Collaborating in online teaching: inviting e-guests to facilitate learning in the digital environment

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Abstract

Purpose – Teaching and learning online during the Covid-19 pandemic has forced university instructors to consider online alternatives to the classroom. It is possible to facilitate students’ learning in the digital environment in similar ways to the traditional face-to-face classroom. The inclusion of e-guests in the digital learning space presents one such opportunity. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the use of e-guests in online learning.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper presents a case study, following a postgraduate class and the role of the e-guest in students’ synchronous online learning.

Findings – E-guests facilitated student learning. Their approaches to learning ranged from slides to discussions. Students responded well to this method of learning.

Practical implications – There is potential for enhancing student learning through the inclusion of e-guests, who bring their expertise to the classroom. E-guests from different regions offer students an opportunity to learn from specialists they would not necessarily have access to in the traditional classroom.

Originality/value – E-guests offer one important potential means of enriching online teaching.

Keywords Postgraduate, Online learning, Digital learning, Online teaching, E-guests, Synchronous learning

Paper type Case study

Introduction
The inclusion of classroom visitors has long been a practice in education to enhance content delivery and acquisition of learning. In addition to the traditional face-to-face classroom, guests have similarly been used in the online learning environment to augment learning. An e-guest, that is participation of an external expert in a given area in the virtual classroom, offers an opportunity to include external expertise and enhance learning. This paper examines the incorporation of a set of three e-guest visits to one online module, with the goal of understanding the potential for e-guests to broaden the student’s learning experience online.

Background literature
Guests in the classroom
The pedagogical tradition of incorporating of external expertise in the classroom has a long tradition. As early as 2000, the e-guest was promoted as part of a redefined learning space...
online (Evening Mail, 2000). Guest speakers are used to help enrich the depth and nature of content covered in a unit of learning, providing students with an experience that extends beyond the traditional lecture to wider learning around practical and theoretical issues.

Researchers have found links between student motivation and engagement and the presence of visiting speakers. After surveying journalism and mass communication students, Merle and Craig (2017) emphasised the role of guest speakers in promoting active learning in the classroom, with guests who communicate, rather than lecture to students, having greatest impact. Lee and Joung (2017) also surveyed university students about their perceptions of guests in the hospitality and tourism industry. In keeping with other researchers (Kang et al., 2005), the authors found that students valued first-hand knowledge and current awareness of the field, perceived links between industry visitors with their future careers and introduction to new areas. Merle and Craig (2017) also suggested that students value a link between learning outcomes and guest speakers because guests used specific examples.

The selection of guests for the classroom is a critical part of the process. Lee and Joung (2017, p. 309) emphasised that selection of guest speakers plays a critical role in student engagement and that identifying:

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... industry professionals who are appropriate for the class based on their knowledge of the course content and know how to relate their background and industry knowledge to the topic is essential.
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In addition, the approach of a guest forms a critical part of their success in the classroom. For instance, Merle and Craig (2017) reported that students preferred question and answer discussions over the traditional lecture format. The guest speaker approach may also include one speaker or a panel of speakers in discussion about a topic.

**Guest speakers in the online environment**

The virtual classroom provides the digital context for guests. The e-guest, an external visitor to the virtual classroom, fulfils the role of guest speaker, offering professional and subject expertise to facilitate student learning. Within the virtual context, the e-guest may, for example, deliver a lecture, offer expert input to question and answer discussions and provide additional content, such as readings or videos, to deepen student engagement.

While Merle and Craig (2017) recommended the face-to-face classroom over the online environment to promote this connection between speaker and students, other researchers have found positive ways to extend or introduce guests to the online learning environment. For instance, Boettcher and Cartwright (1997) suggested that the e-guest can act as an additional learning resource for students, while Ostorga and Farruggio (2013) have argued that e-guests encourage deep learning. Additionally, examining the collaboration between students and external visitors, Eveleth and Baker Eveleth (2009) reported that online guests possess a credibility that enables them to reinforce learning. According to Hemphill and Hemphill (2007), the online guest can enhance critical thinking and engagement. Farruggio (2009) suggested that e-guests contribute to students’ professional growth, offering an exemplar that students can follow. Schumann (2019) used e-guest videos to help students identify with role models and mentors for their studies. Holtzblatt and Tschakert (2011) have added that e-guests can help bring expertise from locations at a distance to the local classroom.

E-guests may also influence affective behaviour in the online classroom. For instance, Beasley et al. (2012) found that the virtual guest panel can positively affect how people interact with one another. They explored an online guest and intervention approach to their
organisation of a panel on diverse groups, as an extension of the traditional face-to-face panel format, and found it helped lower negative reactions towards interpersonal interactions with particular groups. They recommended the virtual guest panel approach to facilitate other diverse groups as a means of increasing positive affect among the audience.

Approach: the e-guest in the classroom

Case study approach
A case study approach was taken for this paper as a means of highlighting the practice of using e-guests in the online classroom. The postgraduate module, people, information and communication, offered though the School of Information and Communication Studies, provided the case context, in which to implement a learning design element through the involvement of e-guests in learning engagement and content delivery.

The case study provides a common means of exploring a phenomenon in a given context in research, in particular in educational research. For example, Yin (2003, p. 1) legitimised case method research as:

[...] the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context.

The case study further enables educational exploration and dissemination practice through case design. Boling (2010) described the design case as “a description of a real artifact or experience that has been intentionally designed”, and in the context of this paper, the introduction of a learning exemplar through e-guest visits. Design cases rely on precedent in which designers proactively seek designs that will provide solutions for future problems (Boling, 2010). Important considerations for rigour in case design include characteristics that support the reader:

[...] building trust in what has been reported, providing context that allows independent assessment of what has been reported by the reader, and committing to transparency in conveying the particular situation rather than to process in deriving the general rule (Boling, 2010, p. 5).

In the current case of e-guests, the context is reported with outcomes in the particular online module.

Boling (2010) further addresses the concern with generalisability of the single case study, asserting that precedents sought in designing are “concrete and situated” as oppose to generalised. The single case may still offer food for thought for further research and inspiration for development of educational approaches. The design case approach used in this paper facilitated deeper understanding of e-guests in one online educational setting. Importantly, in keeping with Boling’s (2010) argument for case design, the case of e-guests offers an example of design opportunity. As is important with design case work (Boling, 2010), the outcomes may help other instructors similarly designing educational opportunities online.

Module: people, information and communication
A series of e-guests are invited annually to the postgraduate module, people, information and communication. The module functions as a collaboratively led online offering, with both student and instructor input into module content. Students are encouraged to propose topics for exploration, share literature they find with the class, select potential field trip opportunities and suggest and agree e-guests for the module. During this 12-week long
module, students take turns as seminar leaders, who manage and lead weekly discussion (synchronous and asynchronous), as well as tech angels, who facilitate their class colleagues with any arising technical difficulties during synchronous sessions (e.g., loss of connectivity) held via Blackboard Virtual Classroom, currently used as an add-on feature to the university’s virtual learning environment, Brightspace. In short, this module follows a self-constructed learning approach, in which students hold the ultimate control over their learning. There were 15 postgraduate students from Master’s of Information Systems, Communications and Media, and Environmental Sustainability programmes enrolled in this year’s offering of the module.

The selection of e-guests follows a two-step process. Firstly, the instructor identifies potential e-guests from professional and academic domains who have offered their expertise in previous offerings of the module or who have expressed interest in becoming an e-guest. Then, when the module begins, students review the syllabus, including potential e-guests and offer their suggestions. Students and the instructor agree the course of the module. This part of the process can be challenging for students, particularly because the online seminar format and self-constructed learning are most often new to them. However, as the module progresses, students become stronger in their own voices and offer suggestions around this material. The module is flexible and allows for additional expertise to be requested, i.e. e-guests, as required for learning.

For 2019–2020, three e-guests were agreed. The first e-guest was a professional working in Ireland in the area of health and health information; their visit coincided with a weekly topic designated as *Information and Communication Where We Work*. The second e-guest was a UK business manager who leads a compliance team for a large, international company; their visit was aligned with the weekly topic, *Managing Workplace Information and Communication*. The third e-guest was an academic located at an Australian university; their visit was coordinated alongside the weekly topic, *Translating Observed Patterns of Behaviour into Models*, to enhance students’ thinking about how to develop theory for and through professional practice.

Sessions with e-guests were synchronous. The following format was followed: the e-guest visited the online classroom either for the first or second hour of the seminar, as they chose. Student seminar leaders for this week moderated discussion around the e-guest’s talk. E-guests varied in their approach to their talks, with some using slide presentations and others offering content in the context of discussion.

**Role of the e-guest in student’s learning**

Students enrolled in the module were enthusiastic about the involvement of e-guests. Students and the instructors discussed upcoming e-guest visits in advance. Students prepared readings selected by the e-guests to support discussion during the online seminar. In addition, students prepared questions in advance to ask of the e-guest during the seminar session. During the online sessions, students interacted with the e-guest to ask questions and explore topics in greater depth.

E-guests were also enthusiastic about participation in the online classroom. They liaised closely with the instructor to prepare for the session. The instructor relayed readings selected by the e-guest to students in advance of the seminar to facilitate student preparation and to encourage engagement during the seminar. During the seminar, e-guests varied in their approach to their contributions. The two industry experts who visited the online class presented content verbally without slides, adopting a more conversational approach with the class, while the academic e-guest used a formal slide deck and took a more academic lecture approach. The business manager proved to be the most popular e-guest; he took the
most informal, conversational approach, and he additionally provided short videos related to his engineering compliance work which helped to spark conversation and engage students.

E-guests further requested feedback on their participation to facilitate their future development of visits to this online module or to other classrooms. They valued the input of students and the instructor. In one noteworthy example of feedback, one student posted to social media enthusiastically about the e-guests’ participation and learning outcomes in the module. This post was “liked” by the student’s classmates who were members of the social media platform. Other students referred to e-guest visits positively and seemed to appreciate the expertise e-guests brought to the online classroom.

Students further valued the connection between university studies and the workplace “real world” approach offered by e-guests. The opportunity to acquire knowledge from professionals was important to student learning and, as observed by Lee and Joung (2017) and Kang et al. (2005), encouraged awareness of the subject area and fostered links between industry and students’ thinking about their future careers.

Discussion

Important outcomes of adding e-guests to online classroom learning included positive student engagement, widening of learning opportunities to international locations and positive student connections between theory and practice. There is potential, as Farruggio (2009) has reported, for e-guests to facilitate students’ professional growth. In the current module, students could look to e-guests as exemplars of work practice to follow in their professional lives and to consider for project assessment. Interestingly, there is a fully asynchronous version of this module on offer this year as well; students in the asynchronous module were much less likely to engage with the module on a weekly basis, while, by stark contrast, e-guests provided a point for enhanced engagement and excitement for students on the synchronous module.

The greatest success with e-guests in this online module seemed to accompany the e-guest’s approach to engagement, following Merle and Craig’s (2017) assertion that guests who communicate, rather than lecture, have the greatest impact. Certainly e-guests on this module encourage active learning among students, as evidenced by students’ development of the question and answer element for e-guests’ visits.

Another important outcome of the inclusion of e-guests in the module was the opportunity to bring in external expertise from around the world. Holtzblatt and Tschakert (2011) have noted that e-guests are useful for this purpose. Two of the e-guests for this module visited from other countries, an occurrence that would have been much less likely for financial reasons related to long distance travel.

E-guests further had a lasting impact on students. Students referred back to e-guest visits in later discussions together in class. It was clear that, as Boettcher and Cartwright (1997) observed, e-guests formed an additional learning resource for students. The interaction between e-guests and students encouraged engagement and critical thinking, as suggested by Hemphill and Hemphill (2007).

Further, these advantages found with regard to the module discussed in this paper also offer a resource for instructors considering alternative learning design, in keeping with dissemination of ideas in education (Boling 2010). The experience of involving e-guests in the classroom offers multiple points which may inform future practice in this area. Additionally, the sharing of learning design outcomes support wider learning in the design community, as promoted by Boling (2010).
Recommendations for incorporating e-guests in the virtual classroom

Given the outcomes of including an e-guest in the class described in this case study, we have several recommendations for others planning to include e-guests in their teaching and learning:

- The selection of e-guests is critical. External visitors should be chosen for their knowledge and expertise in a particular area, enabling significant credibility in the learning environment (Eveleth and Baker Eveleth, 2009; Lee and Joung, 2017). The virtual environment also facilitates accessing expertise that is located at a distance (Holtzblatt and Tschakert, 2011).

- Communication and engagement are key. E-guests should also be chosen for their ability to engage with students. Communication is key here; e-guests who are at ease with discussion will have greater impact on student learning (Merle and Craig, 2017). Remember that e-guests provide exemplars for learning (Farruggio, 2009). As Beasley et al. (2012) found, e-guests can influence how people engage in the virtual environment.

- While instructors may have knowledge of a given subject area and connections with professionals and other academics who might become e-guests, the involvement of students in developing learning expectations can also help with e-guest selection. Students should be consulted about their learning needs and wishes. They are the key players in their learning; their input into selection of e-guests can help deepen their commitment and interaction in the virtual classroom.

- Instructors should create appropriate expectations and make these transparent to e-guests. It is important to explain the weekly process of a class and expectations of both guests and students so that e-guests understand how their contribution will dovetail with student learning and so that e-guests feel comfortable as they join a class. Instructors should also brief e-guests on the technologies used in the virtual classroom and provide the e-guest with an opportunity to try out the virtual classroom space prior to visiting the class. Instructors should further offer feedback to e-guests after sessions so that e-guests can keep or tailor future visits accordingly.

This list is not exhaustive but provides some of the essentials for success with e-guests in the online teaching and learning environment.

Conclusion

E-guests add a valuable dimension to learning which students enthusiastically embraced. As a result, future online offerings of the module in this case study will continue to include e-guests, with a continued focus on a blend of professional and academic speakers.

The advent of Covid-19 restrictions has challenged educators and learners to consider different approaches to learning. An e-guest provides one promising means of not only delivering content but also encouraging discussion, wider critical thinking in the online classroom and further embedding of academic and professional concepts in learning design.

References


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