Re-asserting the importance of synchronous learning in distance education

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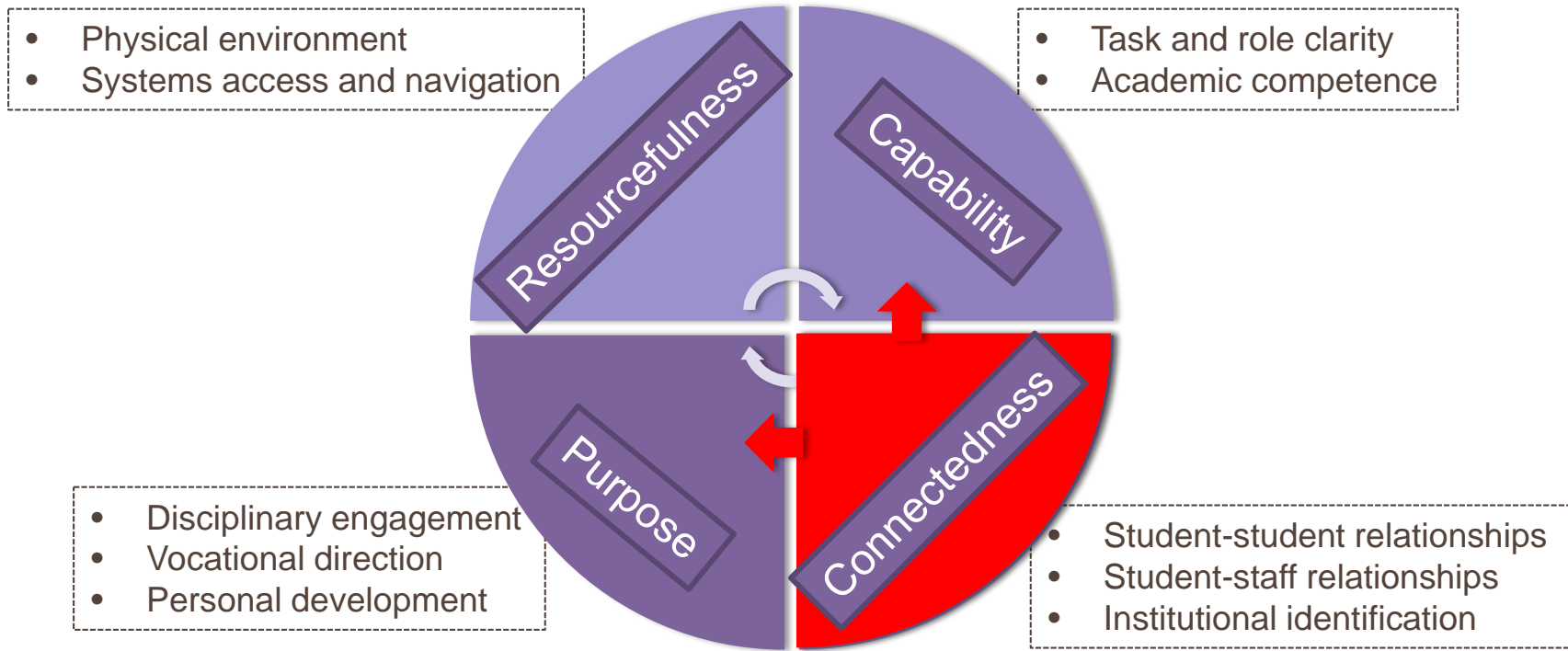
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THE CHALLENGE

How can we **better engage** off-campus students in higher education?

Students who are…

➢ Potentially engaged in full-time work or in carer roles
➢ Potentially studying partly on-campus, partly off-campus

THE THEORY

What makes a student successful in their studies? Studying several large cohorts of students at Griffith University, Lizzio et al. (2006) found an inter-related set of 'senses of success':

- Physical environment
- Systems access and navigation

- Task and role clarity
- Academic competence

Resourcefulness

Capability

Purpose

Connectedness

- Disciplinary engagement
- Vocational direction
- Personal development

- Student-student relationships
- Student-staff relationships
- Institutional identification

How do we build these 'senses of success' for off-campus students?

THE ASSERTION

Synchronous, real-time learning is valuable and even essential for attaining 'expertise' and 'mastery' (Dreyfus 2009).
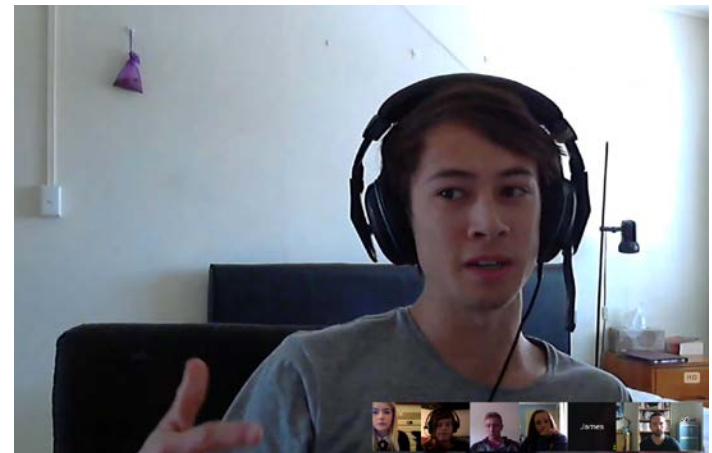
Distance or off-campus learning does not have to be devoid of it...

…or of face-to-face interaction.

Case study 1: Live lecture chat

Case study 2: Google Hangouts

BACKGROUND

HGA235/335 – Digital Society (Special Topic)
Sociology Major – Bachelor of Arts; Bachelor of Social Sciences

➢ Small cohort: 42 students (18 on-campus, 24 off-campus)

Teaching pattern:

- 11 2hr lectures (**live broadcast with chat** and available as recording)
- 2 guided but independent study weeks (first around a film and a formative writing task, second around a summative research and writing task)

- On-campus: 6 tutorials
- Off-campus: Weekly discussion forums and 3 (optional) **Google Hangouts**

CASE STUDY 1: LIVE LECTURE CHAT

- Slow to take off initially, but eventually a small group of regular attendees - some even changed work patterns in order to make it to the live broadcast

- **Advantages**
  - Off-campus students felt more **connected** to a) their off-campus peers; b) their on-campus peers; c) myself
  - Thus, lectures became less of a chore (sitting passively through a recording) and more of an interactive experience
  - They were able to contribute in real-time

- **Disadvantages**
  - Early teething problem where the broadcast did not begin (stuck in lobby) – powerless to resolve
  - Sometimes difficult for me to keep track of the chat when I did tab in
  - Students had to balance chatting to themselves and contributing to the lecture/asking questions (sometimes awkward)
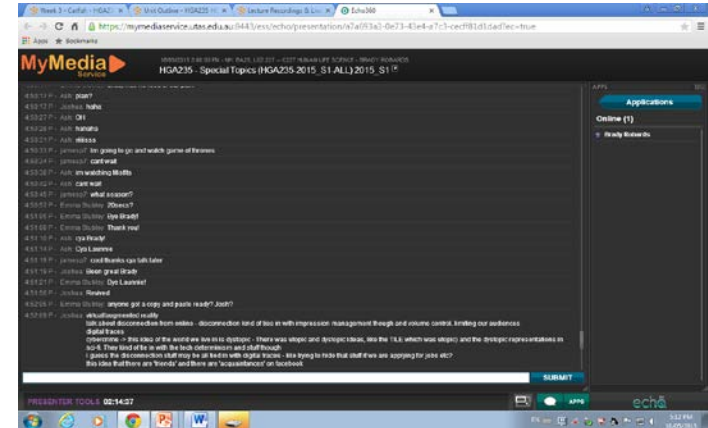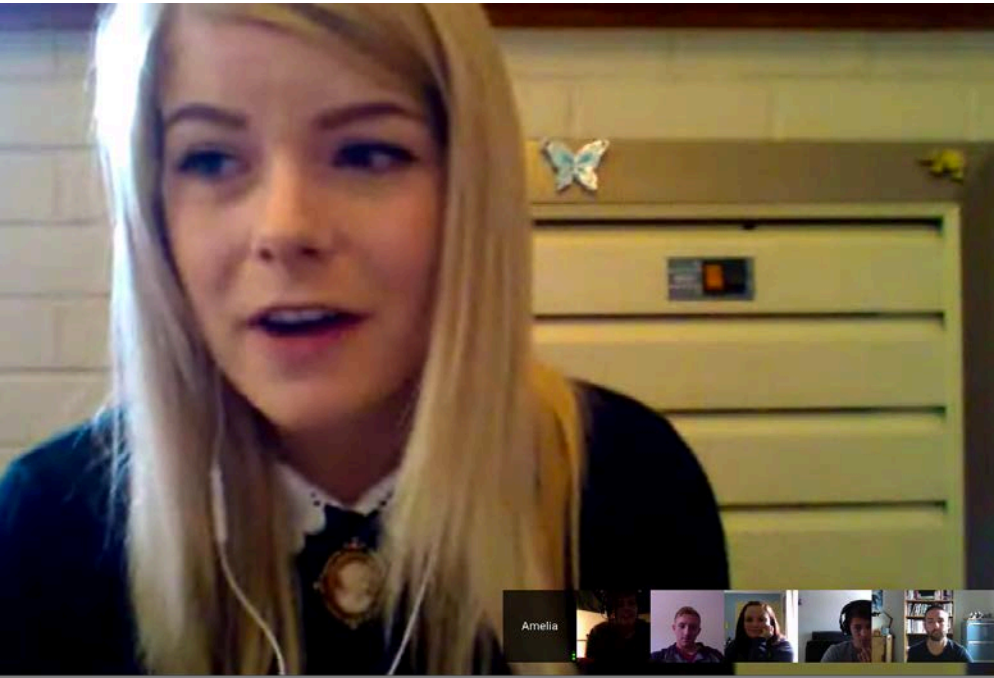

Sense of connectedness

Resourcing implications

CASE STUDY 2: GOOGLE HANGOUTS

- Maximum of 10 participants
- Google-dependent (free to create an account)
- Requires microphone, speakers, and camera (most laptops now have all them built in)
- Used doodle poll to organise times in weeks 2, 6, and 9 (x2)

- Why Google Hangout and not another system? a) familiarity and b) 'focus control'

CASE STUDY 2: GOOGLE HANGOUTS

- **Advantages:**
  - Reinforced and further enhanced **sense of connectedness** amongst those who were also 'coming' to the live lecture broadcasts
  - Ability to check progress with key concepts, discuss difficulties with readings and assessment items (**sense of capability** – academic competence)

- **Disadvantages**:
  - Resource-intensive, not particularly 'efficient'
    - Max. 9 students per 1 instructor per hour (2-3 times less 'efficient' than on-campus tutorials)
  - In trying to be responsive and flexible to student schedules, I pinned myself down with the logistics of organising each session (doodle polls) – better to just schedule them and let students work around that schedule

- **Unexpected**:
  - Google Hangouts are windows into private spaces (bedrooms)

RESULTS?
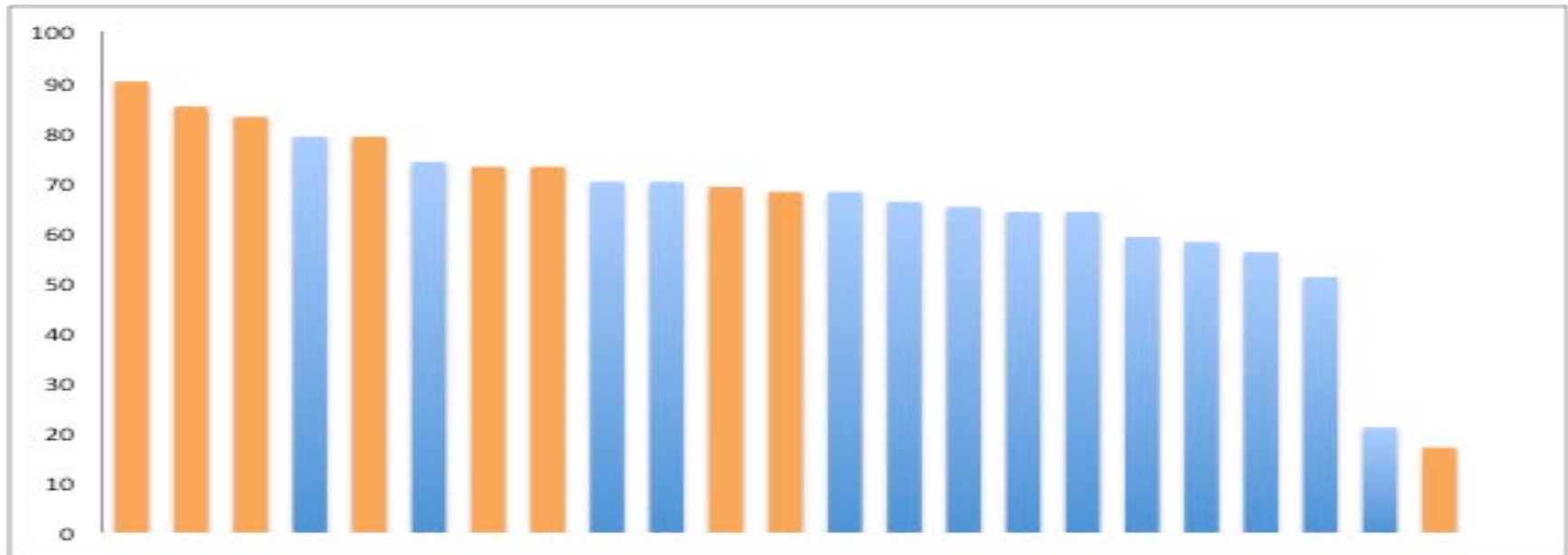
- Off-campus students engaged in synchronous learning (live lecture or Google Hangouts) tended to get higher marks. Seems to indicate effectiveness, BUT…
    - Perhaps students who achieve higher marks are more likely to engage in all learning activities available to them?
    - Perhaps there was a marker bias with more familiar students?

EVALUATION

- Awaiting formal unit evaluations, but…

- On **involvement**, especially via the live lecture broadcast:
    - "We had greater involvement than if we were actually physically there, which is a huge encouragement for participating in the class"
    - "The final lecture with interaction from on campus students was awesome"

- On **connectedness**: "I actually felt more connected to my distance class than my on campus classes because of the live lectures, chat, and google hangouts. It was useful for interacting with the class and engaging in the lecture."

- Room for improvement?
    - **Live lecture broadcast**: A way to 'flag' questions in-chat to be raised with instructor via a notification – Active Learning Platform (ALP) affordance?
    - **Google Hangouts**:
        - More (fortnightly)
        - Flexibility (after hours)
        - Pre-scheduled/set times

CONCLUSIONS

- **Scalability & Resources**: These were only small scale trials. If they were to be scaled up to bigger units, they would need to be resourced properly
  - Njenga and Fourie (2010: 204) explain that 'e-learning' cutting the cost of higher education is one of the big myths about blended learning. Instead, 'investment required to implement e-learning is **still very high**'.

- **Connectedness**: A sense of connectedness is important for students (with flow-on effects to senses of capability, purpose, and overall success). We have to work harder to build that sense of connectedness with off-campus students.

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Two case studies: live lecture broadcast and Google Hangout

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