International Collaborations in Student-Centered Mobile Moviemaking: Combining Online Tools for an Innovative Global Pedagogy

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Abstract

In the last few short years, interconnectivity has brought about new levels of artistic collaboration. Businesses, schools and artists alike are now engaging in multimedia remote collaboration as a matter of course. The next generation of filmmakers, for example, will surely involve an ever-greater degree of remote collaboration, as more teams work together on projects across the planet. There are now many choices of tools and platforms available to link the world through connected devices. How these tools are strategically employed can mean the difference between a smooth, successful collaboration and one that's fallen short of its potential for full member involvement. So...is there such thing as a perfect recipe for an engaging international collaboration?

This paper examines one evolving case study in international collaboration within an educational context, parsing the choices made and measuring them against student uptake and involvement. Entertainment Lab for the Very Small Screen (ELVSS) is an evolving experiment in remote collaboration by international student teams collectively making movies on their mobile phones. As the ELVSS project has expanded and grown more complex since its inception in 2011, so have the lessons to be learned from it. What light can this globally collaborative effort shed on all future international collaborations, particularly ones involving mobile moviemaking?

To what extent did the combination of smart phones and Web 2.0 platforms assist or impede fluid communication, seamless workflow and creative contribution amongst the huge cohort? What were its successes, what were its lessons? How can we continue to improve the pedagogy of collaborative practice in mobile moviemaking?

1. Introduction

With the decline of the Hollywood system as we know it [1], and the exponential increase in new media tools available to all, we sit at the crest of a huge new wave of content-creativity [2]. Movies shot with the HD cameras that reside in the pockets of filmmakers the world over will increasingly be gracing our screens. And part of this revolution will surely involve work that is made through collaborations of creators living in vastly disparate locations.

Entertainment Lab for the Very Small Screen (ELVSS) is an evolving experiment in remote collaboration by international student teams collectively making movies on their mobile phones. Having just completed its third year, ELVSS-2013 surpassed all previous iterations, both in scope and in content [3].

A complex globally-collaborative project is bound to have some successes and also some opportunities for improvement. This paper will look at a few factors at play (including organizational methods and quality of creative collaborations), in hopes that other internationally collaborative endeavours can benefit from our experiences.

2. Cohort Size & Allocation of Students to Teams

ELVSS-2013 involved a total of ninety-six students and six lecturers from five educational institutions, spanning four countries in Europe, South America and Australasia. Combining forces to make eight collectively-created mobile movies, ELVSS-13's final output provided raw material for the video backdrop to an opera performance at the Tete a Tete Opera Festival in London last August.

ELVSS-13 was not a small project. Here are the participating schools and the amount of students from each:

- Salford (Manchester, UK): 54
- Unitec (Auckland, NZ): 13

- Université de Strasbourg (Strasbourg, France): 6
- Universidad Externado (Bogota, Colombia): 6
- AUT (Auckland, NZ): 17

The opera, entitled "State of Being", was written and performed in eight acts, ranging from five to thirteen minutes. In order to create small teams to maximize engagement, we divided the cohort of 96 into eight Teams (one for each act), then sub-divided each Team of twelve into three Groups of four. This created small working groups, providing more opportunity for each student to contribute.

total #	School		amount of students from each school	TEAM (total: 8) A)Love B)Dance C)Science D)Jazz E)Sex F)Drugs G)Death H)Truth	GROUP # (total: 24) (each TEAM has 3 GROUPS contributing to that Act of the Opera)		First Name	Surname
14	Salford	Manchester	1	E - Sex	E1		Reiss	Anderson
15	Salford		2	E - Sex		E2	Faiz	Barber
16	Salford		3	E - Sex		E3	James	Bishop
17	Salford		4	F - Drugs	F1		Kayleigh	Bradbury
18	Salford		5	F - Drugs		F2	Joseph	Cafferty
19	Salford		6	F - Drugs		F3	Lewis	Carville
20	Salford		7	G - Death	G1		Diana	Castro
21	Salford		8	G - Death		G2	Paul	Chambers
22	Salford		9	G - Death		G3	Rob	Clark
23	Salford		10	H - Truth	H1		Taylor	Cole
24	Salford		11	H - Truth		H2	Simon	Coley
25	Salford		12	H - Truth		H3	Thomas	Cone
26	Salford		13	A - Love	A1		Amy	Cook
27	Salford		14	A - Love		A2	Shaun	Cooper
28	Salford		15	A - Love		A3	Max	Dabrowski
29	Salford		16	B - Dance	B1		Ryan	Deane
30	Salford		17	B - Dance		B2	Thomas	Deegan
31	Salford		18	B - Dance		B3	John	Dipper
32	Salford		19	C - Science	C1		James	Dominey
33	Salford		20	C - Science	E1		Nathan	Freeman
34	Salford		21	C - Science		C3	Christopher	Gainsbury
35	Salford		22	D - Jazz	D1		Dionne	Grailey
36	Salford		23	D - Jazz		D2	Paul	Handforth
37	Salford		24	D - Jazz		D3	Michael	Jones

Figure 1: Sample of the ELVSS-13 Roster

Figure 2: Sample of the Team/Group Divisions

The imbalance of school representation - purely a factor of course enrolments - made for uneven distribution amongst the international teams. Each Group had two Salford (UoS) students; some had three. Therefore, no one from the other schools was in a Group with any of their own classmates. This was brought up by several students in their reflections as something they would have valued.

The sheer size of the student population of ELVSS-13 ultimately proved to be a distraction from both the quality of the students' experience and the quality of the output. Looking forward, we will avoid the necessity to adhere to a specific quantity of outputs (such as eight acts, in this case), concentrating instead on fostering small autonomous teams who feed individual content into larger theme-based projects which can have as many outputs as interest generates. Then, ELVSS will remain flexible to accommodate as many or as few students are involved.

3. Project Management vs. Creative Collaboration

Differing academic timetables between the northern and southern hemispheres made coordinating international schedules challenging, and in the end, there was a very short window during which the entire global cohort was attending classes could work together collaboratively. Once the brief was circulated to all students, they needed to immediately dive in and begin their collaborations forthwith. This was less than desirable, as we had precious little time for the students to imbue themselves in the mobile aesthetic [4], or to get to know their teams before jumping into making.

Partially due to these scheduling constraints, the quality of the creative collaboration was not what it could have been. Potentials were missed because of our necessary focus on project management and meeting our deadline rather than on the authentic creative journey of the participants. The extreme complexity of this project was managed capably, but what suffered was the spirit of creative adventurousness we'd hoped would be present. The project itself was innovative, but the content could have been more so. In future iterations, we will prioritise innovative content over accomplishing a single huge coordinated effort.

Future strategies involve ensuring we have enough time to mindfully explore the areas of mobile social media, creative collaboration and mobile artistry with the students prior to beginning the central project. The course work could involve showing and deconstructing curated examples of strong, innovative mobile artistry, then giving them in-class exercises involving creative provocations prior to co-creating internationally. This, we feel, might nurture more original, imaginative work.

4. Platforms for Collaboration

Each Group was required to create a Google Drive Document page as a central place for collaborative discussion. Additionally, each Team was required to maintain a WordPress blog, to journal their project participation, embed their final edited contributions and to lodge their VLOG reflections on the entire experience. Groups were also required to have regular Google+ Hangouts to collaborate on their video. This was the ideal forum for discussions around how to interpret their one-word provocation, what would be shot, by whom and in what country, and how they would assemble it.

Some ELVSS 13 participants gave Google Docs a half-hearted try as a collaborative tool, then migrated swiftly to Facebook. Others just started Facebook groups immediately, not even dipping their toes into G-Docs. Their preferences, they explained, were rooted in their familiarity with Facebook as well as the push notifications (missing from G-Drive Documents) whenever someone posts.

There were a few reasons why we feel Google Drive is a more appropriate tool for this type of collaboration, not the least of which is the transparency. As a collaborative educational project, student conversations should be visible to all involved. A G-Doc is a central "place" that enables both synchronous and asynchronous discussions, and one that contains no other distracting content. Also, the ability to see the revision history is helpful for assessment purposes.

But FB was their collaborative platform of choice, which raises the question of prescription vs. self-determination in the choice of creative platform. How important is it actually that students comply with our choice of collaborative tool if their choice is working well for them? Is the onus not on us to move over to Facebook, merely requiring them to add us to their groups? What is the appropriate amount of control for us to exercise in the management of a student-centred collaboration such as this? This gravitation to the

familiar recalls the digital native debate [5], and reinforces observations that, in fact, "young people's engagements with digital technologies are varied and often unspectacular" [6].

The Hangouts were another difficult issue for the students. While the video chat is, in one way, at the heart of the exercise, the time differential proved a major stumbling block. With NZ and the UK half a day apart, Hangout uptake was not what it should have been. In future, it might help the students to reframe Hangouts if they become more personally connected to their international teammates earlier in the project.

5. Content

As in 2012, the theme of the internationally collaborative mobile movies was predetermined by the group of lecturers who planned and delivered ELVSS-2013.

In ELVSS 12, students were directed to create pieces around the theme of environmental sustainability. A great opportunity, it was reasoned, to address a global issue globally.

For ELVSS 13, there were two content guidelines the students needed to adhere to:

1. Duration: Each Team's piece needed to adhere to the specific length of each "State of Being" act;
2. Provocations: Each act of "State of Being" had a one-word title [1-Love; 2-Dance; 3-Science; 4-Jazz; 5-Sex; 6-Drugs; 7-Death; 8-Truth]. These became the provocations for each Team to abstractly spin into imagery - in however obtuse a fashion they desired.

Except for a few standout examples, the creative edge was left wanting to be sharpened quite a bit in both iterations. The students never fully connected to the provocations in either 2012 or 2013.

For example, while we were careful to explain to our students that it was best not to interpret *State of Being*'s one-word prompts literally, they were hard-pressed to create the visual poetry we'd hoped they would. So, "Love" contained images of couples; "Science" showed test tubes; "Death" showed cemeteries, etc.

We concluded that when given new types of content guidelines (one-word provocations), in an idiom that is also new to them (mobile phone moviemaking), students glommed on to the specifics of the guidelines as if to a lifeline. With so much newness at once, we need to scaffold the new introductions. There remains the tension, though, "between the need for scaffolding and frameworks and the removal of constraints that temper creativity and authenticity" [7]. Finding that balance is sort of the holy grail in the ELVSS quest.

We've each found in our own teaching that when students are given cameras and told to just go out and shoot anything they want to, the footage that comes back has a much freer, more adventurous feel to it than the material they return when they're asked to conform to a more specific content brief.

So in future, we will refrain from prescriptive content parameters, allowing the participants to determine their own by asking those who wish to offer ideas to put them forward. Students will essentially vote on these ideas by choosing which team they join, thereby travelling on their own journey to their very own destination.

6. Summary

In their reflections, the students appreciated the opportunity to participate in this global mobile movie project. Yet many wished they had had the opportunity to get to know their international collaborators a bit more. Additionally, they would have liked more time at the beginning to cement their familiarity with both the hardware and the collaborative platforms. This feedback provides a clear road toward future course improvements.

From the insights gained from ELVSS 2013, the following are our marching orders for the next version. We hope this combo of tools and strategies deepens the functionality of the ELVSS project:

- Ensure that each international team is smaller;
- Rather than prescribe the content, let the participants decide on the movies they want to make;
- Design simpler parameters for the project (e.g. no pre-set programme durations to conform to)
- Align curricula so all ELVSS lecturers can speak to each other's classes about mobile aethetics, artistry and possibilities offered by the tools;
- Perhaps incorporate FB into our palette of mobile social media;
- More student ownership of workflow

Remote collaboration transcends space and time by enabling people to work together both synchronously and asynchronously. There are many tools and methods available today to connect the planet, and more being developed all the time. When employed together in a strategic blend, these connection tools can work together to form an application suite well-suited to serve the specific needs of the project at hand.

References

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