JOURNAL OF INTERACTIVE MEDIA IN EDUCATION

Human Relationships in Higher Education: The Power of Collaboration, Creativity and Openness

SPECIAL COLLECTION: GO-GN

ARTICLE

ubiquity press

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ABSTRACT

We educators may have been obsessed with perfection, expertise, polished experiences and performances too much for too long. Where is the human? Ironed out? This provocative opinion paper is a collection of the authors' reflections based on experiences, observations, ideas and readings. We invite educators to consider and explore what may help them (re-) connect with their inner selves and others socially, emotionally and cognitively in the context of learning and teaching in HE during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. With reference to a collaborative creative initiative that was implemented under the auspices of the Global OER Graduate Network, the paper aims to instigate a discussion around the importance of building and sustaining effective relationships in HE. These are perceived as the drivers that potentially boost participation and student success using collaboration, creativity and openness. Working in partnership with students, recognising and accepting individuality as well as creating opportunities for connection can support the operationalisation of these reflections in practice.

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KEYWORDS:
Human relationships; open communities; collaboration; creativity; GO-GN

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Nerantzi, C, Chatzidamianos, G, Stathopoulou, H and Karaouza, E. 2021. Human Relationships in Higher Education: The Power of Collaboration, Creativity and Openness. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 2021(1): 26, pp. 1–11. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.668*

CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic is here. It has shown us the real value of being ourselves, real people with imperfections and insecurities, who are longing to share, relate and connect with other people and ideas. In pandemics, however, one needs protection. Relatedly, we have heard a lot about Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) (or the lack of it...) during the pandemic. Based on their experiences and observations, Chatzidamianos and Nerantzi (2020) stitched together a different kind of PPE specifically designed for Higher Education (HE). This PPE consists of People, Positivity and Emotions and through this the importance of the social and emotional aspects of learning and teaching especially during challenging times are illuminated. This PPE sheds light on the importance of the relational aspects of teaching and learning which makes it particularly relevant to this paper.

But we always knew... that we are by nature "social animals" (Aristotle, writing in 350BC). Freire (2007: 33) noted, over two millennia later, "[T]o be in the world necessarily implies being *with* the world and *with* others." It is that togetherness we are longing for during the time where social distancing has become the new normal and which has also been our Achilles' heel in the fight against the virus. Bozkurt and Sharma's (2020: i) words are a powerful reminder of our current reality: "Today we are living in a strange new world where to be social means to keep distance, and weirdly, to be labelled positive has negative connotations".

Digital networked technologies create alternatives to physical contact and restrict social distancing to its physical dimension. Meanwhile, new opportunities for connection and a different type of togetherness are possible. Just imagine this pandemic broke out 20 years ago... Palmer (2007: 11) notes that "Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves." That human web has been enabled and strengthened through digital networked technologies available for over 20 years now, yet a different social inequality has emerged. The digital divide (Killen & Langer-Crame 2020) has left many in society with restricted or even no access to what has now become part of the essential digital toolkit and others may need help in understanding how to use it. These are important issues that need to be addressed in order to enable, foster and sustain democratic participation in learning and educational opportunities. Such opportunities will target those who need them the most and are excluded by default as they have no or only limited access to digital and networked technologies used in learning communities.

CONNECTIONS, COLLABORATIONS AND COMMUNITY

When we talk about connections, can this also mean community? Siemens (2006: 112) makes this link by recognising that "essentially, a community is a connection-forming space." A space that is not occupied by heartless cognitive machines, but by people fuelled by experiences, stories, emotions and social relationships. Taken together, these feed and shape our affect, wellbeing and growth, individually and collectively. This is what moves people forward and upwards but also accompanies us to live to the full in the moment, the now and be alive with all our senses and be curious about the world around us, imagine, be disappointed, experiment, fail, try again, invent.

Our relationships are fundamental in how we feel about ourselves, others and the world. This does not only apply to our personal lives and the communities we live within. HE lives through the communities it serves. Although Bloom's (1956) early work emphasised the importance of moving towards higher order thinking in the cognitive domain, one can only wonder; what about the affective and the kinaesthetic domains which play an equally important role in the ways we learn and are fundamental within relationships?

HE is the engine that creates and disseminates knowledge. While these functions are fundamental, HE is also about the human beings, us, our relationships with each other, communities, society and the world and how the interaction between these can empower us to make a positive change. Is this an overly romantic view? Or is it *simply* the core purpose of HE which is no longer being fulfilled. Murphy and Brown (2012: 645) talk about the need for a relational pedagogy stating that such "an approach to HE is needed which recognises that learning comes from interrelational experiences that address academic, intellectual and

DOI: 10.5334/jime.668

social agendas, where values are explicitly articulated as part of the student experience." The role of relationships is reflected in a number of evidence-based pedagogical frameworks, empirical and conceptual ones, that have been developed to support learning and teaching in a digital world. In her review, Nerantzi (2017) identified that such frameworks have four common enabling factors for learning supported by technology: 1. Tutor support, 2. Activities, 3. Choice, 4. Community. These factors can provide a useful guide also in the context of block teaching (Nerantzi & Chatzidamianos 2020) as they help focus on what can make a difference to students. Within the Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2000) the importance of teacher and social presence to complement cognitive presence in order to establish a community is recognised. While Shea, Hayes and Vickers (2010) found that tutor visibility plays a significant role in establishing a community, a review of the Community of Inquiry Framework by Armellini and De Stefani (2016) illuminated the central role social presence plays in building and sustaining a community of inquiry. The more recent work by Gilpin (2020: 39) also highlights the importance of social interaction and collaborative learning as enablers for online settings whereby students are "craving authentic interactions".

These, however, are not new constructs within the education literature. In his early work *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) pioneered the idea of interactions in teaching and learning, and their fundamental role in providing a transformative life experience to students. Dewey's ideas have been operationalised through what is known as experiential learning, but can also be seen through the marketisation of HE where institutions invest in the 'student experience'. Although 'experience' remains a contested construct with multiple scholars debating its epistemological and ontological conceptualisation, our understanding of the concept follows that of Beard (2010: 17), who argues that

> "...a sense-making process involving significant experiences that, to varying degrees, act as the source of learning. These experiences actively immerse and reflectively engage the inner world of the learner, as a whole being (including physical-bodily, intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually) with their intricate 'outer world' of the learning environment (including belonging and acting—the conative—in places, spaces, within the social, cultural, and political milieu) to create memorable, rich, and effective experiences for, and of learning".

Connections, collaborations, learning communities and our physical, cognitive and emotional interactions with them could prove to be an effective way towards meaningful and transformative teaching and learning practices. With the sense of safety being threatened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, how could community and the relationships we develop within these, however, make us feel safe? The need for safety could be operationalised by the development and fostering of educational spaces where we can open up, be our real selves, trust each other, develop confidence in ourselves. Such spaces can help people express and develop, forgive and tolerate but also respect, accept and celebrate others as they are, with their imperfections, magic uniqueness and human creases. In experiential education, Jeffs and Smith (2005: 59) argue that learning is liberating as it allows people 'to be "set free"'. For Nerantzi (2017) this is achieved through community learning experiences designed for HE staff as learners engaging in open academic development courses, as a phenomenographic study showed. This is because community in open and online settings was found to be experienced in three distinct ways:

1. Learners were seeking to be part of a community and cultivated social relationships within the course. Synchronous video meeting technologies helped them in this process. The cross-boundary nature of the groups was especially attractive to participants and generated increased interest for each other.
2. Learners were seeking to be part of a local or existing support community, outside the course, with individuals they already knew and had common interests with.
3. Learners also saw the course as a community that continued beyond the pre-defined course timeframe. The cross-institutional and cross-boundary dimensions of the course, that also brought together formal and informal learning using social media, presents a new academic development approach that is a continuum.

Community seems to be an enabling factor for collaboration as the above study indicates; also advocated by Gilpin (2020) and Brown (2001) who believed that community can in fact boost

DOI: 10.5334/jime.668

collaboration. A study by Sadiq (2021) during the pandemic also confirmed the power of virtual communities for academics to come together to support each other, learn together and feel a sense of togetherness. These findings confirmed Nerantzi and Gossman's (2018) call for a new model for academic development based on Siemens' (2006: 40) notion of community-based learning – something previously also suggested by Brown (2001). Ehlers (2020) more recently highlighted that learning communities play a key role for learning. While Alberti (2020: online) suggests that community is "critical to preventing unwanted loneliness" and feeling connected emotionally, Bozkurt et al. (2020) highlight the need for more innovations in developing and fostering community. Finally, James and Brookfield (2014) propose that nurturing creativity in communities can make a difference in student engagement, participation and learning.

Why is it, however, that 'engagement' often seems to be perceived as something that relates predominately to the degree a student engages with the course and associated learning activities (Dunbar-Morris et al. 2021)? What about the academic's authentic engagement, beyond presence and visibility? hooks (1994) calls for a confessional approach where academics model risk taking, opening up and experiential storytelling as these strategies can bring students and academics closer together and help them establish humane connections and relationships during the learning process. They note characteristically that

> "In my classroom I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share. When professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators. It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic materials. But most professors must practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body, and spirit." (hooks 1994: 21).

Admittedly, not all disciplines lend themselves to confessional narratives that can enhance a session; nor can all academics become more confessional as hooks (1994) might have preferred. In our experience from teaching in a Department of Psychology, however, we know from student feedback that sessions where we have shared work experiences about patients from clinical practice, or our own career trajectories, or even anxieties for a deadline that we have to meet (e.g. funding application) were very positively commented. Consider the student feedback below:

> "when you shared in class that for your CPD[1] you also study for an MSc and work towards your dissertation submission deadline, I felt that you can relate with us on a different level because you and we are all going through the same journey together" (anonymous student feedback, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2021).

Sharing a personal challenge (i.e., meeting a deadline) formed the foundation upon which a connection was formed. It is such confessional attitudes that we feel would benefit relationship building with students. It is such confessional attitudes that would model to students how to take risks and that it is OK to be vulnerable with others. It is such confessional attitudes that would indicate how deeply an academic engages with their students. A prerequisite, of course, is the existence of a safe space where sharing can happen.

If indeed we can harness the power of community or communities for learning even further, creating safe spaces within these will be important. In communities we seed and nurture relationships of trust that will help us grow emotionally and socially, not just for life but also for learning and teaching as these are not activities or processes that happen outside the human experience but within it. Social and emotional learning is often explored in the context of school education (CASEL 2020). It is, however, equally important in HE. Murphy and Brown (2012: 648) recognise this and advocate for a relational pedagogy for HE as an alternative to managerial and consumeristic strategies. The authors suggest that

> "rather than offering a pathology of student learning or failure of tutor skills and techniques, a relational pedagogy locates failures, crises and difficulties within the relationships that the student establishes with tutors, peers, the institution (as a disembodied other) and the discipline under study."

1 CPD: Continuous Professional Development.

Endorsing such a relational approach to teaching and learning could potentially help the university community as a whole to develop, through the identification of challenges that can collectively be addressed. Indeed, the system of student reps, which is well-established across the UK HE sector, works towards this direction by fostering a collaborative partnership between the student body, the academic staff and the support services.

OPENNESS AND CREATIVITY IN FOSTERING COMMUNITY

How can we keep our curiosity and imagination alive? How can we grow it and what are the conditions to make this happen (more)? Judson (2019: online) suggests that "we live and thrive in communities. We imagine ideas, stories and images that unite us and help us evolve within communities".

The importance of emotional learning also features in the affective dimensions of student feedback (Ajjawi & Boud 2018). To that front, open education might help. Weller (2014: 136) states that "sharing as widely as possible should be at the heart of educational practice". The Open Education Movement and its people, their resources, practices and research, worldwide have been sharing their work generously to make education accessible to all as a social mission and also support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations 2015). Networks and open communities of practitioners and researchers have created hubs for such sharing, peer support and innovations. Examples include the #phdchat community that is fostered via a hashtag on Twitter and is widely used by PhD researchers for informal peer support and the #femedtech collective that advocates for gender balance for all those practising and researching in educational technology. In a phenomenographic study into open cross-institutional academic development Nerantzi (2019b) found that open cross-boundary communities that bring together diverse individuals (staff and students) from different disciplines, backgrounds and sectors can be particularly transformative for fostering relationships and boosting learning and development. The leaky institution (Wall 2015), the unbounded curriculum (Hall & Smyth 2016) and the porous university (Macintyre 2016) are all concepts that lie within the boundary crossing opportunities presented for HE. Traditionally, university courses are available for those registered formally and involve a more closed group of students. Cross-boundary learning experiences are more porous and public and seamlessly mix formally registered students or learners with open learners and potentially experts that have no formal association with the particular course or the institution. It is the diversity of voices, people and backgrounds that acts as a curiosity trigger and motivator and can enrich, open-up our worldview and foster human relationships that are supportive and often lead to social connections and collaborations (Nerantzi 2017; Roberts et al. 2020). Treviranus (2016: 7) emphasises that "it is our variability that gives us collective strength" and this is what is often experienced in such open communities where like- and other-minded individuals are coming together and often connect on a humane level creating relationships that can be lasting. However, for such Open Education Practices[2] to be successful, Funk (2021: 1) argued that we need to foster cognitive compassion as opposed to "a panic-induced care narrative for more sustainable caring academic and professional capabilities". Modelling such behaviour, the author argued, could help students develop their own agency through the realisation that respecting different perspectives openly and with compassion is effective. Moving away from an emotionally driven intimacy, Funk (2021) placed special emphasis on the term "authentic care" towards students as a means to achieve a more sustainable framework of practising cognitive compassion. Such an approach would be particularly effective in diverse student cohorts (backgrounds and disciplines) who, however, share similar needs.

Meanwhile, creativity also plays a key role in bringing people together (James & Brookfield 2014). Before the pandemic, Crawford et al. (2018) in their report on a major research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK, found that creative arts practised within communities have the power to reduce social isolation, help individuals express emotionally and cognitively, feel better about themselves and heal. We have indeed seen this in a plethora

2 Open Education Practices are "collaborative practices that include the creation, use, and reuse of OER, as well as pedagogical practices employing participatory technologies and social networks for interaction, peer-learning, knowledge creation, and empowerment of learners" (Cronin, 2017: 4).

DOI: 10.5334/jime.668

of ways during the pandemic and the explosion of arts practices and playful experimentation widely shared through social media channels that evidence the appetite of individuals to engage and participate to bring positivity, purpose and a sense of wellbeing (e.g. #badbugsbookclub, #EdDev #knitting, #makeatgrow, #creativeHE, @64 Million Artists). Creativity, however, is not equally important in all disciplines, subjects and professional areas. When we think about creative learning and teaching, we know that some of the approaches are often seen as risky and are often eliminated (Nelson 2018). As Nelson notes, we often indirectly penalise creativity by focusing on how well a student's work is constructively aligned with the learning objectives. Although well intended, constructive alignment encourages a rather 'mechanistic scoping and strategy' in the student 'rather than curiosity' (p. 41). Creativity, however, is perhaps, misunderstood. By creativity we mean being resourceful and inventive in everyday activities with the view to problem-find and problem solve in ways that improve and add value to a process, an output or a product. Creative approaches are vital for learning and teaching (James & Nerantzi 2019) including learning through play, making and storytelling. Brown (2009: 197) recognises that "play sets the stage for cooperative socialization. It nourishes the roots of trust, empathy, caring, and sharing." While play has often been seen as "kid stuff" and "trivial" (Nussbaum 2013: 118) a shift is happening whereby play and playful learning are increasingly recognised as a valid learning and teaching approach that is entering and spreading across HE in a range of applications (James & Nerantzi 2019). Indicatively, the conceptual Playground model (Nerantzi 2015; 2019a) that was constructed based on community-based learning experiences in open settings and particularly the course and open community Creativity for Learning (#creativeHE), marries the Three Main Theories of Teaching (Ramsden 2008); the Creativity and Learning Ecologies (Jackson 2015) with the Cognitive (Bloom 1956), Affective (Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia 1964) and Psychomotor Domains (Harrow 1972; Simpson 1972). It is the application of such a model that creates the necessary safe spaces discussed earlier, within which trust can be developed, connections can be formed and community is fostered.

AN EXAMPLE FROM PRACTICE

In this section, an example from practice linked to an open community is presented with the view to demonstrate how openness and creativity can help towards relationship building, completion of studies at doctoral level, engaging in collaborative projects and generating outputs.

The Global OER Graduate Network (GO-GN) was started in 2013 by Fred Mulder (Open University in The Netherlands) and Rory McGreal (Athabasca University, Canada). Led by Martin Weller (The Open University, U.K.) and funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the GO-GN brings together doctoral students in open education at various stages of their journey. It has since become a vital, effective and caring hub for peer academic and emotional support. Sharing and collaboration within GO-GN extends beyond individual doctoral journeys. Mantai (2017: online) recognises that "[I]t is no secret that it takes a village to raise a PhD graduate." The need for support beyond the supervisory team is recognised also by Bastalich (2017) who argues that peer support networks are extremely important for doctoral students. Experiences in GO-GN seem to confirm this (Weller et al. 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic a GO-GN collaborative picture book project brought together GO-GN members and alumni and supported a GO-GN Fellowship (Nerantzi 2020). Through this work, a GO-GN picture book team was formed. Members of the team were keen to contribute to something novel, which was outside the boundaries of their specialisation and expertise and were prepared to experiment and immerse themselves in new experiences. Through open, collaborative and creative work the team who practised in different parts of the world, felt that they were in a safe environment in which judgement was suspended, where they could be truthful to themselves and have their diverse voices heard and considered (Corti et al. 2021; Pulker & Nerantzi in press). They, therefore, felt motivated to contribute to something they had never done before, took risks and were prepared to experiment and immerse themselves in new experiences that were not always comfortable. Following a co-designed co-produced approach, the GO-GN picture book team reached out to the GO-GN and the wider open education communities for input and critique on the book during all stages of development and production, including the writing and illustrating of the story. The team's openness to otherness, different perspectives and novel ideas but also the suspension of judgement during the creative process

fostered an inclusive space and indeed a community in which everything was respected and considered. This creative collaborative project seems to have further strengthened their personal and professional connections and relationships and led to the creation of a truly collaborative output that provided a shared sense of ownership. The picture book is publicly available and has been translated into over 20 languages thanks to members of the team and the wider open education community who embraced this project (Nerantzi et al. 2021). While this project is an example of how a community of learners can engage in creative activities and collaboration to strengthen their relationships and produce a co-created shared output, it also provides food for thought of how such activities could be used more widely within undergraduate and postgraduate courses in HE to foster cross-boundary learning and teaching opportunities.

WHAT CAN WE PRACTICALLY DO?

Rapid shifts happened during the pandemic. Despite the challenges relatively seamless learning and teaching was enabled thanks to enormous efforts by educators, students and their institutions. Overnight, online (and in some cases blended and hybrid) delivery became the norm for HE institutions. Based on the above exploration we provide some practical advice on how educators could further develop staff and students' relationships in online and blended settings that we hope will be of value during and beyond the pandemic.

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH STUDENTS IS CENTRAL

As with every relationship, dedicated opportunity and time is needed for the interrelated experiences to bring positive outcomes. Building and sustaining the social aspect of learning through authentic relationship with our students but also supporting relationship building among students is vital. Focusing on the relationship, we need to think whether we are developing a new relationship with a specific student group or whether we need to adapt an existing relationship to address the evolving changes in expectations, resources and demands. If the former, then more effort is needed in *relating* and we have seen this happening during the pandemic as educators recognised, perhaps more than ever before, the importance to connect with their students. Consider offering a safe space for the student group and the educator to build these relationships and be part of the group. Also, assessing students' learning needs and identifying possible strategies in collaboration with students to harness the diversity they bring and create stimulating and inclusive learning experiences. These can boost their motivation to actively participate, have choice and succeed while also feeling supported and motivated to learn. The collaborative way of accessing this information will strengthen relationships and could potentially buffer the side effects of continuous change. Remember that it is important to remain open and connected with the people and the process. Students may feel lonely. How can we help them feel part of the group or the learning community? And what role can their peers play?

RECOGNITION AND ACCEPTANCE

Students and educators entering a new relationship or an adapted relationship due to course changes, systemic or wider socio-political reasons, are likely to experience gains but also losses. They will bring their own expectations, learning autobiographies and this will interact with what is on offer. By using our capacity for connectedness, we need to recognise/acknowledge the emerging opportunities and difficulties. Managing our expectations but most importantly our students' expectations is crucial. Acknowledge when something has not worked so well. Work with the students to address any challenges we can, together. Students are more likely to accept changes when there is a positive learning relationship which has been developed based on openness, trust and collaboration (cf. confessional approach: hooks 1994).

DEVELOP CREATIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION

Some of these may be new to us and our students in an HE context. Remember, the goal is to connect, remain connected and achieve optimal engagement in whichever way engagement can be defined. This could be by developing a community to foster social learning or by bringing students and educators together to 'do things': sharing personal stories and experiences, for example, can lay the foundations to form relationships, enhance and sustain them. This, of course, needs to be operationalised to the degree and the depth that students and staff feel

comfortable with. They can help the educator and students to open up, get to know each other better, discover shared interests and aspirations and, therefore, feel more connected to each other. Utilising creative and playful approaches can speed up the socialisation process and community building but also helps students use their resourcefulness, imagination and creativity for their personal well-being. It also boosts their engagement and performance as they will continue to expand their repertoire of tools and strategies for learning (Lister, Seale & Douce 2021). The students will also feel an improved sense of belongingness and connection with the group, which now includes the educator (Brantmeier 2013; Resnick 2017).

For some, if not for most educators, the new opportunities might pose a challenge as we will have to take risks, dare to try, and learn new approaches also supported or enabled by technologies, and engage in ways outside of our comfort zone. Using a new educational technology just for the sake of using it, however, is potentially more problematic than relying on an out-of-date learning tool that is tested, and that the user knows how to use to its full potential. Relatedly and whilst moving away from the notion of technological determinism (i.e. technology as causing the change, Duffy & Henry 2016), Stokes (2012: 8) argued that 'technology has no impact on its own – it all depends [on] how we use it'. Hence, practitioners will need to invest the time and the emotional resources to adapt to the new and more creative approaches to learning, which for some will be a challenge. To that front, reflection, peer support and staff development can help educators to open up, share and develop their practice to make a difference to students' engagement and their learning.

CONCLUSION

This article has illustrated the value of creating human relationships in learning and teaching and how this can be achieved through openness, collaboration and creativity through a GO-GN example and related experiences. Opening-up practice to create opportunities for more connected learning and development can transform learning and help educators as learners and students to join up with professional networks. Such practices can foster a culture of sharing, openness and collaboration that strengthens diverse connections and opens minds to a wide range of perspectives that have the potential to build genuine, inclusive and non-judgemental human relationships and create agency to work together for the social good. The lessons learnt based on this collective exploration bring together creativity, community and openness. While these have been studied extensively independently, in this article we have brought these together to illustrate their potential interconnectedness and value to foster togetherness. We acknowledge that our ideas have not been empirically tested but are put forward with the view to trigger further discussions, reflections and a refocused way of approaching our practice.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Nerantzi, C, Chatzidamianos, G, Stathopoulou, H and Karaouza, E. 2021. Human Relationships in Higher Education: The Power of Collaboration, Creativity and Openness. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 2021(1): 26, pp. 1–11. DOI: *https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.668*

Submitted: 24 March 2021
Accepted: 26 October 2021
Published: 13 December 2021

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Journal of Interactive Media in Education is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.