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Personalised and multi-sensory approaches to engaging students at a distance: a case study from religious studies

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PERSONALISED AND MULTI-SENSORY APPROACHES TO ENGAGING STUDENTS AT A DISTANCE: A CASE STUDY FROM RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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Summary

This article critically evaluates the pedagogical value of peer-to-peer digital sharing of audio visual resources in a distance learning context. It does so through a case study exploring the use of OpenStudio, an innovative software developed by the Open University (UK). This platform allows students to upload their own images, sounds and texts to an interactive digital pinboard, where they are shared with other students and comments may be exchanged. The context for the use of OpenStudio was to support peer-to-peer group activities, both assessed and unassessed, in a Religious Studies course (A227 “Exploring Religion: Places, Practices, Texts and Experiences”). These activities were envisaged as a novel, experimental approach to offering students a highly personalised, multi-sensory opportunity to explore complex scholarly concepts, in particular the *materiality* of religion. OpenStudio would provide students with a means of learning through their own creativity and self-expression, and also that of others. The findings of this article draw on data critically evaluating the engagement and experiences of both students and tutors during the first presentation of the course, in order to assess the strengths and limitations of this approach to personalised learning through digital technologies.

Introduction

How can we use personalised and multi-sensory approaches to support students in grasping complex ideas, such as the concept of *religion* as a category of scholarly enquiry, and facilitate their critical engagement with relevant scholarly debates in distance learning environments? This was the pedagogical issue faced by members of the Religious Studies department at The Open University, in the United Kingdom, when they came to consider the design of the second year undergraduate course A227 “Exploring Religion: Places, Practices, Texts and Experiences” (hereafter, A227). One of the key developments in the study of religions has been the *material turn*, but this can be a strange concept for students who are used to conceptualising *religion* primarily in terms of abstract beliefs and worldviews. The material turn involves a greater focus on the sensory aspects of religion, such as the ways in which our bodies engage with places, objects and sounds. A227 aimed to encourage students to think beyond simplistic conceptualisations of *religion* and heighten students’ awareness of the complexities of religion as it is lived, including the exploration of material, sensory aspects of religion. The pedagogical concern here was not only in response to the material “turn” in the discipline of religious studies; but also in the context of a discussion about the value of object-based learning

(Chatterjee et al., 2015) which has highlighted the value of multi-sensory, holistic learning experiences and of student engagement through a range of different learning styles (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Course design also needed to consider how these aims could be achieved in a distance learning context. The Open University is the largest distance learning provider of Higher Education in the United Kingdom. As a non-conventional university, with many students from widening participation backgrounds, dispersed around the country, and abroad, and with much of its tuition strategy based on its online presence, there are few opportunities for field visits to religious sites or classroom engagement with physical objects. This paper outlines and critically evaluates the approach adopted by the designers of A227 to address these issues through the use of a peer-to-peer digital sharing tool called OpenStudio.

Context and rationale

OpenStudio is an online tool developed by the Open University, which allows students to share their own images, sounds and texts on an interactive digital pinboard and comment on each other's contributions. On this online platform, students' contributions are displayed next to each other with the comments shown underneath each image (or text/ sound recording). This makes it a lot easier to access, gain an overview and compare different contributions than it is, for example, on online forums. OpenStudio is a platform that was originally developed for a Digital Photography course and has since been used primarily in the context of science, technology and engineering courses (Rosewell, 2015).

OpenStudio was envisaged as a means of enabling a highly personalised approach to learning at a distance. More specifically, its use as part of this Religious Studies course was bound up with three specific pedagogical aims.

- The first was to use OpenStudio as a means of introducing students to some complex theories, concepts and themes in Religious Studies by enabling them to explore these through familiar places, sounds and objects in their own environment. For example, a student might upload a picture of their local football ground in order to discuss the spectrum of *religious* and the *secular*; or an image of an old church building which has been turned into apartments, in order to comment on secularization in a local setting; or to upload the sound of church bells as an example of the ways in which religions engage the human sensorium. A227 sought to create opportunities for students to consider, often for the first time, key concepts and themes in religious studies in a personalised way, by encouraging them to engage with and reflect on their own familiar context.
- Second, OpenStudio was used to encourage students' creativity, and specifically to engage them with multi-sensory learning and assessment to accommodate different learning styles and create richer, deeper learning experiences. Creativity is increasingly a priority amongst employers (Osmani et al., 2015; Rampersad & Patel, 2014; Robinson, 2011), and there is a significant corpus of literature on the relationship between creativity and critical thinking skills (Watts & Blessinger, 2017; p.226), imagination (Blessinger & Watts, 2017; p.4) and intelligence (Kim, 2011; p.285). As Jackson has argued: "creative learning – learning to be

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creative – is an orientation and capability that all students could and most importantly should, develop while they are studying in higher education” (2017, p.ix). However, many HE institutions struggle with the pedagogy of creativity; furthermore, the creative process – *to make* – and its assessment is particularly challenging in a distance learning environment. The use of OpenStudio, and its facility to display and share sound recordings and digital photographs in particular, allows students to engage in creative ways with theoretical and thematic course content. As Del Siegle notes, the use of digital photography offers educators an “excellent opportunity to enhance their students’ creative thinking and self-reflection” (2012; p.285), and there are a range of studies highlighting the capacity of the use of digital photography in higher education to facilitate enhanced student engagement and performance, such as Gleeson’s (2014) study exploring digital photography projects in engineering.

- Third, in all this, A227 utilised OpenStudio in order to traverse some of the perceived limitations of distance learning. While various types of synchronous and asynchronous forums have long been used by distance HE institutions for group tuition, the platforms adopted have tended to produce student learning and interaction which is largely text or voice based. Open Studio, which the designers of A227 judged to offer an accessible, easy to use, and attractive means of sharing images and sounds, as well as text, also provided a means of creating online environments in which self-expression and learning between peers could take place. In the context of A227, it was envisaged that as students collaboratively produced these collections of images and collections of sounds, offering comment on each other’s work and perhaps inspiring each other to think about religion in new ways, or even to make new images and recordings, Open Studio could provide a valuable opportunity for co-creation, developing students’ communication skills.

Methodology

This study focuses on the use of OpenStudio in the course of the first presentation of A227, which ran over a period of nine months (from October 2017 to June 2018). In the Open University, teaching materials and assessment strategies are designed by a small group of academics (referred to as the “module team”), but courses are delivered and assessed by a larger group of tutors each teaching small groups of students across the UK (and beyond). Students used OpenStudio in the context of small online tutor groups which included approximately 20 students each. The software was used by students in four specific activities during the duration of the course:

- Activity 1: ‘What is religion’ activity (week 1). This was a formative activity, which asked students to upload a short, non-specialist definition of religion, in their own words. It was envisaged that this text based activity would develop students’ familiarity with the software, and also give them an early experience of engagement with their peer group.
- Activity 2: “Take a picture of religion?” activity. This assessed activity took place in weeks 2-3 of the course. Initially, in week 2, students were asked to upload a picture of *religion* in their locality and to add a commentary (100 words max) on “why it might tell us something

interesting about religion”. Students were also invited to comment on the images uploaded by other students. Then, in week 3, students were asked to complete their first summative, two-part assessment task. This required them, firstly, to expand on their initial commentary (in week 2) by explaining in 500 words how the image they took related to the course theme “What is religion?”. Second, they were asked, also in 500 words, to reflect on the experience of taking part in the “Take a picture of religion” activity. It was suggested they might use this to discuss how the activity informed their understanding of what *religion* might be. They could also reflect on the process of taking an image and engaging with their local environment, or on their experiences of collaborative discussion with other students or on the negotiation of technical or practical difficulties.

- Activity 3: “Thinking about urban and religious change” activity (week 7). Students were again invited to explore their neighbourhood and take pictures, this times looking specifically for examples of secular buildings which had become religious buildings, and vice-versa. This was a formative activity, and students were invited to upload their images and commentaries on OpenStudio and to continue their interaction with other students on this platform.
- Activity 4: “What does religion sound like?” (week 23). In this final, formative activity students were this time invited to upload recordings (e.g. from their phones) which captured what religion might “sound like”; they were asked to include also a brief commentary of what the sound represented to them about religion, and also to comment on the recordings of other students.

Students in secure environments or those with accessibility issues were provided with a sample image bank (for the “Take a picture of religion” activity) and were given the option of describing sounds or objects in writing or discuss with their tutor of how they would be comfortable contributing to these activities.

The critical evaluation of the use of OpenStudio in the context of this course drew on three sources of quantitative and qualitative data. First, a total of 72 students who took part in the course were invited by e-mail to complete an online questionnaire on their experience of OpenStudio in A227, including a number of open and closed questions about each of the four OpenStudio activities. A total of 21 students responded, 16 with complete responses and 5 partially complete – which meant a 22.2% complete response rate. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone with four local tutors who had supervised the student groups in which the activities were completed. The interview consisted of *open questions*, designed to cover each specific OpenStudio activity, to allow comparison, but also including opportunities to reflect generally on student use of the software. Then, finally, we assessed quantitative data on student involvement in the activities. This included the number of students who took part in each activity; the number of students who left commentaries on their own submissions or on those of other students; the number of comments made by each student; how many peers’ text, image or sound files were viewed by each student; or what kinds of images were uploaded for the ‘Take a picture of religion’ activity (e.g. buildings, objects, nature etc.).

Findings

The analysis of student survey responses suggests that a significant proportion of students did indeed feel that the OpenStudio activities helped them with their learning on A227 and helped them critically engage with key theoretical concepts and reflect on existing knowledge and assumptions, including their prior assumptions about the concept of religion. This applied in particular to the two activities involving digital photography (Activities 2 and 3), though less so to the activities involving written definitions (Activity 1) or sounds (Activity 4). 61.1% of respondents felt that the “Take a picture of religion activity” (Activity 2) had helped them with their learning on A227, 57.1% felt this about the converted building activity (Activity 3, which also involved digital photography), 41.1% about Activity 1 (discussing written definitions of religion) and only 37.5% about Activity 4 (the sound activity). While the module team had envisaged Activity 1 (which involved “just” texts, rather than digital photography or sound recordings) as a more accessible, “easier” entry activity, many students did indeed find it harder to engage with this activity than with the activities involving digital photography. This was also reflected in the tutor interviews, with tutors stating, for example:

“The visual aspect made them more relaxed about commenting. It would be worth considering swapping OpenStudio Activities 1 & 2 for this reason.”
(A227 Tutor)

The “Take a picture of religion” activity (Activity 2) received particularly positive feedback, with two thirds (66.7%) of the student survey respondents confirming that this activity had helped them critically engage with relevant theoretical concepts. Students commented, for example:

“It did make me think about religion in my locality as opposed to religion as a ‘top down’ phenomenon which I presume was part of the reason for doing it.”
(A227 Student)

“I’m glad that TMA01 [the assignment linked to Activity 2] required me to engage intensely with the concept of religion. It opened my mind to other people’s perceptions and led me down a very interesting and educative path.”
(A227 Student)

“I found this kind of visual application to be a helpful way of learning. It placed the concepts in to an everyday context.” (A227 Student)

A tutor commented that they felt that this activity was particularly successful as “this was perhaps the only OpenStudio activity where there was a sense of genuine personal engagement” (A227 Tutor). Every student who responded to the survey had taken part in Activity 2 (which was linked to one of the assignments) and had taken and used their own photographs. As students’ open comments on the survey revealed, many students took great care with the selection of images for Activity 2 and were keen to approach it in creative ways, stating for example:

“This was a good opportunity for me to explore my own definition of religion. I was reluctant to take a picture of my local, pretty church, because I wanted to be more imaginative. If I could have found my chunk of the Berlin Wall, I’d have used that. I noticed that other students presented a mixture of obviously or less obviously religious objects. It was an interesting project, but it might have been more interesting (just a thought) if we had been given warning before the course began; there might have been photo opportunities on summer hols.”
(A227 Student)

“I enjoyed thinking about the image that I could use for [...this activity...] - I used my own image and enjoyed planning and taking it.” (A227 Student)

However, the quantitative analysis of the OpenStudio submissions to Activity 2 (“Take a picture of religion”) showed that most students decided to *play it safe* in their selection of images. Of a total of 95 *pictures of religion* that A227 students submitted to the OpenStudio platform as part of this activity, 62 (i.e. 65.3%) were pictures of buildings, such as churches or mosques, which can be seen as a rather cautious approach, rather than creative interpretation of this task.

Open survey comments (including the quotes above) reflected a heightened sense of students’ cognitive engagement with these activities. It is also important to note that survey responses indicated significant levels of emotional engagement, with a sizeable proportion of student survey respondents (Activity 1: 64.7%, Activity 2: 66.7%, Activity 3: 64.3% and Activity 4: 50%) stating that they either enjoyed or very much enjoyed taking part in the OpenStudio activities. As Vicky Trowler notes in her review of literature on student engagement, “Engagement is more than involvement or participation – it requires feelings and sensemaking as well as activity” (2010; p.5; see also Harper & Quaye, 2009). However, in the case of A227, it is also worth noting that two thirds (66.7%) of student survey respondents felt that the fact that Activity 2 was linked to an assignment had influenced the intensity of their engagement with this particular activity to a significant extent.

The fact that some students stated that they did not enjoy the OpenStudio activities nor found them particularly helpful indicates that these activities might appeal more to students with a greater preference for active visual learning styles. This might also explain why Activity 4, based on sounds, was not as popular. Some students also struggled with technical skills required, which is reflected in the following student comment:

“I know that you are trying to attract young people who are likely to be familiar with such technologies but I think that you should remember your older students (and I’m only 49) - all that faffing with unfamiliar technology may put them off even attempting the module in the first place. I certainly thought twice.” (A227 Student)

Another aspect were students’ mixed attitudes towards and experiences of group work aspects of these activities. As reflected in the following comment, some students appreciated the

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engagement with peers as a very valuable aspect of the OpenStudio activities, stating, for example, that they “really enjoyed seeing other student’s submissions and commenting on them” (A227 Student). However, others were concerned about how their submissions might be perceived by other students and felt that taking part in these activities “made them feel uncomfortable” (A227 Student):

“I was aware of the sensitivity of the subject. I didn’t want to come across as being judgemental.” (A227 Student).

Other students regretted that their group was relatively quiet, stating, for example, that “there were very few posts in my tutorial group so it was difficult to engage” (A227 Student). The extent to which students commented on their peers’ OpenStudio submissions was relatively limited, with each submission receiving an average of between 1.4 (for submissions to Activities 1 and 4) and 3.6 comments (which was the average for Activity 2), but considerably more views (ranging from an average of 3.8 views per submission for Activity 4 to 8.5 views per submission for Activity 2). This suggests that a proportion of students appear to have been curious about peers’ uploads, but nervous about making comments themselves. Other students felt more comfortable and made a greater effort to enter into dialogue with other students, with 34.7% of the students taking part in these activities contributing 5 or more comments. In terms of both, numbers of views and comments on each submission, students generally engaged most intensively with Activity 2. This could be due to a number of factors, including the fact that this activity was linked to an assignment. However, only 38.9% of survey respondents felt that this activity helped them develop their communication skills and the same (relatively small) proportion felt that this activity helped them to engage and work with other students.

Conclusion

The findings of this case study suggest that digital platforms like OpenStudio can offer valuable opportunities to introduce students in distance learning environments (and beyond) to complex theories, concepts and themes and facilitate student engagement with relevant concepts and debates through the use of personalised audio-visual resources, selected by the students themselves. OpenStudio, and the opportunities this digital platform offers for creative, personalised use and exchange of audio visual resources, can be used to support students’ creativity, and engage them with multi-sensory learning and assessment accommodating different learning styles and creating richer, deeper learning experiences, even at a distance. However, it appears that the OpenStudio platform is most suitable for the exchange of visual resources, such as digital photography, rather than written texts or sounds. While the module team had expected that text-based activities would be a softer entry point, the project findings suggest that most students found it actually easier to engage with OpenStudio activities involving images. While the group work elements of these OpenStudio activities have received some mixed responses from students, they have great potential, which will need some further development.

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