**Blended Learning: enhancing learning through online collaboration**

**Introduction**

This exemplar describes one teacher’s approach to improving student engagement and discussion skills using an application that supports collaboration.

Steven Mackenzie teaches Higher Politics at Inveralmond Community High School in Livingston, West Lothian ([http://www.inveralmondchs.org/](http://www.inveralmondchs.org/)).

In the academic year 2016-17 he developed a SharePoint website and a Yammer group on Glow for his Higher Politics class.

**Online Collaboration**

Collaborative learning communities are well established in higher education and distance learning. These communities are based around the ability to discuss learning and share resources wherever participants have access to a network. The Open University was the first to develop these in the 1990s. More recently it has created the Futurelearn platform to support access to Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs). In most schools the opportunities for such collaboration are in the very early stages of development.

**Establishing the community**

The pilot at Inveralmond was set up as a ‘small test of change’ approach promoted throughout the school by senior management. The SharePoint site was initially created to host lesson resources. The Yammer group was developed to enhance and extend pupil discussions around the Higher Politics syllabus.
The Technology

SharePoint is a web-based, collaborative platform that integrates with Microsoft Office. It is mainly used as a document management and storage system. The Higher Politics site allowed learners to access lesson content, syllabus and exam materials and extension tasks (Attachment 1). Home access to material such as video files and audio blogs supported a flipped approach to learning, with this content being consumed at home and discussed in class. Tools such as Sway were used to provide content that could more easily be adapted to and viewed on a range of mobile devices.

Yammer is a Microsoft business application that enables online collaboration through group discussion and the sharing of resources, via a social media style interface (Attachment 2).

Access

Students had access to a wireless network in school which supported their personal devices, with the choice in class to use a school iPad or their personal device with Yammer installed. Out of school, all learners owned personal mobile devices and installed the Yammer application on these.

Teacher Skills

The teacher role in these Yammer discussions is different to classroom based experiences, with students taking more of a lead in initiating and supporting learning. Key skills in supporting collaboration in a Yammer group include:

- Encouraging all learners to participate in conversations
- Modelling what a digital learning conversation looks like
- Supporting threaded discussions
• Summarising the key points in discussions

**Student Skills**

It’s important to work with students to support their understanding of online learning and in particular how it differs from their experience of conversations in a social media context.

Just because students sit next to each other in class, does not mean they will automatically engage online. They need to be introduced to a different way of learning and teaching, especially the features of participation in a threaded discussion. ‘Often and little’ is the rule of thumb.

• Visit the group regularly and contribute a little

• Think Twitter, with the value of short, carefully thought out inputs.

**Impacts**

Teacher feedback provided evidence of the following impacts.

• A marked improvement in learner engagement

• Enhanced working relationships

• More student control over learning

• Increased home learning

• Consistency of learning between lessons

• Tasks were completed as advanced preparation for lessons, allowing an immediate focus on learning in lesson time

Student feedback provided evidence of the following impacts.

• The benefits of anywhere anytime access to learning resources

• Support available from the teacher outside of timetabled lesson time

• Increased peer support as learners engaged with each other
• Immediacy - given the nature of the subject – the facility to respond quickly to political developments (‘politics does not stop at the end of the school day’).

• Ownership of learning

• Preparation for a style of digital learning commonly found in higher education

High Level Messages

• It’s easy to make assumptions about the range and quality of learner digital skills based on their use of social media and other online services and tools. Online learning requires a different skill set compared to the face to face classroom based experience. Students need to be inducted into this.

• Anywhere-anytime access to an online learning community does not mean everywhere and all-the-time use or support. Teachers and students need to develop a robust approach to using the service to ensure an appropriate work-life balance.

• Online conversations are not an added extra. What takes place online should be clearly embedded in learning in lesson time. Students increasingly do not distinguish between life on and off-line, they are part of the same picture.

• Developing summative and formative assessment strategies for online or blended learning can be challenging. Being aware of practices in higher education and distance learning can support approaches to this.

Next Steps

• In the 2017-2018 academic year the use of Yammer groups will be extended to include two Higher Modern Studies classes and the wider Social Subjects Faculty;

• School colleagues will be encouraged to develop use of Yammer in their lessons e.g. Yammer is being implemented as a communication tool for the full S6, S5 and ‘House’ groups in the school;

• E-Learning frameworks will be explored to support a better understanding of the ways in which collaborative learning can be supported and evaluated.

The work of Gilly Salmon has been influential in developing approaches to supporting online learning. Her 5 Stage Model of E-Learning illustrates the factors that should be taken into account when developing collaborative learning opportunities in an online environment (Attachment 3). Education Scotland colleagues have proposed a framework, based on the work of Salmon, for evaluating collaboration in Yammer group activities (Attachment 4).
Attachment 1

The Inveralmond Community High School SharePoint site on Glow.
The Inveralmond Community High School Yammer group on Glow.
Attachment 3

Gilly Salmon / 5 Stage Model of E-Learning

Source: http://www.gillysalmon.com/five-stage-model.html
Last accessed: 27/6/2017
Attachment 4: Evaluating Collaboration in a Yammer Group (graphic)

Evaluating Collaboration in an Online Discussion Group

Surface

Sending and Receiving Messages
Participants send short messages that have a social focus.

Information Exchange:
Participants share web links and files, but do not identify the relevance of these.

Knowledge Construction:
Participants share knowledge and information. They engage in dialogue that offers information, but there is no evaluation of its relevance or use.

Development:
Participants signpost to examples of work that are taking place outside of the online group.

The moderator welcomes participants into the community – agrees with them what the ground rules for contributing to the community should be – encourages all to participate – ensures that discussions focus on collaborative learning – visits the discussion group often and contributes a little (does not dominate) – encourages threaded discussions – regularly summarise the key points from these discussions – encourages participants to take the lead in sharing, contributing, working together.

sending and receiving Messages
Participants post messages whose features include: longer responses that state a position and back it up with an explanation; they may begin with a social focus but then develop to include a response to the task; they support a threaded discussion.

Information Exchange
Participants post web links and files, including examples of their own work, to which other learners respond and reflect. They indicate the ways in which this information is relevant.

Knowledge Construction
Participants share knowledge and information about their respective work. They engage in a dialogue that synthesises their experiences and that of others, from which emerges an improved or new knowledge about this work.

Deep

Development
Participants regularly provide support to others and reference content and educators outside of the group; they do not rely on the moderator to lead or support discussions.

Foundations:
Learners can access the discussion group ‘anytime-anywhere’ – they are motivated to participate in the group – they have experience of online socialisation through their use of social networks
Further Reading
