# Students' views of a networked practice inquiry course: energising and challenging higher education teaching

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## Abstract

In the higher education sector both networked learning and inquiry-based learning are signalled as flexible pedagogical approaches which support and encourage the development of skills, competences and qualities expected of "21st century" learning. Whereas networked learning distinctively attends to connectedness enhanced and mediated by technologies for the creation of learning networks and socio-material assemblages, inquiry-based learning distinctively brings together teaching and researching encouraging students' learning engagement and development. A networked practice inquiry approach was envisaged as helpful to encourage postgraduate students to engage for learning on and with digital technologies and inspire professional practice development. Past the course experience an interpretative study was taken up in an attempt to obtain an initial picture of the student perspective of this course approach.

This paper shares a preliminary qualitative picture describing students' viewpoint of the networked practice inquiry learning experience. It is a first glimpse into technology enhanced and mediated learning experience of the postgraduate student in Malta. These preliminary findings suggest that students are forward looking. Students demand and celebrate innovative digital tools and practices in and for learning, especially when these are seen accommodating them and resonating to their wider life and work practice experiences. They are generally enthused to assume explorative and inquiry attitudes into life and work practices for learning and practice development. They are also into connectedness for learning but on their own terms. This is a threefold appeal coming from mature students regarding their higher education course experience which, in a local context of fast developing socio-technological change, is simultaneously energising and challenging. Considering that in the local context there is currently a lot of work going on the political and executive tables to see artificial intelligence and immersive technologies compellingly transforming mainstream societal sectors including education, in the local higher education scene we urgently need to make a start for making the course experience the first port of call where one has the "an opportunity to think and dream" as one of the research participants put it; constructively and critically laying down our future and that of the generations to come.

Student experience, networked learning, inquiry-based learning, qualitative research, higher education

## Introduction

Technologies are a facet moreover an integral aspect of our work, our life, and increasingly part of our physical selves. Fast and unrelenting techno-social developments and increasingly immersive surroundings accentuate the need for the development of higher order competences and qualities moreover factual knowledge when in formal learning. Against this backdrop, a networked practice inquiry approach was adopted for taking forward a social science course within an overarching postgraduate programme of studies. In the higher education (HE) sector both networked learning and inquiry-based learning are signalled as flexible pedagogical approaches which support and encourage the development of skills, competences and qualities expected of "21st century" learning. Whereas networked learning distinctively attends to connectedness enhanced and mediated by technologies for the creation of learning networks (Goodyear & Carvalho, 2014) and socio-material assemblages (Gourlay & Oliver, 2018), inquiry-based learning distinctively brings together teaching and researching (Brew, 2010; Healey, 2005) encouraging students' learning engagement and development (Spronken-Smith, 2012). This networked practice inquiry approach was envisaged as helpful to encourage students to engage for learning on and with digital technologies and inspire professional practice development. This paper shares preliminary qualitative results describing the student viewpoint of the networked practice inquiry learning experience. These results suggest that students are forward looking. They demand and celebrate

innovative digital tools and practices in and for learning, especially when these are seen accommodating them and resonating to their wider life and work practice experiences. They are enthused assuming explorative and inquiry attitudes into life and work practices for learning and practice development but demand more time for such active engagement. They are also into connectedness for learning but on their own terms. This is a threefold appeal coming from mature students regarding their higher education course experience which, in the Maltese local context of fast developing socio-technological change, is simultaneously energising and challenging.

## Research Contextualisation

This last decade the HE student experience of digital educational practices has attracted a lot of attention, much because of  the student consumerist outlook seeping into the sector (Jones, 2018; Johnston, McNeill & Smyth, 2018; Mayo, 2019) but in part and more constructively because of a genuine concern to respond better to the students' learning needs  at what is increasingly seen as the digital university (Gourlay & Oliver 2018; Johnson et al., 2018) trying to keep up with the wider community and societal evolving context (Siemens, Gašević & Dawson, 2015). I would like to think this effort falls in the latter category. Although the networked learning literature includes a good number of studies on the HE student experience of technology enhanced and/or mediated learning (Goodyear, Jones, Asensio, Hodgson & Steeples, 2005; Jones & Bloxham, 2001; Ramanau, Sharpe & Benfield, 2008; Beetham, 2008; Thorpe et al., 2008; and so on), such studies in the local higher education context of concern are a rarity. In-depth research looking into the postgraduate student's perspective of the digital learning experience in the Maltese context is strikingly missing (and this at a time when there is a local drive to advance and spearhead technology enhanced and mediated practices in different societal sectors including education).   This research study is a preliminary attempt to address this research gap. It also comes just in time when a new University of Malta (UM) strategy issued recently declares the need to be giving special attention to the student experience and the development of teaching and learning at the institution, alongside blended and online learning policy initiatives. In its statement regarding the nurturing of "a culture of quality based on the principle that quality comes from people" the UM strategy states that "teaching, learning and research are fundamental core missions" and "student engagement and involvement are indispensable in the design, development and review of programmes, evaluation of procedures and governance" (p.61). This initiative is also seen as a small early response implementing the new institutional vision; an unpretentious attempt to involve the students in the review of formal HE teaching and learning.

## Research Background

When the author was invited to take forward the study-unit on the digital dimension of community action and development within an encompassing Masters level programme of studies on community action and development at a HE institution in Malta, she strived for a preach-through-practice learning design aspiring "communal" learning enhanced and mediated by available digital technologies.  The implemented networked practice inquiry course strategy meant to encourage students to actively engage exploring the digital dimension of community action and development for themselves in learning and additionally support their professional practice development considering that the 12 enrolled course participants where professionals already engaged in communal, education and other public and private community activism.

The implemented networked practice inquiry approach included 11 on-campus weekly, 3-hour, evening meetings and an online component intended to make seamless the course experience across the virtual and the physical and (in a small way as an initial attempt) the closed and open spaces. Through the study course students were introduced to curricular concepts on the theme of digital practices for community action and development and invited to reflect on their professional work and other life practices in cooperation and collaboration with fellow students offline and online. The offline meetings were a mix of discussion activities which were meant to continue in the dedicated online space, and student led seminars presenting a critical review of a self-selected case-study and project work in progress. The assessment was based on their online contributions (20%), seminar presentation of the project work in progress (20%), participation in the peer reviewing exercise (10%) and the 1500-word written project report (50%). For their individual project work, students were encouraged to engage in an inquiry-based enterprise critically appraising some self-chosen aspect of their life and/or professional work practice relating to community action and development with the aim of improving it in consideration of surrounding digital technologies and practices. Through the study course the students also had the opportunity to explore, experiment and connect using a small selection of social media and other innovative technologies, and critically appraise them in (what were intended as relaxed and easy-going) conversations with fellow peers and tutor with regards to their wider life and professional practices. Further to teaching the intended curriculum for

personal content knowledge development, an aspiration in adopting this networked practice inquiry strategy was to support the course participants develop critical and analytical competences, and a discerning attitude to learning and wider practice development which are considered crucial commitment in higher education teaching and learning.

Past the course, a qualitative research study was taken up to evaluate the course experience from the students' standpoint and so involve them more intimately in the review of the course for feeding future teaching and learning development. The students' course evaluation feedback collected by the anonymous post-course online survey issued by the institutional unit responsible for the quality assurance of academic programmes and resources yielded 4 responses. Markedly, the survey highlighted that although the course was generally well received, students found it hard to keep up with weekly tasks because of time limitations. Nonetheless there was found a comment which along with the criticism of the many tasks for part-time study commitment, stated that the course was "not engaging", and that in spite of "potential to help in community work outreach and engagement" the course "took another twist, more targeted for professional growth". The qualitative study meant to gain a better understanding of the different student perceptions and experiences in more detail to hopefully improve this postgraduate blended course experience, reaching out to the all the different students' learning needs (which evidently for some students fell short despite the careful planning). The following section sets out the qualitative description of this course constituted from the transcribed comments of participating students who kindly consented and dedicated some of their precious time to contribute to this study (and for which, as the course co-ordinator, tutor and researcher, this author is very grateful).

## Research Methods

For this exploration of students' perceptions of the networked practice inquiry course experience, an interpretative attitude was assumed in an attempt to arrive at a depiction from the students' viewpoint. Semi-structured interviews with consenting participants were held 3 months after the end of the course and the publication of course results.  The emailed call for research participation attracted 2 out of the 12 invited students (who completed the course). The additional attempt to recruit more participants using a snowballing strategy failed. The interpretative approach within the qualitative research paradigm (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011) to understand students' lived course experiences sidestepped  the problem of the small research sample because each data transcript incorporates multiple instances of perceptions and experiences (Norman Denzin in Baker, Edwards, and Doidge (2012)) so at most a small research sample yields a description which is more partial than that which could have been obtained employing a larger data set. The study is considered mostly preliminary quest into the Maltese postgraduate student experience of digital learning practice but nonetheless a noteworthy starter.

During the interview the participants were encouraged to describe episodes of their learning enterprise and to reflect and comment on how they approached tasks, what they saw themselves gaining from these experiences, what they found helpful or otherwise for their learning and professional practice development, and what they thought would have supported them better for their personal learning and wider life and work practice development. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and emailed to the interviewees for approval before the data analysis process.

The interpretative data analysis process consisted of two main stages. The first level of analysis consisted of 3 iterations through the data. Through the first iteration, each transcript was read and annotated with neutral codes. In a second round through the individual transcripts, potential themes and subthemes were identified and illustrative data excerpts marked. In the subsequent iteration of this first level of data analysis, the set of themes and subthemes from across different transcripts were brought together along with corresponding quotations (and other transcript tracking information) into a single data tabulation. Past this first stage of data analysis, the activity-centred analysis and design (ACAD) framework (Carvalho & Goodyear, 2014) was brought in as a theoretical frame for structuring the interpretative narrative describing the lived experiences of the learning course. The set of themes and subthemes was grouped and regrouped to devise a representation of student views set out in consideration of the tools and spaces supporting the lived experience of the set design, the tasks setting forth the lived experience of the epistemic design, and the people and places upholding the lived experience of social the design. The next section outlines the resulting interpretation.

## Research Findings

The blended course intending an in inquiry-based attitude within an overarching networked learning approach for exploring the digital dimension of community action and development was portrayed as follows:

**The lived experience of set design – what of tools and spaces**

The networked practice inquiry course approach was a different pedagogy than what the students are used (#1). The lectures were not lectures (#1) but a discussion space where you could talk and everyone was sharing their thoughts on the discussion theme (#1). The case-studies describing innovative projects were a welcome inclusion because they provide examples of state-of-the-art innovation, so a source of ideas for assignments and work practice development. It was also a pleasure for students to have the possibility to access the webpages of projects they were reading about. The approach was different than going to the lectures where you can sit to silently listen and you do not have "homework" but can do a little bit of reading and think about the assignment (#1). In this study-unit the student was involved very much (#1). There were the online discussions besides the discussion in class for the students to keep up with every week (#1, #2).

The institutional (Moodle-based) course-site conveying the learning resources and the online discussion forums is not so convenient for being accessed using the mobile phone (#2). Part-time students who are trying to get on with their studies often take the study work to bed. Mobile devices such as the smart phone or the tablet are more convenient (#1, #2) to juggle part-time studies with life and work commitments. Behind the scenes, the students maintain a secret group to keep connected (for this student cohort a Facebook group). The tendency is for students to download and share course resources within this secret group away from the institutional course-site which is more tedious to navigate (#2). This students' online space is a lifeline for students to help themselves through the study programme. Students who do not make the effort to keep connected to this invisible student community and active in this informal space are losing out (#2).

Social media beyond the popular Facebook and WhatsApp such as the more public Twitter are problematic. The students need time to figure out how an unfamiliar technology works (#2). They need time to explore, experiment and critically appraise it. During the course there was not enough time for this exploration and experimentation. The incorporation of innovative technology applications such as the smart learning activity (bringing in the media developer as a guest speaker) is appealing especially when the student sees similar innovation being developed at the workplace (#2) so the resonance between course learning activity and workplace practices.

Considering the course focused on the digital dimension of community action and development, the student sees the importance of the learning resources needing to be frequently updated to keep them up to scratch (#2) aligning to wider world and work life practices. The consideration of troubling issues (such as cybersecurity) serves the student to build confidence (#1). The invitation of a first-hand expert as a guest would have served better for students' learning (#2). Other participants' suggestions with regards to tools and spaces include recommendations for "weekend workshops" (#1) and that the online components of the course are easily accessible through the mobile smartphone (#2).

> "those were not lecturers where you listen and cannot speak - obviously that was really helpful; that you talk and we are all expressing ourselves, and at the same time we a keeping to the topic. But the thing was more interactive" (#1:5)

> "We discovered other [web] pages because the [web]pages we were doing we never heard of them before. I mean all the groupwork which we did were new to us, both our work and that of others. There was a group that had [web] page on plants … I mean we discovered how vast the Internet is. By being an Internet user, it does not mean you are seeing all the content there is because it is very vast. But we all had a certain sense of team-work in doing that work. At times we lack that because with the Masters it is as if everyone is working on their own on the assignments" (#2:3).

> "Because do not forget, [raising the smart phone] this is what we most frequently use … So the mobile, let me speak for myself as well, when I did the assignment I emphasised that a person will access the website I was trying to create from the mobile rather than from the PC or the laptop. I mean we need to adapt our Internet reach through the mobile … Because this is what we use. Nowadays this has become kind of my computer because if I have an email I answer it from here. I look at the Calendar from here. If you have a FB [account] you access it from here. And here you have the best thing [because] it is practical and lightweight – true it is addictive as well – But when I wake up the first thing I use it to check the time, I check the notifications, I see what I have to do. And before I go to sleep I do the same thing. Because you are not going to take the laptop to bed. But this sits next to your bed. There are negative attributes to this. But I wanted to explain to you that nowadays people check things, access websites, [use] applications, from the mobile [smartphone]" (#2:1/2).

**The lived experience of epistemic design – tasks**

Students participating in this study see value in the course tasks incorporating opportunities to critically inquire life and work practices. Individual readings of printed and online articles are a means for reflection, even on professional work practices (#1). These are the learning tasks students are used to.  Together with the lectures, they serve as a springboard to extend the exploration of the study topic after the lecture (#2). The readings and lectures lead to the discovery of other resources for learning (aspects of the topic you are interested in as a student). But the  students were not sure what to expect (#2) despite the available course description outlining the course approach, organisation and structure. The (networked practice inquiry) course approach, related methods and tasks for learning did not fall in with the way students are used to in going about their studies (#1). The lectures were more of a discussion space for expressing your thoughts and listening to what others have to say (#1). This also served as a means of reflection. The discussions and the sharing of work and life experience also encouraged self-awareness, helped to build self-confidence, and to critically engage for learning. The expectation to be explorative and to participate online on a weekly basis is overwhelming for the limited study-unit time alongside other studies, work and life commitments. From the part-time postgraduate student's point of view, the online tasks are time-consuming, too demanding and put you in a vulnerable position because you have to be certain of what you are putting in writing (#1). Added to this there are instances when technology fails you so further hindering you from participating in online activities (#1); and the choice of technologies may not be so responsive to students' preferences for learning (#2). Grading tied to online participation is unnecessary pressure because as an adult you know that participation in the online discussion helps you for learning, but then again, the grading was a motivation for contributing to these discussions (#1).

The case-study summaries served to take stock of state-of-the-art examples, and to help generate ideas for work and life practices involved in community action and development. The task approach in the form of small group presentations was an opportunity to learn to work with others with different working styles (#2).

The individual assignment focusing on a self-chosen issue related to work and/or life practice permits you to work on something that goes beyond the assignment requirements of the study-unit; hopefully leading to something useful for serving the community of concern (#2). This leads the student to take time in coming up with a project proposal (#2). The opportunity to obtain feedback from peers and tutor is useful for improving the initial project idea (and for achieving a better course grade (#1)).  Students participating in the study appreciate the peer-reviewing exercise of draft projects. Through the task of paired peer-reviewing of project work, the research participants claim that they learnt to critically and constructively review the work of others; something which is pointed out as being done at the workplace and in wider world situations such as when evaluating public consultation propositions. Through the peer reviewing process participants also claim that they learnt how things work in different organisations and institutions. This access to insider viewpoints is claimed to have helped reduce "frustration" and increase "empathy" for when liaising with external stakeholders for work and life purposes (because you get a better understanding of what is happening on the other side (#1)).

Additional recommendations with regards to tasks include the careful scheduling of this challenging course alongside other programme study-units which are not so demanding (#1) and the widening of the time window allocated for the study-unit so that students have more time for engaging in inquiry processes (#2) for completing set tasks:

> "I think that as a course it was too demanding because you had to give an input every week. Now we are mature students. At least this is the way I work: I go for the lectures. I take notes. When the assignment comes, I start to think about it. Then I spend about a fortnight mentally preparing for it. This and that; and thinking about it during the lectures. Then I sit down and write. With this [course] you had to work from the start. So, full-time (work). You have to come to the university. You have to go to work. At times you stay late at work. The university, part-time, it was difficult to contribute as much as I would have liked, or perhaps I could have gained much more" (#1:3)

> "Peer reviewing helped me a lot. First of all you need a buddy - for me it worked well because we chose our own buddy. And <Beta> was my buddy throughout the course. So even we encounter a difficulty, we talk about it, or when we do not understand a topic. The fact that she was my (peer) reviewer for the project work helped me because she was highlighting that which I left out. I think that was a good thing. The peer review was a good exercise. And we learn how to give each other feedback. I think we Maltese suffer in this thing of mutually giving feedback. I think that this is something which should stay … Obviously, you are not going to take on board all that is said in the peer review. I mean, it is up to you to whether you want to accept what you are being told. But I think, it helps you. And the fact that you have to do a review to someone else also gets you out of your own niche. Because at times it happens to us that we take the information which applies to us and that other information - Look, especially in our world, we use things for our practice but what interests us are the marks. And you are selective in what you listen to and adopt. So the peer

review of other's work was an opportunity and a task and a responsibility to understand what someone else is doing. It might be that I am not going to use it but I learnt just the same". (#1:7)

## The lived experience of social design – people and places

Participants attach importance to the on-campus meetings with peers and the tutor. As can be noted from the first quotation in the previous section, students are used to the traditional learning approach attending transmissive lectures and following this up with readings and a written assignment. Nonetheless students appreciate the divergent face-to-face meetings as a place for people congregate, express their thoughts on the discussion topic and listen to the views and experiences of others (#1, #2). This celebration stands in stark contrast to the students' outlook of the online meeting places within the formal learning space backed up by the institutional platform. The research participants do not show the same enthusiasm for the discursive online events meant for people to meet online, express their thoughts and read about what others have to say in the institutional learning spaces. The online and written characterisations here raise concerns for students. A participant confides that if you lack self-confidence, the online discussions with peers (outside that small close-knit subgroup) are unnerving because you need to be certain about what you are writing and not posting "xi cucata" [something silly] (#1). The permanence of the written comments in formal learning spaces is not something the students look forward to when they are struggling to gain an understanding.

The mixed age of the students is interpreted as another possible source of pressure. Older students might feel pressured to show themselves as digitally literate as their younger counterparts who are perceived to be more digitally competent (#1). Reflecting on the peer-reviewing exercise, a participant remarked that younger students may be annoyed that a peer gets to review their work (#2).

Group work is a collective event for learning which students generally fear because people have different working styles and you need to find a way how to work together (#2) which does not always work out well. The research participants both note that for their particular course experience, the strategy permitting the students to form the work groups amongst themselves helped for things to work well (because they already knew each other well when into the second year of the encompassing programme of studies and already had their established ways of working together in subgroups). A participant explained that the 4-member group she was in, agreed on a subdivision of the work and collaborated online (in their own secret spaces) for putting it all together so "practicing the digital dimension of community action and development" as part of their course experience (#2). The peer reviewing task encouraging students to collaborate for learning and development was highlighted as a new experience for the participants in the local formal learning setting. Participants emphasised the importance of the pairing organisation of the peer review process left in the hands of the students. They flag the fear of criticism of peers which can be experienced as unacceptable. Trust (#1) and maturity (#2) are seen as necessary conditions for the success of peer reviewing as an activity for learning and development. The participants also noted that informally there is a tendency for students who are close to be helping each other but the actual reading of the draft work and writing a review of the work (and attaining a grade for it (#1)) was all new to them. A participant remarked that behind the scenes the students were consulting with each other on the review before posting them online in the more "public" peer review space on the institutional platform so highlighting wariness and uncertainty:

"I do not see any methods that we could have used. Because you used the best method. During the [face-to-face] session we could talk. We could share our experiences. They were simplified. I mean there wasn't the use of difficult words that we could not relate to. We were discovering something which we are in touch with all the time. So we could understand better what we are saying, what we are doing. The digital dimensions are an integral part of our lives nowadays. Without them, it is difficult. In fact, we experience it even as a Masters [earning] group. We feel that who does not use Facebook so much falls behind from [the rest of] the group. I mean, we have a small community as a Masters group on Facebook. Those who do not log in, huh." (#2:7)

"There may be people who do not like it [peer-reviewing]. But if you genuinely give constructive feedback you do not have to dislike it … maybe we [peer-reviewing pair] are grown-ups, we have reached a certain age. But maybe with the younger ones, they may be annoyed that a younger peer [reviews your work]. But personally, it did not upset me. On the contrary, it was helpful because those things which I failed to see, <Alpha> noted them, and we discussed them. I mean we should not be upset by peer-reviewing" (#2:5)

I ran into difficulties during the course. I mean, I cannot say that it was plain sailing because I could not keep up for example. And I am a type of person - how shall I say this - although I am very outgoing, I am very wary and shy. I was very self-conscious when writing in places where

everyone can see it. I mean, I tend to hold back from writing. And I start saying to myself; "But am I correct in saying this?". It is as if my self-esteem in this respect is a bit low. So, that of the [online] writing, and having to writing things that make sense was a bit stressful. And how much are you going to write online? For example, when we get into a debate I am not going to write something silly. I used to be very self-conscious that for example - and time was against me. As we always say, time is against us. So a person like me, who struggles to make a step forward in writing online, I did not have the time to think and be certain [of what I wrote]. So I used to choose not to write, or not write that part" (#1:2).

## Discussion and Conclusion

From this small-scale study, students are nowadays taking for granted the incorporation of digital technologies for taking forward a formal learning study course, and demand that these are chosen with the specific aim to accommodate them. This may be partly the result of the permeation of digital technologies in most of our practices locally, and also because at universities such as the HE institution of concern there is increasing coercion for enhancing teaching with digital technologies. For the case of the concerned university, it is for using the automatically generated created course-sites on the institutional Moodle-based virtual learning environment in association to running study-units within programme of studies. But then students still find issue with technologies they are not familiar with and more so with technology mediated learning activity which seeks to steer them away from individual knowledge acquisition learning attitudes to connectedness with others online as well as offline. Considering the surrounding context, this is no surprise when observing that on campus the traditional transmissive lecture continues in earnest despite the vast amount of educational research challenging this HE teaching attitude with the online space mostly used as a depository for subject content to be conveniently passed on to students (Caruana, 2019). In fact, research participants commented on the unusual course approach.

The participating students appreciated the opportunities of the set tasks for reflecting and rethinking work and life practices incorporating the digital dimension (and even their learning practices) but they are overwhelmed by the demand on their time this active engagement signifies in contrast to traditional lecture attendance followed by literature readings and the submission of a written assignment for course assessment purposes. At the same time students demand and celebrate innovative digital tools and technology enhanced and mediated practices remodelling their formal learning experiences more in line to wider life and work practices, participating students convey hesitancy and wariness to a networked practice inquiry approach for learning. All at once, the research participants flag pressure and stress generated by invitations to technology enhanced and mediated learning with others and celebrate and demand innovative digital tools and practices incorporated into their formal learning experiences. They are not used to the learning going on "publicly" visible, "formally" graduated and "openly" discussed through the run of the course. They find all this overwhelming and time consuming (because they are "on the stage" all the time compared to the relaxed attitude when all the organisation and management of the study work is left in the hands of the students to take up in their own time, invisibly and in isolation. In secret spaces and places shared with those few trusted others the students are connecting for learning and mutually supporting each other for learning within their limits of understanding, but here they are safe from judgment, grading and the authoritarian and derisive. The students are nurturing connectedness for learning but on their own terms. In my opinion, the way we often go about our HE teaching and learning does not encourage them to do otherwise, and an isolated case of trying to go against the mainstream attitude cannot be expected to bring change in students' attitudes and outlook overnight.

The picture arising from this study needs to be acknowledged as a partial description of students' perceptions and experiences of a networked inquiry course approach because of the limited number of research participants. Further exploration is required to add more detail to this emergent picture. However, this picture is no less authentic and worthy as an interpretative representation. What clearly emerges from this representation is that students question the what and how of their course experiences from within the encompassing and surrounding environment. Students are not against digital tools and practices infusing their HE course experience; and especially welcome them when these are seen accommodating them and resonate to their life and work practice experience. Students see the worthiness of co-operation and collaboration for learning and development, but they are upset by them in the formal learning spaces where they feel being continuously assessed, and not only by tutoring staff for grading purposes which is already stressful but also by untrusted peers which is disappointing. Students are comfortable and see it as significant to connect for learning in their secret informal places with that close-knit subgroup of peers whom they trust. They see this as critically important to keep in the loop and help themselves for pulling through the study programme.

Considering this developing picture, perhaps as educators we need to be looking more closely at our own stance and how we can support students in their networked learning pursuits on their own terms. This may require us to

involve them more in learning design and delivery including the curriculum and assessment simultaneously preserving quality (if not also improving it). In so doing, we need to convey trust (so preaching through practice in this respect) and potentially boost participants' confidence as worthy partners in learning.

Concurrently we need to persist in our effort to understand students' perceptions and experiences of our teaching and learning propositions. This helps us support students develop the competences for learning in groups (Jaques & Salmon, 2008) and peer learning (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2014) and the development of networked learning we refer to in our calls for 21st century competences expected of 21st century learning and teaching.

In a local context where a lot is currently on the political and executive tables to see artificial intelligence and immersive technologies compellingly transforming mainstream societal sectors including education (Malta the Ultimate AI Launchpad: A Strategy and Vision for Artificial Intelligence in Malta 2030), this author is of the believe that in our HE we urgently need to wake up and make a start for making the HE course experience a first port of call for our students (and community participants) and making their learning experience "an opportunity to think and dream" (#2) as one of the research participants put it; remodelling our HE teaching and learning (indisputably permeated by digital tools and practices nowadays) that safely and without intimidation truly supports student (networked) learning today and tomorrow.

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