Citation

New, Karen; Fox, Kate; Church, Hazel and Moorman, Fiona (2024). The development and evaluation of an online journal club: perspectives from student participants and practitioners. Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning (early access).

URL

https://oro.open.ac.uk/97610/

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To cite this article: Karen New, Kate Fox, Hazel Church & Fiona Moorman (07 May 2024): The development and evaluation of an online journal club: perspectives from student participants and practitioners, Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning, DOI: 10.1080/02680513.2024.2349234

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2024.2349234

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Published online: 07 May 2024.

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The development and evaluation of an online journal club: perspectives from student participants and practitioners

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ABSTRACT
The coronavirus pandemic which began during the 2019/2020 academic calendar has had a significant impact on many educational providers. The Open University, UK, the largest distance tertiary provider in Europe, is ideally placed to share its experience in online and distance education. This paper outlines the use of the Online Journal Club (OJC) as a mechanism for increasing student ownership of learning within the context of an online academic community. OJCs provide an informal, low-risk environment for students to share topics of interest with fellow students, whilst practitioners step back from their traditional roles. Our findings indicate that OJCs provide an enriching and authentic experience for distance learning students, developing academic and employability skills, including digital and information literacy and communication skills. Furthermore, OJCs can act as a potentially transformative experience for practitioners.

Introduction
The coronavirus pandemic part-way through the 2019/2020 academic calendar had a significant impact on educational providers. For some tertiary education providers, the response involved expanding and further developing existing online/blended provision; for others, it involved development of new online alternatives which facilitate aspects of the student experience previously developed in a face-to-face environment. As the sector transitions to a post-pandemic context, it looks increasingly likely that online and blended learning will be a permanent component of the higher education landscape (Tsiligkiris & Ilieva, 2022), meaning that the importance of providing a rich online academic experience for students remains undiminished. This study evaluated whether our approach of providing low-stakes, student-led online journal clubs within a holistic online setting, outside a formal learning route, might provide an authentic learning experience. This paper acts as a case study, outlining the use of online journal clubs (OJCs) to provide a mechanism for development of confidence and skills and increasing student ownership of learning within the context of an online community.
Open university context

The Open University (OU) is a large-scale distance higher education provider, with over 200,000 students, situated throughout the UK and internationally (The Open University, 2022). As might be expected from such large numbers of individuals, OU students are a heterogenous group bringing diverse prior educational experiences into this learning environment. Inevitably, there is a wide spectrum of competence, confidence and self-perception relating to academic proficiency, in terms of prior knowledge and the study tools and methodology applicable in a distance learning context. Additionally, most OU students complete their OU studies on a part-time basis and a significant proportion combine study alongside work and/or caring responsibilities, or face health and disability-related challenges. Furthermore, individuals from poverty-affected, or disadvantaged backgrounds, make up a disproportionate number of part-time students (The Open University, 2022).

Since 2008, the OU has used online conferencing software, a technology that facilitates communication and collaboration between remote participants in real time through audio and text-based chat, to provide synchronous online tutorials. These events provide a mechanism through which access to education and knowledge may be democratised, and real-time interaction and community-building with peers and practitioners is possible despite geographic barriers.

Online synchronous tutorials: challenges for students

Although tuition events (such as lectures and workshops) in some higher education institutions form a compulsory part of the educational experience, in the OU context, such events (referred to within the OU as ‘tutorials’) are optional. Research and internal quality control processes suggest that online tutorial attendance is low (Butler et al., 2018). Given the complex demographics of the student-base and wider societal context, the reasons for this are likely to be multifaceted, but low attendance represents a significant concern.

Whilst individuals may exhibit confidence and competence with some digital devices and tools (e.g. social media), Prensky’s (2001) concept of ‘digital natives’, who are comfortable and proficient with information technology by virtue of their date of birth, oversimplifies the digital capability of individuals (Smith et al., 2020). Whilst individuals may regularly use Apps and navigate the internet, they may have limited experience with institutionally provided virtual learning environments (VLE), or workplace tools (e.g. PowerPoint, conferencing software). The OU attracts students from across all age groups and social backgrounds with 33% of new undergraduates under 25, and 26% of OU UK undergraduates currently living in the 25% most deprived areas of the country; prior access and technical experience and capability should not be assumed. As Giesbers et al. (2014) suggest, for some students, the technology used for online tutorial events may distract from the intended learning opportunities. Low confidence/familiarity with tools may contribute to reticence to attend, a concern reported by Kear et al. (2012), who found that the complexity of the interface, along with technical difficulties, were common reasons for non-attendance in online tutorials. However, it must be acknowledged that such a limited, deficit view does not fully explain any ‘digital disconnect’ (Selwyn, 2007) nor
provide the sole reason for non-attendance/lack of engagement, merely it is important to recognise that for some students, technology may be a barrier.

**Online synchronous tutorials: challenges for practitioners**

Mirroring the students they support, OU associate lecturers (ALs) form a heterogenous body, geographically isolated from their peers and with mixed prior experiences of online teaching. Online education is a challenging field; practitioners need to know their specialist topic, be aware of different pedagogies and demonstrate a ‘working familiarity’ with a range of technologies. Overcoming difficulties presented in synchronous online tutorials, such as turn-adjacency, technological issues and developing online etiquette and emergency ‘back-up’ plans (Chen et al., 2019; Moorhouse et al., 2021), requires a delicate balance to avoid rigidity, limiting spontaneity and interaction.

A concern arising from low attendance is the potential negative impact on practitioner perceptions and expectations of online tutorials. Designing and facilitating participatory online synchronous tutorials is time-consuming (Kear et al., 2012; Lonie & Andrews, 2009). Where attendance is low, or where students demonstrate limited engagement (e.g. reluctance to use microphones, Campbell et al., 2019; Douce, 2019), it may be inevitable that some practitioners adopt a didactic ‘sage-on-a-stage’ approach, with overreliance on pre-prepared slides. Instead of the discursive process outlined by Laurillard (2013), poor attendance and reduction in dialogue in online sessions results in ‘one-way’ lectures (Butler et al., 2018; Lowe et al., 2016) and although unintentional, these traditional polarised student-practitioner roles, with asymmetrical power-relationship and delivery of content, may lack authenticity and reduce the potential for the development of transformative environments (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015).

**Development of the Online Journal Club (OJC) programme**

This paper describes the establishment of online journal clubs (OJCs), embedded within a supportive website, in order to address challenges within our dispersed distance learning environment.

As Linzer (1987) describes, Journal Clubs have existed in face-to-face environments for over a century and have long been used as an educational and professional development tool in academia and industry. Journal clubs may offer the potential to raise awareness of recent research or clinical/industry-led practices and develop critical evaluation skills. They may enable individuals to participate in collaborative and peer-to-peer learning, forming professional and social networks (Newswander & Borrego, 2009). Journal club providers have embraced the opportunities provided by technology, utilising a variety of online formats, ranging from the use of email for asynchronous journal clubs (Kuppersmith et al., 1997; Thakurdesai et al., 2018), closed-group blogging platforms, such as WordPress (Kean, 2013) and private Facebook groups (Graff et al., 2018), through to open social media platforms, such as Twitter, as illustrated by Chai et al. (2018), whose Twitter journal club is open to clinicians, science professionals, patient and non-physician viewpoints.

Despite perceived benefits, the literature highlights limitations associated with student journal clubs; in addition to the logistical issue of developing journal club
infrastructure, there are challenges associated with recruitment and motivation of participants as time-poor individuals may struggle to find, evaluate and present information (Thakurdesai et al., 2018); on a more basic level, students may simply not appreciate the value of participation in journal clubs. Students may also experience barriers to participation such as real or perceived lack of digital skills or online confidence (Billingsley et al., 2013) and technical issues (Aweid et al., 2022).

**Pedagogical context for our OJC model**

Defining how a journal club operates is surprisingly difficult. At its essence, an online journal club provides an online space where students can present to their peers. Historically, journal clubs follow a variety of different methodologies; clubs may operate where one or more papers are shared prior to a meeting, to be discussed as a whole group, or presented by one or two participants in a seminar. Articles for discussion might be selected by a lead member of the group or might be selected by participants on a rota basis; the articles themselves might be from high impact journals or preprints.

When designing our OJC model, flexibility was considered important so that learners were given autonomy over subject matter; students were required to source and share news of importance to them, in an informal and enjoyable way. OJC had no restrictions over the academic level of source material, and it was anticipated that items shared in the OJC programme might range from traditional journal articles and research papers to items sourced from mainstream media. It was hoped that participation in live OJC events might enable students to increase ownership of learning and hence provide an enriching experience, which might be carried through to formal study. In our OJC model, a student was only defined as having ‘participated’ in an OJC event if they delivered a talk to their peers. In such a way, it was hoped that students would gain from their own direct experience, whilst also being able to learn from each other’s experience.

A further aim of OJC was to facilitate the application of potentially abstract study concepts into real-life contemporary situations. By preparing and undertaking live oral presentations, it was hoped that students would be able to develop ‘back to basics’ skills (Barber & Robertson, 2016) of relevance to a wide range of employment contexts (Ornellas et al., 2019). Indeed, the name ‘Online Journal Club’ was adopted to mirror naming conventions within professional practice for similar events; ‘online’ to facilitate access to our geographically spread student-base; whilst inclusion of ‘club’ also served to emphasise the less formal aspect, i.e. an informal virtual meeting place for individuals with shared interests.

A key tenet of our design approach was that an OJC event would be more than a live event; the OJC experience would be a ‘one-stop-shop’, where students could access a dedicated website to support academic and digital literacy skills and gain access to an academic community of peers and experienced facilitators (Figures 1 and 2); the OJC website would have no time limits, and would be visited (and revisited) when the student chose. In such a way, OJCs would exist outside formal module/qualification websites, providing interdisciplinary, informal spaces outside the more rigid structure of any specific programme of study.
The online environment

To minimise barriers to participation, the OJC programme used tools and platforms already in existence in the university, and required no further software, hardware, training or financial commitments, beyond those students were already required to use/develop during their study with the OU. The OJC website was designed to provide a reflective learning space, where live clubs might enable students to practice and develop key competencies in online conferencing tools; providing an environment where learners might be challenged about pre-existing assumptions about the technology and their role in online events. Students were guided and supported through the ‘OJC experience’ (Figure 2) and provided with learning material to aid the development of communication and presentation skills while using industry standard tools, such as PowerPoint and Adobe Connect.

A forum was provided to enable students to interact asynchronously with each other and OJC facilitators, and live club events took place in Adobe Connect. Although Adobe
Connect offers the ability to record live events, sharing the concerns of Cox (2005) and Lowe et al. (2016) that interactions may be changed as a result of recording, OJC live events were not recorded.

**Encouraging student participation**

Although the literature is mixed over the benefits of making participation in journal clubs mandatory (Deenadayalan et al., 2008; Honey & Baker, 2011), to strengthen learner autonomy, OJC events were voluntary. However, any student attending a live event was expected to present to their peers; no non-participating students were permitted to access a live event. Each OJC live event was kept small (<5 students per live event) to maintain a less-pressurised environment. OJC events were advertised approximately 4 weeks ahead of events, on a variety of module and internal facing qualification websites, and students were able to choose their preferred date from supplied options. Students were also issued with email reminders closer to the date of their chosen event.

The literature is also mixed with regards to the use of incentives to attend Journal Clubs. However, to ensure students achieved recognition for their participation in OJC
events and to increase learner motivation and ownership of learning (Law, 2015) as well as the perceived value of OJCs, students participating in live events were encouraged to gain a microcredential. In collaboration with colleagues across the university, a digital microbadge, hosted on the OpenLearn platform was designed, along with an OJC Quiz to help students reflect and further consolidate skills gained through the experience. Whilst students could participate in as many OJC events as they wished, the microbadge was only awarded following their first event.

In summary, we had identified that students were lacking in opportunities to participate in authentic learning experiences and that there was a need to enhance a variety of employability and digital skills.

Materials and methods

The aims of this study were to explore the feasibility of establishing online journal clubs within our dispersed, distance learning context and to gain an understanding of student and practitioner experiences relating to preparation for and participation in clubs.

A mixed methods approach was adopted involving analysis of quantitative and qualitative student survey responses and qualitative practitioner focus group data. Ethical approval and Data Protection Impact Assessment/Compliance Checks were obtained according to The Open University’s code of practice and procedures before embarking on this project (reference numbers HREC/3070/Moorman and Data Protection registration number 4296).

Demographic data

The following categories of demographic data were collected for students who signed up for an OJC event: gender, whether a disability was declared, ethnicity and prior educational qualifications. Demographic data was not linked to individual survey responses.

Survey analysis

At the end of each live OJC event, student participants were directed to an anonymous JISC survey, comprising 15 short, Likert-style closed-response questions using the 1–5 rating scale and 3 open-ended free text questions. Questions were grouped to collect responses on previous experiences of digital tools, student perception of preparing for an OJC event and experience of participating in OJCs. Free text responses were independently manually coded by two project leads. In total, responses from 26 different students were gathered, over an 8-month period.

Focus group analysis

Qualitative feedback from all four AL practitioners was gathered in an online focus group, within Adobe Connect. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, the room was on a secure OU server and locked to restrict access. The objective for the focus group was to gather practitioner voice and, in line with Costley et al. (2010), all ALs were keen to share experiences and thoughts. The focus group was recorded and, to increase validity, the
recording made available for transcription to an independent third-party who anonymised all comments. Qualitative thematic analysis was employed by project leads and the transcript was independently analysed via NVIVO™ Version 11 (QSR International Pty. Ltd www.qsrinternational.com) and manual approaches. A consensus was reached on key themes emerging from the data: ‘influences on practice’, ‘logistical concerns’, ‘student experience’, ‘challenges and suggestions’.

Results

Between December 2018 and September 2019, 13 OJC live events were provided. A total of 121 posts were made on the asynchronous forum hosted on the OJC website. Posts were made by 34 individual contributors, split across 14 different discussion threads. In response to student requests, and with student permission, some presentation slides were made available on the forum and a small sample of titles are provided (Table 1). 100% of OJC student participants successfully claimed their microbadge.

Characteristics of students who expressed interest in OJC

Seventy-nine students signed-up to participate in OJC by completing the online form to indicate their availability for specific clubs. Demographic data for all 79 students who expressed interest in participating in an OJC event was analysed. Of these students who expressed interest in participation, only 34 individuals (43%) followed-up this initial interest by preparing and delivering a presentation to fully participate in one or more OJC events.

As shown in Figure 3(a), fewer male students than females signed up for an OJC event (21 versus 58), but of those who expressed initial interest by completing the sign-up form, a greater proportion of male students progressed to present at a club

Table 1. A sample of student presentations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tardigrades: ‘Water bears’ stuck on the moon after crash</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engineering: A very short introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female warriors: Historical reality vs media portrayal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology and the fleshly interface in Forster’s ‘The Machine Stops’: An ecocritical appraisal of a one-hundred year old future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New pain organ discovered in the skin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex structures’ organisation studied in slime mould</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate change: Having the right combination of tree ‘personalities’ could make forests more resilient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deadly Sea Worm found off Britain’s coastline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harnessing heat beyond 200 °c from unconcentrated sunlight with nonevacuated transparent aerogels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Quantitative survey results: respondents (n, %) reporting their previous experience of online engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Very frequently/ frequently</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Never/ rarely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have given online presentations before</td>
<td>3 (11.5%)</td>
<td>1 (3.8%)</td>
<td>22 (84.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have used my microphone in Adobe Connect before</td>
<td>12 (46.1%)</td>
<td>3 (11.5)</td>
<td>11 (42.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have used PowerPoint (or similar software) before</td>
<td>16 (61.1%)</td>
<td>5 (19.2%)</td>
<td>5 (19.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before OJC I felt confident when attending tutorials in Adobe Connect</td>
<td>16 (61.1%)</td>
<td>7 (26.9%)</td>
<td>3 (11.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Quantitative survey results: respondents (n, %) reporting their experience of preparing for and participating in their OJC event and development of skills and confidence following the event.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly agree/agree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Strongly disagree/disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The information and resources on the OJC website did not help me prepare for OJC</td>
<td>4 (15.3%)</td>
<td>1 (3.8%)</td>
<td>21 (80.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I found it easy to research my news/article</td>
<td>25 (96.2%)</td>
<td>1 (3.8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoyed OJC</td>
<td>26 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OJC was not very friendly or relaxed</td>
<td>1 (3.8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>25 (96.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OJC made me feel part of a community</td>
<td>26 (100%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I did not enjoy interacting with other students in the OJC environment</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (3.8%)</td>
<td>25 (96.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OJC has not increased my confidence within the Adobe Connect environment</td>
<td>2 (7.7%)</td>
<td>1 (3.8%)</td>
<td>23 (88.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OJC has increased my ability to research articles/information</td>
<td>25 (96.2%)</td>
<td>1 (3.8%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OJC has not helped me develop my presentation skills</td>
<td>1 (3.8%)</td>
<td>2 (7.7%)</td>
<td>23 (88.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A mixture of positive and negative statements were used to avoid possible bias of students checking all ‘agree/strongly agree’ boxes.

compared to female students (approximately 60% versus 40%). Approximately 25% of all presenters had a disability marker, indicating that OJCs were accessible to these students. Figure 3(b) indicates that students with HE qualifications were most likely both to sign-up and to participate in a club, but it is worth noting that this grouping also included students with qualifications such as Higher National Certificates/Higher National Diplomas, or National Vocational Qualifications. It is plausible that the opportunity of participating in OJCs could be attractive as an enrichment experience to students who are already strong academically. However, students with lower prior educational qualifications also participated in OJC events, albeit to a lesser extent, indicating that the experience of participating in OJCs was of interest to students spanning a range of educational backgrounds.

Student perspectives

Twenty-six of the 34 students who participated in OJC events responded to the student feedback survey (response rate of approximately 75%). Although more than half of students who participated in an OJC event indicated that they had used PowerPoint (or similar presentation software) frequently, very few had previously given an online presentation. Just over half of respondents said that they felt confident when attending online tutorials, with the remainder feeling confident less often when attending online tutorials. There was also variable experience of use of microphone during online tutorials with survey respondents equally split between those who never/rarely and frequently/very frequently used their microphone during online tutorials (Table 2).

As shown in Table 3, twenty-seven out of 34 students responding to the survey indicated that the information and resources on the OJC website had helped them prepare for OJCs, demonstrating the usefulness of the ‘one-stop-shop’ approach. Furthermore, students believed that their research and presentation skills had been developed as a result of participation in OJCs. However, it must be acknowledged that student presenters only provided their perceptions of improved skill development following OJC participation and this has not been confirmed objectively with formal pre- and post-test evaluation of the impacts of OJC participation on skill development.
Analysis of the survey free text answers in response to the questions ‘what did you value from your OJC experience?’ and ‘do you think you have developed any specific skills during your OJC experience?’ revealed several themes, represented by the student voices presented in Table 4.

Survey respondents said they enjoyed OJCs, that clubs were friendly and relaxed and that the experience made them feel part of a community. When asked about the experience of participating in OJCs, all apart from one respondent indicated that they enjoyed interacting with other students. Thematic analysis of the student survey free text questions identified that irrespective of prior experience, the chance to practice
presentation skills was valued. Students also believed that their overall confidence, and research and presentation skills, had been developed as a result of participation in OJCs.

**Practitioner perspectives**

All four practitioners involved in the focus group were experienced ALs, each working on a variety of modules within the School of Life, Health and Chemical Sciences. The practitioners were all female, all within the same age range and all had significant experience using Adobe Connect. The focus group findings revealed four main themes, represented by practitioner voices presented in Table 5: student experience and pedagogical aspects, challenges, recommendations and influences on practice.

High levels of student enthusiasm during clubs were noted by all facilitators, as they reflected on their own previous experience of student engagement and interaction in other, non-OJC, tuition events. Unlike other events, within the live OJC event, facilitators reported that students were willing to use microphones to interact with each other and with the facilitator and that students spoke with passion about their chosen topic. This, in turn ‘re-energised’ the facilitators themselves. Facilitators also discussed how students demonstrated more interest and willingness to explore a discussion point with one another, whether verbally or within text chat, when freed from module-specific constraints. Although anecdotal, the facilitator comments about previous experiences align with Butler et al. (2018) with regard to student behaviour in non-OJC tuition events. Facilitators noted that there was considerable variation in students’ confidence and skills,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Representative voices from student presenters.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opportunity to present</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘ ... but the most useful thing to me was to face my fear of presenting. I never use the microphone during tutorials and avoid speaking in public but I would like to overcome this fear, and OJC provided the first step to tackling this.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘being able to read my presentation aloud was helpful. Overall, my OJC experience presented me with the opportunity to engage in using PowerPoint as a means of communicating information’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Development of research and presentation skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I think my research skills improved and it also increased my confidence in the area of presenting as it gave me an opportunity to try it out and I also learned how online presentations work as I had never given one before’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Prompted me to do some independent reading before starting the module’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Understanding the format and style of a science presentation compared to a commercial presentation’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Learning how to present in a clear, concise and structured way’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Using my listening skills and learning to learn from others. Practising trying to make coherent explanations of concepts’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘It was good to have the chance to practice skills I have had a taste of in the past. Also, it’s great to practice powerpoints for my future study’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Getting to give an online presentation was a new experience, and it helps to build confidence in presenting work in a relevant, concise, and interesting manner’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Development of confidence</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I didn’t feel confident talking in a tutorial but now I do’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘My research took me out of my comfort zone and I really enjoyed it!’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The ability to be brave and do what I wanted to do – I wasn’t sure I could’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I have gained confidence in speaking about a subject alongside a presentation, I was nervous but this has really helped’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benefit of being part of an academic community</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Opportunity to interact with my fellow students and tutors in a safe, non judgemental and open online environment’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Really enjoyed being part of a science community, and the informal, friendly environment’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Chatting to the tutor and other student in a relaxed atmosphere’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘It was great to hear the passion and enthusiasm of other students!’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with some very confident presenters, others very nervous, and how the opportunity of developing presentation skills was appreciated by students.

Facilitators discussed strategies to boost participation, and suggestions included involving student buddies (Motzo, 2016) and advertising on social media, as it was felt that having a greater number of presenters per club would be beneficial. Facilitators suggested that more reflection should be built into the OJC experience, to offer students the opportunity to reflect on their experience, what they have learnt and what they would do differently if they did it again.

There were no negative comments about the clubs or any concerns with the technology used, although practitioners discussed logistical issues required for the smooth running of events. For example, the importance of timing events: there were concerns that students would be time poor and would not participate if dates clashed with assessment or busy periods during the academic year. All facilitators emphasised the importance of creating a secure, relaxed, supportive environment, with aspects such as use of emoticons being useful for positive feedback during online presentations. Facilitators also felt it important that live OJC events should not be recorded.

All facilitators expressed enjoyment relating to running clubs and that they had not anticipated that they would learn so much from the experience. Facilitators acknowledged personal challenges, including how they felt nervous before their first club as the experience of facilitating OJCs was new to them and concerns over their expected levels

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Table 5. Representative voices from practitioner focus group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practitioner thoughts about student experience and pedagogical aspects of OJC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘it didn’t feel like a sort of tutor/student scenario. It felt like a group of people getting together to listen to some really exciting science’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I love the enthusiasm the students have’ ‘the students were also actually learning core presentation skills and what they were doing: they were reflecting on their experience and their practice for the next time which also was an aspect I hadn’t necessarily thought of’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘It has to be student led, you know, for it to have that impact and not just be yet another avenue that tutors or module team or whatever are encouraging something’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘when you let them be completely free about what they’re doing, how well they’d come back with something very scientific that they’d thought about and put together because you’ve released them from the confines of a TMA’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Challenges</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘recruiting the students and getting them to actually send their presentations in’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘students signed up but time constraints meant that they weren’t able to participate’</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘At the beginning I was a bit nervous and anxious, I think because it was something that I’d not done before’</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘what if someone comes along with something I’ve got absolutely no clue about. And that was my biggest worry’</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘an inappropriate choice of topic’</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Recommendations</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>‘we’d done really well was create a safe space for people, particularly those who might be nervous to have a go and be welcomed and not feel unduly pressured’</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘I think the fact that the journal clubs are not recorded is a really big plus point in the students’ eyes’</td>
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<td>‘it would be very difficult to make it compulsory unless it is written in as part of the assessment strategy’</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘I wonder if we could maybe build that reflection into future online journal clubs, maybe ask students to reflect on some key points before they start the process and then maybe when they’re finished maybe getting them to reflect on how they think they did’</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Influences on practice</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>‘I’m sort of really not worried about these long silent pauses and it has encouraged the students to think’</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘I’ve actually started doing a much shorter recording of the slides and then opening it up for questions and answers and chatting about it off the record, as it were, and it is helping a little bit and people do actually stay and ask questions and interact with it more’</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘… it has changed the way I am approaching my own practice’</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘I hadn’t anticipated I would learn quite as much as I did from facilitating journal club’</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘we move from being – to teacher to facilitators of the students or something’</td>
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of knowledge regarding the different presentations created by students. Facilitators also expressed concerns over the prospect of dealing with inappropriate content included in student presentations. The facilitators commented that the positive experiences gained by facilitating OJCs should be offered to other practitioners as it had changed their own tutoring practice, for example, by empowering them to talk less in their own tutorials. Indeed, two facilitators said that they now run unrecorded interactive sessions for live attendees complemented by a short recorded slidecast.

Discussion

Before this study, the practical and pedagogical implications of offering online journal clubs and the associated support and community afforded by the OJC website were unknown within our setting. Although the literature provided a mixed view regarding the success of journal clubs generally, our study demonstrates the successful establishment of online journal clubs and provides insights into potential benefits for both students and practitioners.

Discussion of student experience

Students indicated that the OJC experience (i.e. website and live events) provided an enjoyable experience. The experiences of finding, evaluating and summarising information, presenting it in a visual form and providing an oral presentation in front of their peers, provided opportunities which were directly transferable into the formal online teaching environment of module websites and tutorials.

Participation in OJCs enabled these online adult distance learners to share elements of their personalised learning journey with their peers. Students had agency to research and evaluate a topic of relevance to them; they were explicitly given control over the online learning space, to use the microphone and move through their presentations themselves. They were able to practice using the tools needed for formal online tutorials within an authentic, low-risk, informal space. This assertion was supported by free text comments from student presenters such as

... but the most useful thing to me was to face my fear of presenting. I never use the microphone during tutorials and avoid speaking in public but I would like to overcome this fear, and OJC provided the first step to tackling this

and

I think my research skills improved and it also increased my confidence in the area of presenting as it gave me an opportunity to try it out and I also learned how online presentations work as I had never given one before.

The format of live OJC events enabled students to learn more than an aspect of subject knowledge from their peers; students were able to experience a range of presenting styles, enabling students to learn from each other. Unlike more conventional universities, OU students are at a range of different stages in their working, studying and personal lives, and OJCs provide a safe and informal space for students to work together in a cooperative manner, whilst being able to take the initiative for their presentation and
to reflect on the approaches used by themselves and their peers. Students commented positively on the benefits of this cooperative space: ‘... really enjoyed being part of a science community, and the informal, friendly environment’, ‘chatting to the tutor and other student in a relaxed atmosphere’ and ‘it was great to hear the passion and enthusiasm of other students!’ Our OJC format provided a ‘real world’ experience mirroring that in many professional settings, for example, where journal clubs are used within healthcare settings to share case studies and encourage discussion amongst peers, or informative presentations within a more corporate setting, for example, for strategic or training purposes. Within our setting, OJC therefore provide an authentic environment to practice these key employability skills, as well as develop critical analysis and oral/visual communication skills. OJC avoid the assumptions inherent in the terminology around ‘digital natives’ (Smith et al., 2020), scaffolding the development of digital literacy and helping students gain familiarity, confidence and competence with digital tools, within live events and through the guidance and community space provided by the website. Additionally, presenters highly valued the opportunity to claim their OJC badge, which might indicate that students appreciated the credibility of the microcredential, which could be added to their online portfolio to provide direct evidence of skills and attribute development for employers.

**Discussion of practitioner experience**

Within OJC, rather than ‘teachers’, the role of facilitator was that of a broker (Wenger, 1998, 2009; Wenger et al., 2002) providing ‘stewardship’ while managing events (Kimble, 2006) and aiding contextualisation (Conole, 2011). OJC events demonstrated a social constructivist approach; a space outside the typical student-tutor relationship, where student and practitioners shared their passions in their subjects, and where interaction enhanced co-construction of knowledge and deeper learning.

Reflection on actions or professional practices is an essential element of the transformative process (Cranton, 2002, 2016), and responses from our facilitators indicated that their involvement in OJC enabled them to critically reflect on their existing teaching practices and experiences. Although our study involved a small group of practitioners, and hence is limited in terms of generalisability, the common themes identified by the individuals are nonetheless informative and we suggest that OJC may form activating events (Cranton, 2002, 2016). In OJC, student participants were granted ‘presenter’ status and provided with spaces where facilitators handed control over to each student. We suggest that this may have disrupted typical tutor-student dynamics. By providing an opportunity to step outside roles and experiences in typical online tutorials, OJC gave practitioners a new lens to view the Adobe Connect environment, enabled self-criticism and opportunity to develop their existing practices. This was evidenced by practitioner comments such as ‘it didn’t feel like a sort of tutor/student scenario. It felt like a group of people getting together to listen to some really exciting science’, ‘...it has changed the way I am approaching my own practice’, and ‘... we move from being teacher ... to facilitators of the students or something’.

Each of our facilitators indicated that elements of their teaching approaches would be modified, to attempt to continue to enhance the learning experience of their students; they felt empowered to relinquish control, i.e. making use of
a version of silent pedagogy (Ollin, 2008) in order to provide space for and to listen to student voice, rather than rush to ‘talk into a void’ (Stickler, 2019). It takes confidence to step back from the traditional teaching role, even more so in a silent online room, where a second of silence seems much longer, and the importance of recognising its potential for purposeful use, cannot be underestimated (Stickler, 2019).

Beyond direct pedagogical considerations, the facilitators commented on feeling ‘energised’ listening to the enthusiasm projected by the students, reaffirming their own passion for their respective specialities.

**Study limitations and future work**

Study limitations include a small and relatively homogenous sample size of student participants, most of whom were studying modules within the School of Life, Health and Chemical Sciences. There may also have been a degree of response bias in the students who completed the survey, as the 8 students who chose not to complete the survey may have differed substantially in their responses to the 26 students who did complete the survey. Furthermore, the survey and focus group data were self-reported, which has potential to bias the results.

Further work to expand the findings of this study is currently underway; students studying a stage 2 STEM module participate in OJCs as part of their studies and the role their OJC experience may play in skill and confidence development will be formally evaluated in this larger scale study. It is also anticipated that having a larger number of potential participants may offer scope to identify any potential barriers to participation.

**Implications and recommendations for practice**

- Although most HEIs are now providing in-person teaching, evidence indicates that online education will continue to remain a key component of the higher education landscape. Online journal clubs have the potential to offer an authentic learning experience where students can develop key skills within an online academic community and as such could be a pedagogically useful addition to online or blended learning settings,

**Planning for success**

- A dispersed student and/or practitioner base is not a barrier to facilitating positive authentic experiences, however, to enhance student recruitment to participate in journal club events, careful planning is recommended, e.g. advance advertisement of clubs on multiple media platforms to provide increased reach as well as adequate time for students to prepare their presentations. Advertising and supportive spaces should also make the links between OJC experience and transferable employability skills explicit, to help students recognise the importance of these skills in a wider context beyond education. Additionally, the incentive of digital badging adds
credibility to the OJC experience, helping students demonstrate skill development to employers.

**Supporting students and practitioners**

- Provision of ‘wraparound’ guidance is important to support students to find and evaluate information and to prepare their presentations, as perceived or real lack of digital literacy skills and confidence can deter students from participating. Since there is evidence that some students’ participation is affected by the action of recording the session (Butler, 2018), we would suggest that OJC events should not be routinely recorded, as this may increase student reticence. Nonetheless, drawing on facilitator feedback, judicious use of recordings may provide a powerful self-reflective tool for students and facilitators alike.

Appropriate support and training for practitioners is also vital, to enable them to create a safe, supportive environment for clubs to allay any student anxieties. It is important that events are *facilitated* rather than *taught*, to increase student agency, creating a unique OJC experience that is truly student-led.

**Acknowledgments**

This work was funded by eSTEeM, The Open University centre for STEM pedagogy.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

This work was supported and funded by eSTEeM – The OU Centre for Scholarship and Innovation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths. Project Reference 18K-FMKN-LHCS-01.

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Tutor supporting colleagues with the academic and pastoral support for students. She has undertaken a number of scholarship research projects within the university aimed at improving the student experience and accessibility. Kate is committed to providing the opportunity for students to get involved in Online Journal Clubs and enthusiastically endorses the many pedagogical benefits and employment skills they offer participants. Previous roles involved working as a laboratory scientist in drug discovery and cancer research, and in intellectual property and project management.

Hazel Church is currently Course Manager at Sounds-Write, looking after the production and updating of online courses. Hazel previously worked as a Curriculum Manager in STEM at The Open University during a career in online distance education spanning over 14 years. Hazel has a Masters in Online Distance Education from The Open University, UK and was awarded Senior Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy when working at The Open University. She is passionate about online learning and the opportunities it can provide for learners to extend and develop their skills.

Dr. Fiona Moorman started her journey with the Open University in 2005 as an Associate Lecturer/tutor tutoring on interdisciplinary science and biological modules at all levels of undergraduate study. She has been working as a faculty manager in the school of Life, Health and Chemical Sciences (LHCS) since 2018, supporting Associate Lecturers to deliver effective tuition to hundreds of distance learners as well as chairing a Stage 3 Biological science module. She is passionate about building academic community, leading on initiatives such as producing the school newsletter, circulated to staff and students alike, working with student buddies and student interns and providing opportunities for development of online confidence and skills of our students via Online Journal Club (OJC).

References


