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Duncan, D. (2021). Remote Supervision of Group Practice Projects During a Lockdown: A Pedagogical and Experiential Perspective. *Journal of Media Education*, 12(2), 48 - 56. <https://fr.calameo.com/journal-of-media-education/read/00009178964e297c91c94>

Published in:
Journal of Media Education

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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Remote Supervision of Group Practice Projects During a Lockdown: a pedagogical and experiential perspective

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Abstract

The current global Coronavirus pandemic has created a number of problems for the teaching and supervision of media-related practice (such as broadcast production) in Higher Education contexts. This paper presents challenges facing the supervision of group projects involving media production and explores possible solutions drawn from various parts of the feedback nexus, ICT tools; and new approaches to supervisory intervention. Ideas and solutions developed now under the current lockdown context can be used or adapted for future contexts of supervision involving various levels of restriction on movement or physical interaction.

Author Biography

Don Duncan has worked in the field of journalism for several decades in Europe, the Middle East, Africa and North America. He has a master's degrees in politics, journalism, and film making. His current interests include: multilingualism; sectarianism and identity; and hybrid forms of broadcast work.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Introduction

The global Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 and its related national lockdowns and periods of restrictions have caused considerable disruption to all aspects of society, not least, Higher Education.

In the United Kingdom, like many other countries, the first reported case of Covid-19 was reported in January 31st and the virus started to spread exponentially through February and early March. With very little time to prepare, lecturers and students found themselves having to radically pivot their work online as universities across the country began to cease most activities operating in a physical capacity.

Since that time, in a bid to continue teaching, research and supervision, universities and other institutes of Higher Education have been embracing and adapting various technologies and approaches, some of which have existed for a number of years: online learning platforms, hybrid delivery, remote learning. With tools like these, educators and students are innovating new, effective ways to minimise the disruption to learning and research caused by the pandemic.

This paper operates on the understanding that Covid-19 and its associated disruptions (caused by lockdown, partial lockdown and public restrictions) signify a watershed for teaching and supervision in the Higher Education sector. Media-related subject pathways, especially those which carry practice components (broadcast, journalism, film, etc.), are embracing new ways of teaching and supervising media production, doing so remotely in order to be compliant with rules relating to various levels of lockdown. A paradigm shift is underway.

Technologies and teaching strategies – which until recently were considered marginal or were neglected – are now forming the spine of a new education and supervision delivery that is pliant and deeply adaptable to current and future pandemic contexts.

In a bid to address a specific part of the aforementioned changes, this paper will analyse and reflect on the remote supervision of group practice projects in the context of a society-wide lockdown. It will take as a specific case study the supervision of students on the MA Media & Broadcast Production programme at Queen's University Belfast as they undertake a practice-based dissertation project during the Covid-19 global pandemic of 2020. The analysis and reflection in the paper will focus on one specific practice dissertation project – a three-part podcast series – being produced by a group of three MA students who are geographically dispersed.

The analysis in this paper will draw both from my own experiences as supervisor and lecturer as well as on ideas and strategies developed by theorists and other lecturer-practitioners. The aim is to explore ways to improve the quality of supervision of group work during current and future lockdown contexts.

Research Context

The creation and maintenance of constructive alignment between assignment work and module learning outcomes, as per Biggs (1999), is challenged by various contexts and circumstances in the contemporary, Covid-era arena of Higher Education.

Declining support and subsidies from governments in numerous countries has and continues to compel universities to reform their business models. Slaughter & Leslie (1997) examined how many universities have settled on a business model with a growing dependency on higher fee-paying international students as a substitute for lost state subsidies. This model of internationalisation does not come without problems. As per Welch (2012), recently developed “opportunistic entrepreneurship” in the modern Higher Education sector has created dysfunction and tension at the heart of the pedagogical project in many of the institutions adopting such a business model.

Group work can be a useful tool in contexts where student numbers are being scaled up and it carries its own intrinsic, unique pedagogical value and potential (Williams et al, 1991). However, student team dynamics in group configurations, especially in the context of graded assessment, can be fraught and problematic. The concept and perennial problem of “social loafing” in group contexts – as conceptualised by Aggarwal & O'Brien (2008) – is common,

yet there exist many ways to manage it. Riebe et al. (2016) explore some of the psychological dimensions students encounter as they negotiate and enter into group work.

The growth of the integration of ICT tools in the Higher Education sector – both for teaching and for managing group work has been well documented (Collis & Moonen, 2008; Hedberg & Corrent-Agostinho). There is also growing literature around how ICT tools can be used for the more effective provision of student supervision (Gumbo, 2018; Karvounidis et al, 2014; Sheratt, 2012).

Drawing on this research context, this paper will focus on the specific context of group work supervision where remote collaboration within the group is necessitated by a lockdown, due to pandemic in this case. Hesterman's (2016) work on managing power dynamics in group work and establishing, in the early stages of a project, protocols that increase the chances of ultimate success for the collaboration is instructive.

Research Question 1:

How can formal, informal and “accidental” moments of feedback be used to better design and sustain remote group work?

Research Question 2:

Can ICT tools, such as VLE, be used to improve socialisation and trust within groups working together remotely?

Research Question 3:

Does frequent supervisor intervention help or hurt the chances of successful and harmonious dynamics of groups working together remotely?

Case Study

The arrival of Covid-19 and the ensuing global pandemic and lockdown measures added several more layers of complexity to the relationship I have – as a supervisor – to my MA students. As a case study for this paper, I will take a four people – myself as supervisor and one group of three students who are my supervisees as they work on a podcast series as part of their MA dissertation. In addition to collaboratively producing the podcast series, they each have had to individually produce an essay of critical reflection so as to satisfy the requirements of the dissertation.

Since the lockdown in the U.K. began (March 23rd, 2020), the three members of this group have been scattered geographically – one back home to Scotland, one to north county Antrim (in Northern Ireland) and one to Belfast city. Their task has been to co-produce a three-part podcast series in compliance with the evolving rules associated with various stages of lockdown and/or restrictions on movement and gathering. Episodes need to be produced in such a way that they feel like that they are part of a series – both sonically and thematically. The material – in its entirety – cannot exceed 1 hour 25 minutes and must be sound-rich, narrative-driven and character-centred. At time of writing, students have not yet been graded on the project.

For the group in question, the pandemic context in which the project is occurring means not only that production must happen remotely but also that production must be dispersed, given that they are in three separate geographic locations. This kind of production process is already happening in the podcasting and radio industry (Transom). This means that students use equipment and software they have access to – mobile phones, skype, WhatsApp, Zoom, etc. – and produce a sound-rich story using them, despite the odds.

The kind of camaraderie and intra-group trust that can develop from positive, in-person collaboration is less easily attainable when the whole process has been made virtual as was the case the university entered lockdown.

Method

The context of the research covered in this paper was the unprecedented, highly changeable situation of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. The case study chosen is a group unit of three geographically dispersed students undertaking a collaborative, practice-based media project, also a relatively dynamic situation. The students had already commenced their dissertation projects when research for this paper was begun and had not yet completed the research by the time the research and writing of the paper was completed.

In such a layered situation of change, a definitive research intervention at a specific point of time in the cohort's group work – such as a questionnaire – was the best way to a) get a sense of the salient challenges facing in group work under lockdown and b) test ideas from the research literature around group work and remote supervision.

The primary instrument of research used was an in-depth questionnaire which the student members of the case study cohort had the option to complete. Because they had not finished the dissertation project and had not received any grades, it was extremely important that the students in question didn't feel unduly compelled to cooperate due to a perception of potential impact on final grades. To avoid this happening, the questionnaire was made anonymous, optional and was available online giving the student full agency in the process of engagement or non-engagement with the questionnaire. Prior to being sent the questionnaire, the students were briefed on the purposes of the research, on their anonymity throughout the whole process and on the fact that collaboration or non-collaboration would have no impact whatsoever on their grades.

The case study cohort included in this paper was chosen over other potential cohorts because it contained various attributes of particular relevance to the research questions: the cohort was a group of more than two people; they were collaboratively working on a practice-based project; they were geographically dispersed; one member was overseas (Scotland). Additional attributes made the cohort of interest also: there was a gender mix (two female, one male) and a mix of nationalities with the three members adhering to different national identities.

The questionnaire, administered via SurveyMonkey.com approximately six weeks after the commencement of the group work in question, consisted of ten open-ended questions that required narrative-based answers. As a result, the data collected from the survey is qualitative in nature.

The survey was designed so that there was a logical flow from each question to the next. The questions were worded such that they would produce long, detailed and nuanced narrative answers. The language used was simple and unambiguous and sought to directly address the research questions of the paper. Prior to sending the questionnaire to the students, the survey was piloted with an impact working group consisting of academic staff of Queen's University Belfast. Slight amendments to the questionnaire were made as a consequence to that pilot.

This data emerging from the questionnaire is supplemented in this paper by additional data and learning from formal and informal feedback produced over the past year by the MA class to which the case study cohort belongs.

Another aspect of the methodology was the creation of a closed page on Canvas (the VLE used by the MA students) for the sole use of the cohort under study in this paper. The page serves as a “home room” for the students and it became a kind of “live document” through which their project could be kept track of, remotely.

Results

Remote Group Practice Work Under Lockdown

In an ideal world, group configurations for practice-based activities and assignments should be used only if doing so serves a clear pedagogical benefit for the student or if it helps replicate a working situation/process that exists in industry, such as the production of TV news packages (which require crews of 2 – 3 people typically) or TV documentaries (which often require crews of 3 – 5 people). In reality, however, the tendency of modern universities is to seek to boost student numbers, especially through lucrative internationalisation – the “massification of higher education” as Welch puts it (2012, p. 298) – often without matching growth with a commensurate investment in physical or human resources. This poorly-aligned scaling up of student numbers with investments in equipment/facilities and staff erodes the ability of the academic staff to cope in terms of their capacity, their workload and any new directions they want to take, or innovations they want to make, in curricula (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Such pressures that are put on resources by scaled up student numbers often compel practice-based lecturers to lean on group work as a way to mitigate problems related to resource scarcity or a mismanaged scaling up of student numbers. This is, of course, a use of group practice work that has little, if any, rooting in pedagogical best practice.

However, even when used for pedagogically beneficial reasons – in classroom contexts or in contexts involving assignments that take place primarily outside of class time – group configurations can carry within them an innate tension for the student for whom they can be simultaneously valuable and fraught. “Social loafing” – whereby one or more members of a group do less work and benefit from the harder work of other group members – is a common problem faced by lecturers and students in the context of group work. Williams et al found it to be the “primary complaint” from students as to why they dislike group work (1991, p. 47), a significant factor among various “transaction costs” evaluated by each student as they consider, negotiate and enter group configurations. (Riebe et al, 2016, p. 16)

In the case of teaching and supervising students of broadcast journalism and documentary, feedback mechanisms such as informal minute papers and university-issued, formal evaluation surveys are particularly useful because they repeatedly reflect group tensions as they develop, with students often lauding and bemoaning group work as a modality for assessment. Formal and informal student feedback can therefore form a solid first step for lecturers to discover and hone finding ways to improve.

On top of these regular sources of feedback, there can also occur occasional sources of additional feedback which are accidental in nature. An MA student belonging to the cohort of students from which the case study cohort has been drawn, misunderstood a prompt for an essay assignment and instead delivered a detailed and frank evaluation of their experience of group work became an unexpected yet invaluable source of “accidental” feedback over this past year. The essay in question painted the picture of the difficulties and obstacles to learning that can occur when one member of a group does not get motivated; does not get on board; and ultimately lets down the group and puts the project’s practice output in jeopardy. This kind of “accidental feedback” along with the abovementioned intended formal and informal kinds of feedback are potent tools for a practice-based supervisor preparing to oversee projects remotely.

ICT as a solution for problems of scale and for facilitating “group socialisation”

Gumbo points out how soaring student numbers are “among the most challenging factors that cause supervision problems and thus affect output” but goes on to assert that ICT tools are one of the possible solutions that can help speed up aspects of supervision “since it provides a quicker way to manage and carry out supervision” (2018, p. 55). ICT can also be used to ensure that the “structural factors” of a group project’s set-up phase – which Aggarwal and O’Brien see as important for the healthy functioning of the project (2008, p. 275) – are easy to establish and then adapt, if needed, as per the evolution of the group project.

As per Gumbo above, ICT tools and capacities afforded by Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) can become indispensable tools by which to manage remote supervision. As illustrated in more detail below, VLEs have the potential to make remote supervision more efficient and effective. I argue that they also carry the potential to re-inject more pedagogical value and purpose to remote group work that, in many cases, has been occasioned mainly due to resource scarcity.

ICT for “Group Socialisation”

Hesterman puts significant emphasis on the importance of “group socialisation” to the eventual successful functioning of a group unit, adding that “groups are not always cohesive, and members do not necessarily pool their resources of knowledge.” Citing Becker, Hesterman asserts that “allocating time to socialise and form a cohesive team is identified as particularly challenging (2016). Particularly where group members are geographically, socially and economically diverse” (2016, p. 4 – 5).

The three students that form the case study cohort were not randomly assigned to each other. They self-selected and then proceeded to assign specific production roles within the group. This sense of agency helped assure the “cohesion” and “pooling of resources” (Hesterman, 2016) that can lead to a successful group project outcome.

Aside from students’ own agency, there is much a supervisor can do to facilitate Hesterman’s “group socialisation” or indeed Hedberg & Corrent-Agostinho’s model of “flexible learning” (2010, p. 84) by triggering collaboration, equity and resourcefulness within the group – all of which are qualities that are especially necessary in the context of a lockdown.

VLE platforms such as Canvas and software such as MS Teams, which enables file sharing and VoIP calls between students, are extremely valuable Web 2.0 tools that are crucial for the cultivation and meaningful activation of group cohesion in a lockdown context.

Karvounidis *et al.* assert that adopting Web 2.0 technologies, such as Canvas and MS Teams, can help build “an increased emphasis on user-generated content, data and content sharing [and] collaborative efforts” (2014, p. 577). These characteristics help – among other things – to trigger “perceived usefulness,” “perceived enjoyment,” “perceived playfulness,” a sense of “quality of information,” and a sense of the “quality of the system” that all can underpin and promote dynamic, healthy and functional group work dynamics (Karvounidis *et al.*, 2014, p. 578).

In this vein, I created a closed, dedicated page on Canvas (the VLE used by my university) for the case study group. The page would serve as a “home room” of sorts for our virtual rapport: a place where all updates, resources and new instructions were posted or linked to.

There, the physically dispersed group could glean – in an even, fair manner – initial information posted by me about new and emerging, lockdown-specific media best practice concerning remote broadcast production. From this, they could decide – *as a group* – what their own specific approach to remote production in the current lockdown context would be.

Links to resources for “producing under lockdown” (Transom, 2020) posted on this group-dedicated Canvas page created a very useful information gap that served to propel group cohesion, socialisation and helped display Swan’s “indicators of community” (as cited in Sheratt, 2012, p. 102) where “individual students take on a facilitative role” and this “creates a different dynamic from facilitative intervention by a tutor.” The gap between the resource links posted on the shared Canvas page and the resultant production approach the group adopted from those resources was a purposeful design component of the page. This gap compelled them to engage with and appropriate the page I had created; activating Hesterman’s “group socialisation” (2016) mentioned above so as to “enhance asynchronous communication and cooperative learning” (Karvounidis et al., 2014, p. 580).

Iterative feedback informing evolving supervision approach

I created an online questionnaire that the three students of the case study group could respond to anonymously. Its purpose was to get a sense of how the above supervision strategies were being experienced from the students’ various points of view. One question in the poll specifically addressed the shared, group page I had created on Canvas and one of the group responded that “Canvas is helpful to me when there is a clearly-marked folder with suggested reading in it” yet also confessed that they hadn’t used the shared Canvas page all that much. Another responder said that while the page is very useful, Canvas is only one of a whole range of online tools which MA students use to communicate, coordinate and share resources. “We are used to using Google Drive and social media,” the responder wrote, “so we chose against [using Canvas as a primary platform] as we would have to reorganise our material and we already knew how to work with other tools.”

This kind of feedback was both reassuring and illuminating. It also showed how iterative feedback channels (such as anonymous questionnaires) can be a valuable tool to continually adjust and improve the nature of supervision during a lockdown situation that is itself in continual flux. While the thinking and pedagogical strategies behind the abovementioned use of the university’s VLE for a group shared page were sound, the questionnaire feedback

revealed aspects of the approach I had been previously unaware of: that from the point of view of students, a wholly VLE-anchored approach is far too narrow. This raises questions about the efficacy of hierarchically-imposed, centralised VLEs as the exclusive province of virtual learning in Higher Education, a convention that is mainly underpinned by a university's central economic policies and realities. The case study group's feedback via the questionnaire also echoes Collis & Moonen's critique of the typical way in which institutions of Higher Education tend to use VLEs, as mere "filing cabinets," places where information is dumped and shared. This narrow use of VLEs, Collis & Moonen argue, deprives students of the more expansive, dynamic potential of VLEs to shift learning from lower to higher regions of Bloom's taxonomy (2008, p. 96).

In the specific context of supervision during a lockdown, the detailed feedback resulting from the questionnaire I sent to the case study group strengthens the case for a mandatory and broad discussion with members of a given group unit *prior* to formulating any binding technological supervision strategy. Early identification and adoption of alternative tools and platforms which students use and prefer to the official university ones could increase the likelihood of student buy-in and collaboration in the group project (Swan as cited in Sheratt, 2012).

Initiating such online group dialogue and collaboration is not enough, however. As per Garrison and Cleveland (as cited in Sheratt, 2012), simply achieving dialogue online "is not sufficient to achieve the best learning experience." There also needs to be a focus on "critical thinking and cognitive presence" (Sheratt, 2012, p. 109 – 110). To achieve this higher order of collaboration, according to Sheratt, requires supervisor input (2012, p. 110).

Supervisor Input: Striking a balance; shifting onus

Supervisor contact and input can be a subtle and complicated thing. Some students need more of it. Some then grow dependent on it to a degree that is deleterious to their learning. Other students thrive with minimal, "light-touch" supervision and see repeated interventions as "interference" (Sheratt, 2012, p. 110).

Two of the three students in this paper's case study group responded positively to the prospect of regular supervisor input when asked about it in the anonymous questionnaire I sent to them.

One of those students said that “having regular catch-ups with your supervisor is beneficial because it forces the student not to do everything last minute.” Another student said: “We [in the group] are too soft on each other about having things done so having a supervisor to check up on progress is very helpful.”

While this feedback does condone – in the specific context of this group in this lockdown – a certain amount of intervention as supervisor, it is not insignificant that only two of the three group members responded at all to the questionnaire. How does one interpret the non-compliance of that third group member? Might this be a sign that perhaps that member is less receptive of supervisor intervention than the other two? What to do about that silence?

Regardless of the extent and intensity of supervisor intervention, an equanimous, dynamic and self-sustaining group vitality needs to be arrived at for the students of this case study group to successfully achieve the learning outcomes of the particular dissertation module they are undertaking and thereby assure that constructive alignment is reinforced and furthered (Biggs, 1999, p. 69). At an early stage in the process, the onus of responsibility and organisation needs to shift from the supervisor to the students so that they can conceptualise, steer and manage their own research as per the learning outcomes of the dissertation module.

Hesterman formulated a technique to help facilitate this transition and coined it the “Digital Handshake Group Contract.” It can be a hard or soft copy document that facilitates the “negotiation of students’ individualised learning pursuits within the group context” (2016, p. 5). It is a way that helps students assume a collective responsibility and a singular role/set of tasks within that overarching collective duty (2016, p. 7). At the heart of Hesterman’s “Digital Handshake Group Contract” – the glue that holds it all together – is trust.

Discussion/Recommendations

Adopting and adapting Hesterman’s “Digital Handshake” and making it a part of the initial stage of my supervision of the case study cohort, it proved to be a very efficient tool by which to achieve that transition from “onus-on-supervisor” to “shared-and-collective-onus-on-group.” Involving the students in the design and implementation of the ‘contract’ was a good way to get buy-in for the tool/contract itself. While the “digital handshake” worked well

for this paper's case study cohort, it is not necessarily a tool that can or should be universally applied to all kinds of groups and group contexts.

Throughout this paper, I have also studied Hesterman's work on "group socialisation"; Karvounidis *et al*'s strategies around the use of Web 2.0 tools, particularly VLEs, for group supervision; and Sheratt's thinking on the limits of supervisor intervention were all particularly useful in my work supervising the specific cohort taken as a case study for this paper.

The larger challenge now is to decipher which of these strategies can be effectively used for all or most group supervision in a near to mid-future that looks likely to be affected by pandemic and further lockdown and which ones are only effective in the unique context covered in this paper.

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