

Final report: When Two Worlds Collide: Achieving wisdom in online groups

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Original Project title: Wisdom from Groups (WfG)

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Executive Summary

The project themes can be set out in short hand as follows: Online group work. How we get better at it, the need to do more, providing students with experience, innovation in method and reaching out by means of a story set out in a graphic novel.

The question which this project existed to address was ‘how do we get better at collaborative, online group work?’. The basis for this question resides in the need for the Open University to provide teaching which allows students to experience and become more proficient at online group work. This is - a work-reality for numerous professions and collaboration is a necessary skill set in many professional competency frameworks. The key innovation contained in this eSTeEM project related to the medium for, and the manner of, communicating teaching. This project was all about reaching out to students via the means of a story about collaborating in online groups presented in a graphic novel. To achieve maximum outreach the project achieved co-funding by Open Media and Informal Learning (OMIL) and is available along with a variety of supplementary materials in its final form at: <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/science-maths-technology/design-innovation/when-two-worlds-collide-achieving-wisdom-online-groups>

Original aims and scope of the project:

The ‘Wisdom from Groups’ or WfG project (final title: ‘When Two Worlds Collide’) was suggested as an innovation in teaching.

Group work is highly valued by employers and employees alike (as noted previously in Kear et al. 2014; Bell et al. 2017). Collaboration is problematic both in terms of pedagogy and management for online teaching e.g. in terms of the authentic value of tasks, the value of

skills won in the workplace and the sensitivity of assessment (Donelan & Kear, 2017) and synchronising student activity). But it is of central importance in many areas of professional life and emphasised by many professional bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Water and Environmental Management.

The two Environmental Management modules T219 and T319 originally chaired by the proposers make use of group work, but run into a range of generic group work issues noted above in terms of engaging some students. Lack of student understanding of, and appreciation of the value of group work has led to some reduction in retention in each module.

The WfG proposal aimed to address these issues by developing a graphic novel in order to provide an engaging and informative resource which would improve student appreciation of online group work and thus student retention on the modules.

The specific strengths of graphic novels are that they are engaging and can emphasise and amplify key messages in order to improve the student appreciation of the powers of group work (e.g. gaining group wisdom for complex problem structuring issues) and augment the positive message about the importance of group work in a wide range of professional fields. At the outset, the project team believed that such an offer would be of relevance to a wide variety of OU modules which also include group work, thereby widening the scope and content of the graphic novel and its potential users/readership.

References

Bell, S. et al., 2017. Teaching Environmental Management Competencies Online: Towards “Authentic” Collaboration? *European Journal of Open Distance and E Learning*, 20(1), pp.22–44.

Donelan, H. & Kear, K., 2017. Creating and collaborating: students’ and tutors’ perceptions of an online group project. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* (In press).

Kear, K., Donelan, H. & Williams, J., 2014. Using wikis for online group projects: student and tutor perspectives. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 15(4), pp.70–90.

Achievements/deliverables/outputs to date

Our original timetable was as follows

- 1.Engagement of graphic artist – November 2017
- 2.Completion of graphic novel story board in Power point – February 2018

3. Initial artist interpretation – April 2018
4. Iteration and development of storyboard to 'blue pen' format – June 2018
5. Development of the graphic novel in final format – September 2018
6. Finalisation of graphic novel in e-book format – January 2019
7. Handover to T219/ T319 for Block 3 – February 2019

At the time of our interim report on the 10th May 2018 we were already at stage 5 –four months ahead of schedule. Following a final meeting of our academic Advisory Panel on 17th May 2018 we moved to stage 6 and completed the graphic novel by autumn 2018.

At about this time we succeeded in gaining the support and investment of OMIL to provide a web platform for the comic. All elements of the website were completed by the 1st March 2019 (in time for the group work elements of T219 and T319) and the hard copy of the comic was printed and ready for students by 27th March. This was all achieved within budget as well as within the original timeframe.

Findings, Impact – expectations for student experience and teaching

At the time of writing (March 2019) it is too early to identify any significant findings or measures or impact. The site is just launched, and students are only beginning to engage with it. The comic site has been advertised in online/ live module-wide tutorials for both T219 and T319 cohorts. These broadcasts remain available as podcasts to students on either module.

List of Deliverables

The original expectation was that the key deliverable would be a comic, available as a pdf from the module websites. With the inclusion of OMIL the full range of deliverables from this project have expanded to include:

- The M World S World comic – as pdf and as print on demand
- A three-minute animation
- Eight short videos in which the main author and animator discuss the comic and the story form of learning.
- A short explanatory quiz relating to the comic.