

DEVELOPING ACADEMIC PRACTICE

Case study: Micro-learning and the sex industry

Journal:	<i>Developing Academic Practice</i>
Manuscript ID	DAP-2021-0002.R1
Manuscript Type:	Case Study
Keywords:	dyslexia, micro-learning, visual, flexibility, disability

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Abstract

This article interrogates the experience of introducing a micro-learning approach during the Covid pandemic and provides my reflections. It is argued that lectures delivered as micro-learning ‘chunks’ are preferable to traditional lectures in several ways, and that they facilitate rich and innovative seminar classes (Ahearne, 2021a, 2021b). The article concludes that some of the adaptations made during the pandemic should be retained afterwards if they enhance the student learning experience in that area of study.

Key words

dyslexia, micro-learning, visual, flexibility, disability, welfare

Background

During semester one 2020/21 I introduced a third year research-led module and adapted an existing second year module that ran co-currently. For the purposes of this reflective piece I am concentrating on my third year module. Adapting to the pandemic and developing an innovative strategy through the lens of being a disabled staff member, I created a pedagogy that worked digitally and promoted a flexible strategy towards learning (Ahearne, 2021a). Student welfare was a top priority given the unprecedented context we are in (Ahearne, 2021b). I provided all materials at the start of the semester which is considered to be best practice as an accommodation for specific

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3 learning difficulties such as Dyslexia, however this method helps all students with the transition
4 to higher education (Jacobs et al, 2017).
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11 My courses are designed as a package whereby the sessions do not need to be accessed
12 chronologically; this provides students with the ability to work in a non-linear way according to
13 their own schedule. I used this approach for all of my modules but for the purpose of this article I
14 will be concentrating on my award-winning third year module Crime, Justice and the Sex Industry.
15 On this module the students engage with week one covering the socio-historical construction of
16 sex work, then week two concentrating on the laws underpinning the sex industry. After this point
17 the other weeks can be accessed in chronological order *or* as the student wishes. This is important
18 as it gives the student a sense of the module as a whole, and gives the students *control* over the
19 pace and speed at which they work through the materials. In this way the students can tailor the
20 course content to best meet their needs and interests. This also means that students attend each
21 class with a variety of knowledge to add to the debate.
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38 Mihai (2020) asserts that to organise one's course as a series of micro-learning units they must be
39 meaningfully connected but also make sense as stand-alone lessons. This is demonstrated in my
40 visual navigation grid below which features on the home page of my Canvas course; where I
41 explain to students the links between each week. For example, if they wish to interrogate the issue
42 of migrant sex work (relating to week 6) then they also need to consider stigma and violence
43 (week 5) the contested spaces of sex work (week 8) the law and policy (week 2) and the global
44 sex workers' right movement (week 11).
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3 Students should have a sense of achievement and see their progress when completing each unit. It
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5 is also important to keep the segments brief so that students are less likely to tune out or lose their
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7 concentration (Diaz Redondo et al, 2021). I adopted the Kaiseki approach to micro-learning
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9 (Mihai, 2020). The lectures were provided as short audio 'chunks' or segments (Major &
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11 Calandrino, 2018) that guided students through a variety of tasks such as readings and visual
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13 materials. This would be useful across a variety of programmes. Adaptability is a key feature of
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15 successful digital pedagogy during a pandemic (Brown & McCall, 2021). Online material
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17 delivered in this way provides several advantages to pre-recorded hour-long lectures.
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23 1. Firstly, it acknowledges that some learners may have digital inequalities and does not
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25 assume that students have equal access to wifi, computer access and home working
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27 provisions.
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31 2. Secondly, it promotes active learning. Students are engaged, enthused and challenged.
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34 3. Thirdly, it develops student confidence. They attend seminars with a wealth of preparation
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36 leading to a high level of debate and engagement in class time (Forgrave, 2002).
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39 4. Fourth, it honours principles of diversity and inclusion by acknowledging that students may
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41 have caring responsibilities and health-based reasons for engaging with materials in shorter
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43 frames of time. As a recently-diagnosed Dyslexic (Ahearne, 2021a) I recognise the
44
45 importance of learning materials that can be accessed by students with multiple learning
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47 styles and disabilities (Jacobs et al, 2020) including a range of specific learning needs.
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50 **Flipped classroom seminars**

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53 This flipped classroom meant that seminars provided quality time to interrogate the debates which
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55 focused on policy, law, feminist perspectives, policing and sex workers' rights. Students
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3 repeatedly commented on how accessible this module was. The engagement figures on our virtual
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5 learning environment demonstrate the hundreds of hours that students have spent in independent
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7 study. 103 students were registered on my module and I facilitated five seminar groups with around
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9 twenty students per group. In the zoom classroom students were invited to contribute by using
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11 audio, video or by using the chat box. In ice-breaker activities students were invited to share an
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13 emoji or image, and to share additional media sources and journal articles they had located. This
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15 reassured students that they could engage in a way that best met their needs, and gave anxious
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17 students the confidence to contribute. Students with specific learning disabilities such as Dyslexia
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19 often fear that they are not ‘academic’ enough and it is important that we account for this in our
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21 teaching by removing barriers to engaging (Jacobs et al, 2020).
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27 I provided a plethora of weekly readings with instructions that students should choose 2-3 readings
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29 to bring to the seminar. I also provided an extensive reading list and the majority of materials were
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31 made digitally accessible. Students have told me that they now “love reading” and have never
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33 wanted to read so much. I also provided blog posts, media clips, and a variety of visual materials
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35 such as short films and talks (Deed et al, 2014). This gave students reassurance that they had
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37 enough material to access digitally during physical library closures and studying off-campus, and
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39 also the control to choose the readings they wanted. Indeed, in the student evaluations it was
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41 mentioned many times how many sources they had access to.
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47 The positive impact is that students have felt supported to learn through the COVID-19 crisis
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49 (Shamsuddin & Kaur, 2020). I have developed a practice where students feel reassured and
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51 empowered to meet the learning outcomes and develop a genuine passion for the subject. Diep et
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53 al (2017) argue that modes of blended learning rely on the teacher taking on more roles, and
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3 needing to engage the students regularly through the creation of a learning hub. Learning from
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5 this, I published weekly announcements on Canvas to signpost students through the module and
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7 ensure that they felt connected as a community (Burge et al, 2012). I also facilitated a Zoom
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9 research seminar on the topic of sex workers in prison and advertised a session for International
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11 Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers that was facilitated by the English Collective of
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13 Prostitutes (2020). This allowed students to feel they are part of a wider learning community
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15 outside of the university and connected students with accounts of lived-experience which is
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17 integral for this area of study. Learners commented on how “real” and “exciting” it was. This also
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19 ‘brought to life’ the teaching of policy documents and legal frameworks.
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28 **Visual navigation grid from homepage of Canvas**

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[All images belong to the author].

As a recently-diagnosed Dyslexic (Ahearne, 2021a) I am aware of the power of visual aids and navigation tools for learning (Gangwer, 2009). Students could access the weekly content through ‘Modules’ in the menu or by clicking on ‘Pages’ which lead to the homepage and grid. The grid is a cognitive shortcut for how the course can be understood, and is a useful device for reminding students of the many connecting threads between each self-contained unit. Each button on the grid was hyper-linked and pulled through to the corresponding week. This is best practice for using Canvas and is useful for marketing purposes.

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3 The presentation of the course content in this professional visual manner also reassured students
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5 that my pedagogical considerations were thoughtfully prepared and were well-judged for times of
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7 such uncertainty (Brown & McCall, 2021). This increased student confidence in having access to
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9 all of the resources and being well-prepared for their assessment.
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14 **Student satisfaction and attainment**

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18 Scores for both modules via the student evaluations had scores above 4.0 with many questions
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20 scoring 4.8. Examples of student feedback from evaluations:
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24 ● "Gemma is absolutely fantastic! She provided us with an endless variety of different
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26 resources which were interesting. I didn't know much about the topic prior to this module
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28 but now feel passionately about the topic. I love how she makes you feel welcome to the
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30 academic world. I thought the module essay questions were excellent, I wanted to choose
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32 them all".
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37 ● "I really enjoyed the seminars in this module as everyone got to involve themselves and it
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39 was a group discussion. The module was organised really well and we were given a great
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41 deal of support and guidance during our assessment period- from dedicated lectures,
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43 seminars and being able to meet with the lecturer. You can tell the module leader really
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45 cares about what she is teaching and seems to care about the students"
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50 ● "I can't applaud Gemma enough for uploading all the lecture and seminar material in
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52 September. This allowed me to work to a schedule every week. I enjoyed most of the follow
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54 up work attached to the lectures and found seminar work engaging and enjoyed listening
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3 to Gemma in seminars. Gemma provided a comfortable seminar environment online which
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5 gave me the confidence to participate. Overall, I enjoyed the lectures and seminar content
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7 thoroughly, found myself reading extra and watching documentaries and enjoying
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9 attending seminars weekly. Thank you so much!”
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15 This was the first year that the module ran and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. As such
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17 I was nominated for, and won, a Faculty Learning and Teaching Student Experience Award. In
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19 terms of staff workload it eased my burden by working in this top-heavy way, as the material was
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21 pre-loaded and students were attending class prepared and enthusiastic.
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27 **Conclusion**

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31 Whilst the pandemic was unprecedented and teachers had to rapidly shift to digital modes of
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33 delivery, this case study demonstrates the benefits of strengths of micro-learning as a permanent
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35 pedagogical approach. Facilitating lectures through shorter ‘chunks’ that guide learners through a
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37 series of tasks results in a vibrant and inclusive flipped-classroom experience during seminar time.
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39 Organizing one’s course as a series of self-contained units helps students to manage their time and
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41 gives them reassurance of how the module ‘looks’ as a whole. This is evidenced by high levels of
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43 engagement and learner satisfaction demonstrable through student evaluations
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