, I didn't have to deal with any time difference, which made it easier to work out which of the 41 sessions I could attend. Attending approximately a quarter of all sessions gave me, I think, a good idea of the substance and quality of the conference.

It was extremely well-organised and the technology mostly worked well. Sessions were 30-60 minutes long and the ones I attended each had 10 to 30 attendees. They were often co-led by two or more Warwick academics, with a few guest presenters from other universities or organisations, such as Jisc[1]. All presentations and workshops were well-led, interesting, and often thought-provoking. However, rather than report on them all individually, I have compiled my notes under four themes which emerged during the week: Learning and evolving; Maximising student engagement; Connecting a teaching and learning community; Usefulness and accessibility of technology.

The four key themes

Learning and evolving

Participants frequently mentioned the appetite for change and innovation in relation to digital teaching and learning, coupled with the need for training for all users, but especially those designing and delivering online teaching. Collaboration (between academic and professional staff, and with and between students) was seen as essential to best meet the needs of learners and their teachers, as well as using creativity to respond organically to emerging situations. Synchronous versus asynchronous sessions, and hybrid teaching (teaching students in the room and remotely at the same time – terminology is not always consistent, so it is important to be clear and define any new/ambiguous terms in this space), were much discussed, with top tips swapped and shared throughout the week. A recurring theme was the suggestion to be pragmatic and evolutionary, to start small (pedagogically and technologically), and to consider pedagogy, space, and technology in combination (Wilson & Randall, 2010, p.1096): "The idea of 'classroom' now incorporates the use of both physical and virtual space". Balancing positives, negatives, risks and benefits, also featured highly, such as balancing the benefits of recording a live session for some students against the risks of intrusion or invasion of privacy for some other students.

Another sort of balance was that of cognitive and emotional loads; teaching and learning online can be exhausting. Team teaching can help from both the teachers' and students' points of view; one delegate said that "*it just feels better*". Taking time to reflect on online practices was also seen as a key factor in successful and always evolving online teaching and learning.

Maximising student engagement

Much time was spent discussing the pros and cons of synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning, but the consensus for both seemed to coalesce around a few key areas:

- Teaching small (size not defined) 'chunks' of learning interspersed with short interactive segments
- Making transcripts available for all recorded lectures/presentations (whether originally delivered live or as a recording)
- Indicating the content and length of any recordings, so learners know what to expect and how much time to set aside
- Using interactive activities and formative[2] quizzes

- Using reflective activities without necessarily right or wrong answers to promote deeper thinking
- Designing activities that can be used both online and in person

One session focused on a case study which I found especially interesting. The case study reported on 'immersive sprints', short but intensely focused sessions designed to develop and empower female undergraduate confidence, discussion, and presentation skills. The sprints were previously carried out in person over three full days plus a half-day session eight weeks later. However, since the start of the covid pandemic in 2020, the sprints have been run online as six four-hour sessions over two weeks, plus a seventh four-hour session eight weeks later. This required lots of intense preparation and working together, mainly behind the scenes, but was deemed successful. However, if given the choice, the organisers plan to deliver a hybrid version in the future, with some in person and some online sessions.

Connecting a teaching and learning community

Of particular interest to me and my area of research, was a strand of sessions focused on ways of promoting and connecting a teaching and learning community. This might include teachers supporting each other, swapping and sharing resources, and discussing and developing new ways of working, for example. Emerging ideas included such communities needing an initial nurture phase, which might be quite high maintenance for the organiser(s), in order to eventually become self-sustaining. Early nurturing actions might include asking potential members what they need or want from such a community. There are likely, of course, to be multiple perspectives, but a consensus will need to be reached, although there is nothing stopping a community hosting several sub-communities with slightly different though related focuses. I noted eight features of successful communities which I have used to build the following graphic representation:

Building
connections

Knowledge
network

Templates &
common
terminology

Research &
scholarship

Teaching &
learning
community

Developing
staff

1-2-1
facilitation

Learning
models

Design
sprints

Figure 1: Features of a Successful Teaching & Learning Community Model (author provided)

In any successful community, there is likely to be a small core of more active, leading members, a slightly larger group of moderately active members, and the rest of the members who might only be occasionally or rarely active (Wenger, 2002). Time is key, as nurturing, maturing, and moving to a sustainable model will take months or even years, and will depend on ongoing contact, communication, interaction, coordination, cooperation, and collaboration. Time, shared events and activities, and individual relationships are all essential to help to create a sense of identity, belonging, and bonding, all of which are critical to the success of any community.
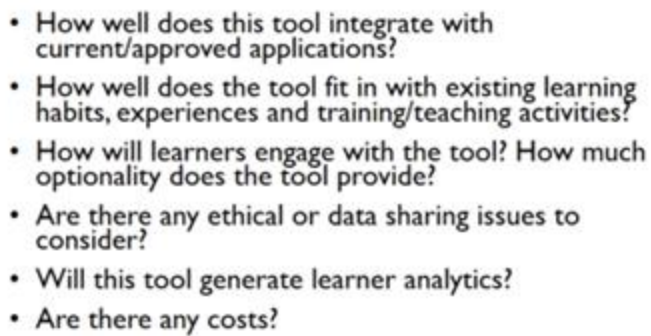
It was pointed out that virtual spaces mimic physical ones, so they should feel welcoming, comfortable, purposeful, and not solely utilitarian, and of course will continue to evolve once built. Communities should of course welcome new members or those who are interested in the subject matter but do not want to become members (but who might bring valuable input and points of view). Wenger (2002, p.112) says that "Effective community design is built on the collective experience of community members" but that the perspectives of outsiders to "develop and steward knowledge" and "help members see the possibilities" can be invaluable.

Usefulness and accessibility of technology

As you would expect, a range of technologies and applications were used and discussed across the 40+ sessions. The event was hosted exclusively in MS Teams, and most presenters spoke to a set of traditional PowerPoint slides. However, some used video, chat, and breakout rooms. Sessions were mainly quite interactive, sometimes using a Padlet (https://padlet.com for virtual post-its, colourful and collaborative), for example. Other platforms used or discussed included:

- Miro (https://miro.com for an infinite virtual whiteboard, also uses post-its, very flexible)
- Blackboard Collaborate (https://www.blackboard.com/en-uk/teaching-learning/collaboration-web-conferencing/blackboard-collaborate for interactive whiteboards, hand-raising, chat, polls, breakouts)
- Vevox (https://vevox.app/#/ for live polling, quizzes, Q&A)
- Canvas (https://www.instructure.com/en-gb for a flexible learning hub, lots of tools)
- MS Whiteboard (https://www.microsoft.com/en-gb/microsoft-365/microsoft-whiteboard/digital-whiteboard-app for drawing, writing, and adding post-its)
- Jamboard (https://edu.google.com/intl/ALL_uk/products/jamboard/ for writing, adding images, connecting people)

This diversity of platforms (and I am certain I did not capture all that were used or discussed) reflected people looking for "practices that support and surround learning and teaching" (Phipps & Lanclos, 2019, p.68). Phipps & Lanclos argue for continued innovation in the use of technology to enhance teaching, learning, and assessment, describing the need for educators to persist in "experimenting with and growing their teaching practices, both with and without technology" (Phipps & Lanclos, 2019, p.83). There was discussion of *how* to gauge the usefulness and accessibility of tools. Figure 2 below, shows a series of questions it was suggested it would be worth considering when auditing tools.

Figure 2: Questions to ask when auditing online tools (screenshot of slide, Dr Sarah Penny, University of Warwick, with permission)

As well as considering these questions, there was discussion at some sessions about practitioners feeling overwhelmed by the perceived multitude of available tools, and the impossibility of becoming an expert in all of them, in terms of their purpose, utility, and cost, let alone having time to test and practise sufficiently with them. It was acknowledged that some tools might work better for teachers but might not work so well from the learners' point of view, and vice versa. This was seen as an insoluble conundrum that only time, experience, and further consideration might help to solve.

Conclusions

My overall impression of the conference was that everybody involved was keen to learn from each other and to keep the good bits of the digital pivot from March 2020. There was clearly some anxiety about the impact of that pivot on learners and staff, but discussion mainly steered away from that towards practical tips and support. The collaborative nature of the sessions led to rich knowledge sharing and co-construction of new knowledge as dialogue developed.

There was considerable "space agnostic learning" (Bryant, 2021), where practitioners were wary of technology taking precedence over pedagogy, and wanted to ensure that high quality teaching and learning could be delivered in different ways in different spaces. There was a strong suggestion that technology (in the broadest sense) should be carefully audited and matched to what needs to be taught.

Some attendees expressed anxiety about their duty of care to learners, which is not the same as academic engagement or participation, and about disengagement, or perhaps disconnection or potential disengagement, which can be tricky to judge or monitor remotely. This related to another strand of concern, which is organisational delays in decision-making related to technology policy and/or purchasing, which can create uncertainty and frustration for staff and students alike. These concerns align

with a need for clarity about what is possible, what is permissible, and what is desirable, which are of course not necessarily the same thing.

Overall, I found the conference stimulating and extremely interesting, both from a pedagogic point of view, and as an exercise in attending an exclusively online extended event. The content and networking opportunities were both immensely valuable to me as a researcher, and as an educational professional. I welcomed making some new contacts at Warwick and I followed them up with one-to-one conversations over the following weeks.

Acknowledgments

Bio

Marianne Talbot is a PhD researcher at the University of Leeds School of Education. Her area of interest is the impact of professional development in educational assessment on qualified teachers, their assessment practice, and their influence on others around them. Her experience is in qualifications and assessment development and evaluation, project management including impact assessments, and course leadership for the Chartered Institute of Educational Assessors, based at the University of Hertfordshire.

Author's email address: edmjt@leeds.ac.uk

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