**Online journal clubs in distance higher education: an opportunity to develop skills and community?**

**Karen:**

Shall we think back to our eSTEeM project?

**Fiona:**

Yes. So, gosh we were new staff tutors. We’d been in the job just a few months, and we went to our first scholarship conference. It was eSTEeM, and this was all new to us. We went to lots of talks. We heard so much that we hadn’t encountered before. It was very buzzy. We heard people talking about student engagement, about interaction, about different assessment. There was so much to learn, we were really fired up, weren’t we?

**Karen:**

Oh absolutely!

**Fiona:**

And then we had a cup of tea together and we got chatting, and I think we drew up a wish list didn’t we Karen?

**Karen:**

Yeah, as you were just saying we were chatting about some of the things that we’d experienced as ALs when we were running tutorials and also as staff tutors, the things that other ALs had been telling us, and because of some of the problems we’d been seeing we, were starting to think well, what could we do to try to solve these? So, we were moving forward and trying to think and, and we did draw up quite a long wish list, didn’t we?

**Fiona:**

We did. We were thinking about, you know, how while student attendance at online tutorials wasn’t

always as good as it could be. How students often came but were completely passive and

didn’t ever use the microphone. How so few of us had actually heard a student voice online.

About how sometimes there didn’t feel to be, how sometimes it could be a better sort

of sense of community among students on a module and within a tutor group. About some

online skills that perhaps could be developed. So, we were chatting about all these things

and thinking well, is there anything we could do, any sort of intervention we could try

that might make some inroads.

**Karen:**

Yeah, and as well as those skills within the Adobe Connect environment which we were using for online tutorials, it was things such as critical thinking, finding information and once they found information how do they analyse it to make sure it’s appropriate and relevant for their purpose? So, it’s all those study related skills that we hope students will develop. So, we wanted to try to tie those two things together to create this environment. Where could this happen?

**Fiona:**

And I suppose if we were to think about the overall aim of the project really in a nutshell, what would you say that it was?

**Karen:**

Probably to get a place where people could come and have fun. I think that’s one of the key things we wanted to develop. Because there’s so many things that we do within modules and as a university, but we wanted something that was a safe, fun place where people wanted to come. Because sometimes, if you’re a distance learner, I think you don’t get much opportunity to chat to somebody else who is interested in what you’re interested in. And so, we wanted this kind of club environment where people could come and say "wow, I’ve just found this out, can I share it with you?" And so, they had an audience of other like-minded people who are interested in what they had to say.

**Fiona:**

Exactly, and we wanted it to be really low stakes. So, we wanted to take it out of the, as you said, out of the module environment. Not linked in any way to assessment. Students didn’t feel they were being measured. They could just come at where they were at, so they could be studying anything. They could be studying towards the beginning of their study journey at level 1 perhaps, or even Access, and they could come and find something of interest to them. Share their passion with other students and, while doing that, develop skills. As you mentioned critical reading, evaluation, information. Just even finding good sources of news. I would also say like a key aspect of the Online

Journal Club experience was the fact that it was just student-led. You know, students were taking ownership for their learning. They weren’t compulsory, so it wasn’t sort of a requirement to do this. But they had the opportunity to go and find something they were interested in themselves. You know, do the research, do the presentation, come along, and talk online to their peers. So, it wasn’t

tutor driven; it wasn’t a didactic experience where they were being told what they needed to do. In a way it was flipping the dynamics wasn’t it really?

**Karen:**

Oh, absolutely, absolutely! But we were aware actually it might seem quite a big ask to get students to do this, and when we were at the eSTEeM Conference and we were chatting about these ideas for what we wanted to create, there were some, I wouldn’t say negativity but some reticence. People were thinking that students might be too nervous to come along. But I think because we were quite green staff tutors and new in the role, and we were sure this would work, that we, we went ahead with it. And so, we were thinking about all the things that a student might need to help them succeed in this process.

**Fiona:**

We did, but of course we couldn’t initially just jump straight into an eSTEeM project. So, what we did was we knew there was a sort of a quite an exciting early start initiative on one of the modules within our school, and we approached the module chair for that, and I think we approached her over a glass of wine in the evening, and asked her if we could offer those students who were on the early start initiative, so they were in between modules. They’d just registered but they hadn’t started yet, in a presentation, if she’d like to offer it, and that’s where we started. There were some associate lecturers who were already working to support students on this early start activity, and so they offered some tutorials, but they also facilitated these Online Journal Clubs. So that’s really where we started. It was a pilot and I recall that summer going on holiday, setting up the sign-up forms and doing the advertising on the website, and then coming back from holiday to find there were like 40 students signed up. I’m thinking, my goodness, will we have enough resource to run these clubs, but we did.

**Karen:**

We did, absolutely. We had so much positive feedback from that very small pilot, and from then we moved forward with the eSTEeM project, and we then started to think about the Online Journal Club website. It's identity.

**Fiona:**

Yes. It was really important for us to have a digital domain really, I guess. The Online Journal Club to have its own kind of, well space. Its own identity. Sort of a one-stop shop really, where we could host lots of different resources to help them with the finding their information. Linked to lots

of helpful places like the library, the prompt to evaluate the sources, and we wanted to

make it really friendly, welcoming. So, we had lots of nice colourful images. We had

inspirational quotes, do you remember that?

**Karen:**

Yeah.

**Fiona:**

We had one from Nelson Mandela didn’t we and a few others. But yes, it was just we wanted to create a special space with a forum as well, somewhere where they could have a bit of community in between. Maybe before they’d actually done their club. They could sort of ask questions, have a bit of chat amongst themselves as well. So, we set the scene. We had a mechanism for collating sign-ups and motivating and encouraging students to send their PowerPoints to us, and then our lovely facilitators would load them up in the Adobe Connect room. They would be there to create a safe, welcoming online space. Just to basically to ensure smooth running. I think we had like a little sign saying, you know 'don’t panic, it’s only journal club!' We tried to make it really relaxed and supportive and then the ALs were just there to kind of move things on and support everyone and listen to the student presentations. So, actually it was really important for us to reward students,

wasn’t it Karen? Because this wasn’t linked to assessment, we thought it would be good to give them a reward. How did we do this?

**Karen:**

Absolutely. Because for students if they were working through all the material that we provided to support them. So, we had the presentation skills, the forums. They were finding their own information. They might be exploring the library. They were preparing their PowerPoints. So, they were putting a lot of effort into this and we thought it appropriate to, as you say, to offer them

some kind of reward for their activities. And so, we looked into micro credentials and we developed an Online Journal Club Badge so anybody who completed a live journal club, who gave a presentation to their peers, and then also completed a very short quiz, was able to claim their micro badge, and that micro badge could then feed onto their social media profiles. For example, on LinkedIn, as well as within the OU profiles as well. And we thought that was very important and it’s kind of like a club badge "look I’ve got a badge to the Online Journal Club" and so we thought that was a very important thing to do.

**Fiona:**

So, that was one of our findings, that there was a real interest in this micro credential, and in fact, I think emphasised their being part of a community. You know, they sort, they had this journey that they went through. They encountered the website. They would have worked through the resources. Maybe they interacted on the forum a little. They did their club, you know, went through the quiz and got their badge. So, it was really a journey. Every single student said that participating in Online Journal Club made them feel part of a community. They all said they enjoyed it. They said it was friendly and welcoming. That they really valued the interaction with other students. Just listening. Several of them said they just enjoyed listening to other students talk. So, I guess they were like so glad that it wasn’t always just a sort of a tutor who was kind of telling them what to do, but they were listening as equals to their peers. And I think there was one lovely piece of feedback from someone saying that they’d found their voice which I thought was just wonderful. So, that was really the community and the interaction part of it. But there was also a lot about their perceived skill development and confidence.

**Karen:**

The feedback that we got from the survey was very much positive for everything. So, the students felt more confident preparing, or going into a tutorial because the Online Journal Club environment was exactly the same environment they’ll be using in their tutorials, and that was one of the key things that we were hoping, was that they start to feel more comfortable and more confident in the online environment, and that’s what was coming through from the survey results. That they were feeling more confident, using their mic to interact with one another. So, it was all very positive.

It was lovely. I know your favourite quote was the one about finding their voice. My favourite quote was a level 1 student who had given their presentation and they said "I was terrified, but I’ll do it again" and I think that’s the key thing, because if we all think back to the first time we had to give a presentation, it’s a very scary process, and it’s only when you start to do it with time, you start

to develop that confidence. So, journal club seemed to provide this nice and safe place where students could practice some of those skills. Turning on a microphone doesn’t sound very scary perhaps, but it is. If you’re suddenly talking to a room of people who you’ll probably never meet face-to-face, and being able to say what’s on your mind, and journal club seemed to give a place where, where students could try that out.

**Fiona:**

But how about us Karen? What would you say we have learnt from our experience of Online Journal Club?

**Karen:**

Oh gosh, it’s been fabulous actually. As I said right back at the beginning, we were quite green staff tutors. Very keen to get this project going. Had never done anything like it before. So, it was a very steep learning curve for us to find how to run a project. How do you get things started? And I have to say that the whole eSTEeM team have been fabulous to support us because we really were trying to find out how to do everything, and there were so many resources they pointed us towards.

**Fiona:**

Yes. I mean, for me, I think, one of the key aspects has been collaboration, you know, how for example, we decided we wanted this website but neither of us had a clue about adding content

to websites. I didn’t know where to start, and so eSTEeM put us in contact with Hazel Church, who is an experienced curriculum manager and was able to get us going on this, and then our website developed. We collaborated with colleagues across the University really, didn’t we, to get the micro badging, to get our project advertised via the University library website. So many different avenues. So, it’s been really fruitful hasn’t it Karen?

**Karen:**

Oh absolutely, and finding out things such as, you know, how to create a survey, going through the appropriate ethics process, the appropriate data protection process. All these things that are really

vital to any project, and making sure everything is done in the right time. I think as inexperienced

scholarship practitioners we weren’t aware of how long things would take. We kind of thought things would start straightaway and of course they don’t, and so, it was important to recognise that, and be realistic in our time plans.

**Fiona:**

But it's been so worthwhile hasn’t it? So, I think if I were to give some advice to someone like

us starting off, I would say don’t be daunted, if you feel there’s a lot to try and get to grips with. Just ask for support and you’ll find it from experienced colleagues, from eSTEeM. Don’t worry about the ethical, navigating the ethical pathway because there is lots of help available, and you learn so much along the way. So, I think it’s been fabulous.

**Karen:**

So where are we now Fi?

**Fiona:**

Well, we’re going forward in many different directions. One really exciting application of Online Journal Club, is to open it up to associate lecturers. So, during the Online Journal Club itself for students, our facilitators thoroughly enjoyed the experience, and one of them suggested that we should consider letting them have a go, and this prompted us to explore a collaboration with STEM for ALs-by-ALs, which is a programme of AL led staff development. So, the difference with Online Journal Club, is really that the ALs do short mini presentations of just like seven minutes or so. They’re not really screened. ALs just have a chance to share things of interest to them professionally. So, scholarship or a research interest or just an aspect of being an AL. Maybe serving on the AL Assembly or the other different aspects of the spectrum of AL role. So, that’s really exciting and we’ve had a few Online Journal Club for AL events. So, that’s something I’d mention. How about

you? Have you got anything else perhaps to add?

**Karen:**

Absolutely. We were concerned that there might be some groups of students who couldn’t take part in our Online Journal Club model, and in particular we were thinking about students in secure units and so we’ve got a separate eSTEeM project now which is taking journal club into secure units, and we’re trialling it at the moment. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic we’re on a pause because we can’t go into units at the moment. But the three units that we’ve gone into so far, we’ve had such positive feedback. Exactly what we were seeing in the online version, students feeling part of a learning community. Having the opportunity to chat to other students who were excited to be studying and excited about their particular topic. So, yes, Online Journal Clubs!

**Fiona:**

Well, and the last thing I’m just going to mention is that we’re very excited that some modules are intending to include Online Journal Club within their tuition strategy, and this is just really, I guess, illustrating just how flexible the model is. So, really no matter what your setting, we’re fairly confident that there’s a scope to add Online Journal Club in there. Watch this space!