


We explored if online learning activities can be organized so that it would make silent learners feel more comfortable and included.

A tall, silver metal signpost stands against a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The signpost has several yellow directional signs attached to it with metal brackets and bolts. Some of the signs are blank, while others have red and white diagonal stripes. The signpost is positioned on the left side of the frame, and the background is a clear blue sky with soft, white clouds.

Silent learners – a guide

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Introduction

This guide presents the findings and recommendations of a Nordplus project, *Lorkers – is lurking working?* (2015–2017) carried out by members of the NVL *Distans* network of the Nordic Network for Adult Education (NVL).

The main objective of the project was to try to understand how adult learners participate in educational activities. Why do some learners never make an active contribution to course activities and can so-called “lurking” (no visible active participation in course activities) be a legitimate form of individual personalized learning? If educational institutions genuinely want to offer individualised learning then surely an individual should have the option to be silent and not participate as actively as teachers might wish?

The project wanted to clarify if “lurking” is just a specific version of flexible learning and try to find out what the incentive is for people’s (continued) participation without participating “actively”. The project also focused on what has been considered as a serious problem for many years in educational circles – namely high drop-out rates in online courses. Connected to this we explored if online learning activities can be organized so that it would make silent learners feel more comfortable and included, and hence more inclined to active participation.



This guide presents a summary of lessons learned from the project and recommendations for teachers and students. We have divided this into the following sections:

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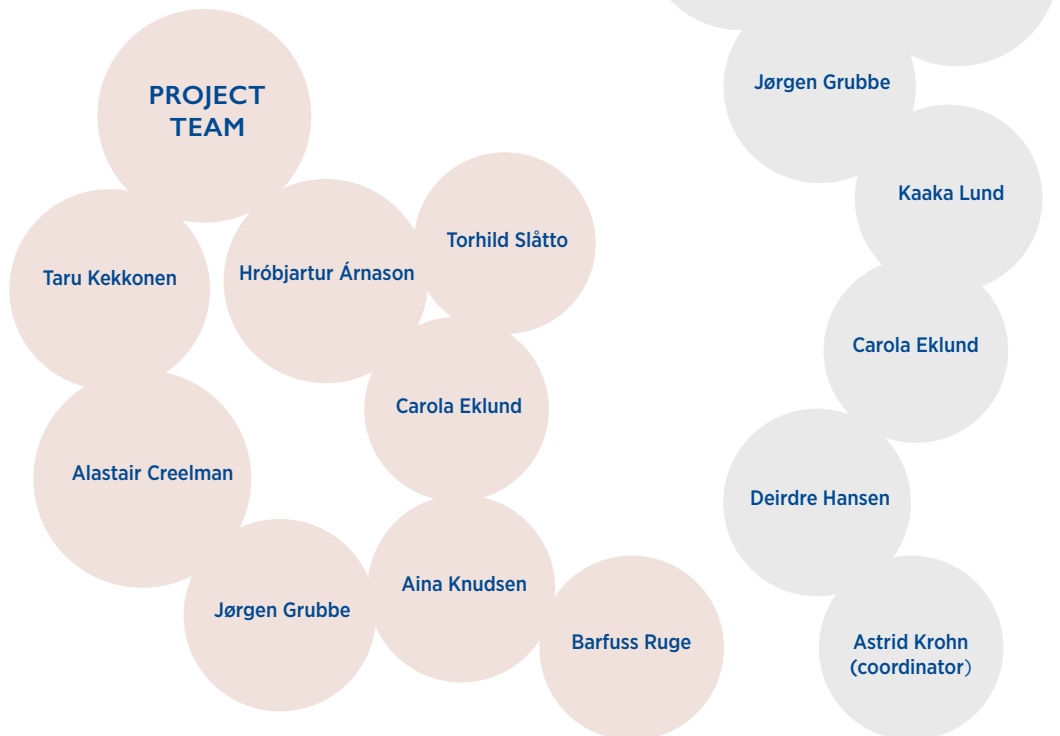
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About Distans

The NVL Distans network's value proposition is to enrich adult learning through interactive and creative technologies. They do this by enabling exchange of experiences and good practice among adult learning practitioners, organizations, as well as politicians and authorities focusing on educational solutions and development in this area.



Background

The project deals with silent, or passive learning in online education for adults, also labelled rather pejoratively as lurking.

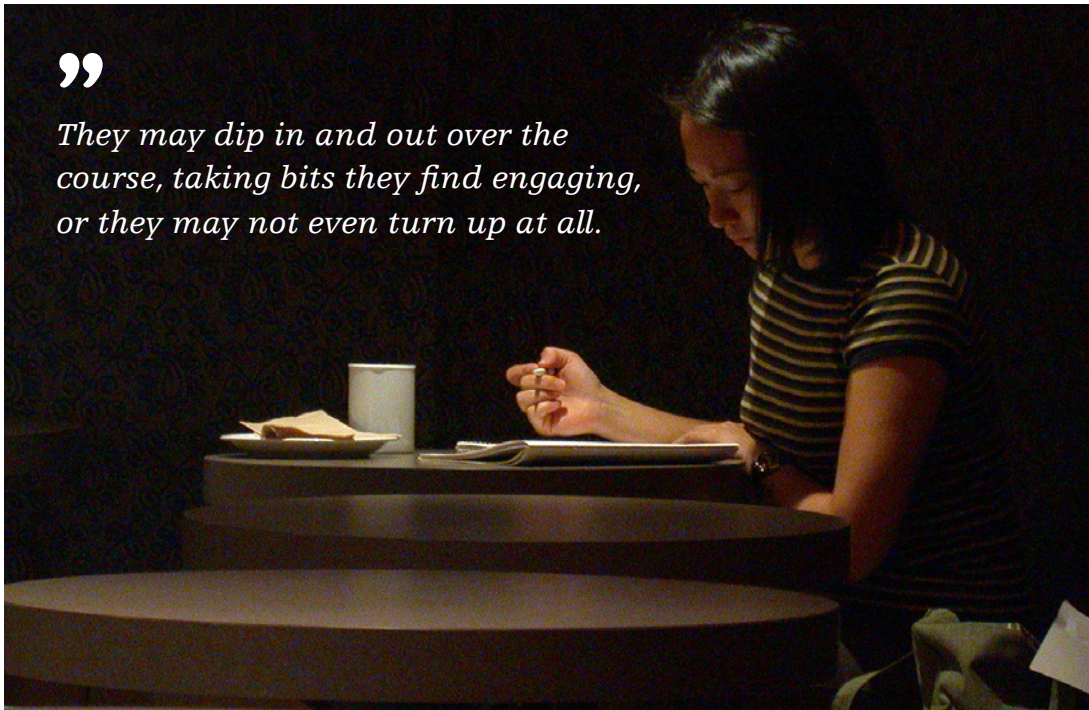
We wondered why some learners follow courses or participate in webinars without actively contributing, apart from perhaps writing “hi” or “thank you” in a chat window. It is easy to see this inactivity as a lack of commitment or even laziness, thus the use of terms like *lurker*. These participants are busy, highly skilled and well educated, so why do they keep such a low profile? They may very well be learning a great deal and working hard, but on their own. Their continued participation clearly indicates that they derive a benefit from participation. Their *lurking* thus cannot be considered a failure and if they disappear when they have learned what they were coming for, they can hardly be considered drop-outs either.

The main objective of the project was to clarify, explore and try to understand what seems to be a structural change in the way adult learners participate in educational activities.

There has been a tendency for teachers to see silent learners in educational activities as uninterested or even lazy. Repeatedly we tell the old Chinese proverb: *I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand* (Confucius) emphasizing that active participation is paramount in learning. Until recently, most people participated in learning events such as courses, conferences, symposia and lectures on-site and in person. The fact that they were physically present counted as active participation though in practice, only a few dare to ask questions or actively participate in discussions. Few would seriously consider finding ways of measuring “real” participation among participants who were physically present. However, with increased opportunities for people to participate in various forms of online learning, things change. It becomes easier to measure active participation in online learning events.

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They may dip in and out over the course, taking bits they find engaging, or they may not even turn up at all.



Source: flickr.com/anyjazz65

There is a general perception that passive participation in many online educational events seems to be increasing. Passive participants are called lurkers, a rather negative term that implies suspicious behaviour. Research literature refers to concepts such as *legitimate peripheral participation* and Martin Weller described them as *drive-by learners*, an appropriate concept in the age of open online courses like MOOCs¹.

Many learners sign up for open online courses simply out of curiosity. Since there is no cost or commitment involved, they only stay for a short time, learn what they need and drop out. They do not intend to complete the course and cannot be compared to students in a formal educational setting who make a major commitment and financial undertaking. These “lurkers” therefore have no suspicious intentions, but unfortunately their learning is not visible to the course provider.

¹ Creelman, Ehlers, Ossiannilsson (2014) Perspectives on MOOC quality - An account of the EFQUEL MOOC Quality Project, International Journal for Innovation and Quality in Learning (INNOQUAL) Issue 03, September 2014, p83 <https://empower.eadtu.eu/images/fields-of-expertise/OERsMOOCs/INNOQUAL-Issue-3-Publication-Sep-2014-FINAL-w-cover.pdf#page=85>

This area is receiving increased research interest, notably a study from the Open University UK (Smith & Smith 2014). They observed an increasing amount of silent learners on some Open University courses and concluded that: ... *teaching and learning strategies need to be reconsidered, to encourage or increase 'active engagement'*. However, the data, alongside literature, also suggests that some adult learners may find value in engaging 'passively'. From the perspective of a Higher Education (HE) institute such as the Open University, this may have implications for the tuition delivery strategy used to deliver the module material, as well as how staff development occurs for the tutors that deliver the material. For example, rather than focus a significant effort on encouraging adult learners to participate in active forum use, the emphasis may need to be shifted to ensuring that appropriate/sufficient material is available to 'passive engagers'. (Smith, D. Smith, K. *The case for 'passive' learning. The silent community or online learners*, EURODL 2014)

If the apparently inactive participation in webinars has a positive impact on the participants, is it then right to consider lurkers on MOOCs, online courses or webinars as failures? Stephen Downes suggests a metaphor that views MOOCs as newspapers and traditional for-credit courses as novels. You start a novel with the intention of reading it all. If you don't,

there was something wrong, whereas you dip into a newspaper and read the parts that most interest you. The newspaper has not failed if some people only read one article whereas the novel has failed if you only read the first two chapters.

Gilly Salmon's five-stage model² for online learning presents a framework for increasing learner engagement that is highly relevant to the aims of this project. The project explored and

tested her methods in practice. What structures do we need to provide scaffolding for "silent" learners? Libraries, adult education, online mentors and peer support are important aspects that need to be examined more. Many learners drop out because they simply don't understand

how to study online, are not native English speakers, are overawed by the other adult learners' contributions and are afraid of asking stupid questions. Course designers must address these insecurities. To help them, we have produced this guide with methods for increasing learner engagement in online learning.

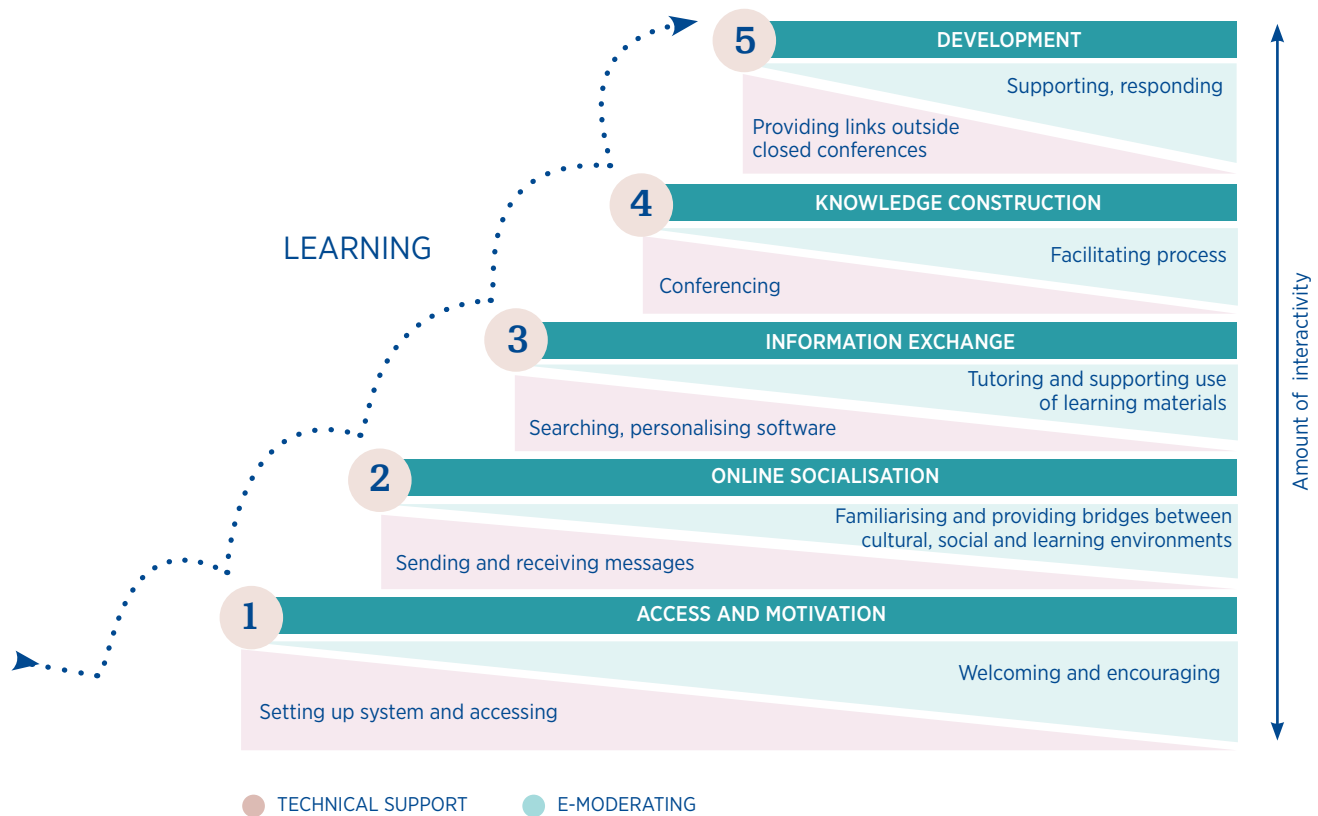
It could be argued that adult learners today take what they need from courses they attend, and little more. They participate in courses in ways that suit their busy schedules, not in the way the educational institutions would like. For many, certificates are of little value, they need the knowledge, ideas or competencies. The

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*Many learners
drop out because
they simply don't
understand how
to study online*

2 www.gillysalmon.com/five-stage-model.html

THE FIVE STAGE MODEL BY GILLY SALMON (REPLICA)

www.gillysalmon.com/five-stage-model.html

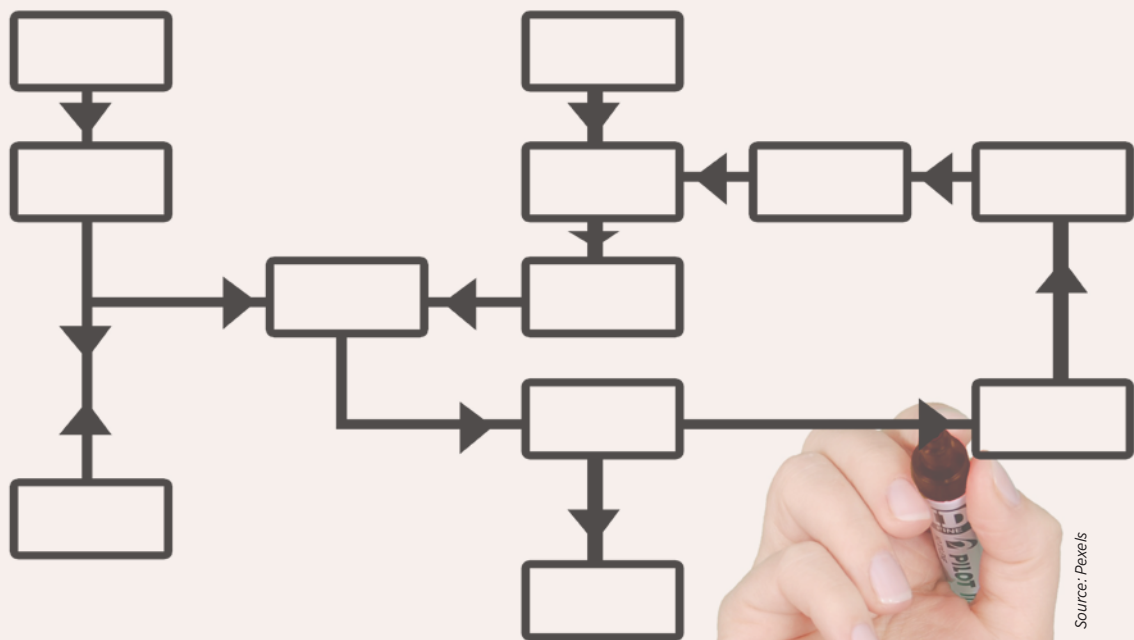


institutions are to some extent no longer the owners of their courses. Instead it has become the adult learners who decide their commitment. However, the educational institutions still need the information to justify their activities. Therefore, they need to learn more about the motivation of these *lurkers* to engage in online courses. Can *lurking* be seen as self study or even individual personalized learning? The ability to learn inde-

pendently and self-sufficiently, it could be argued, is very much what many institutions want to instill in their students. So why should we be concerned about learners who quietly work on their own? The question our project asked was *Is lurking working?* we even coined a new hybrid term *lorking*. Here there is a dilemma: should we accept silent learners the way they are, or should we try to “improve” them by activating them?

Project story – from tools to guide

The main objective of the project was to try to understand what seems to be a structural change in the way adult learners participate in educational activities.



We wanted to know if lurking actually is working. The original idea was to develop tools for predicting which learners would not participate actively and tools to promote engagement. However, as the project progressed, we realised that what was more appropriate was to develop strategies and methods that would empower the silent learners and recognise the diversity of learners in a course of educational event. This guide therefore offers a variety of strategies and methods rather than tools as envisaged in the original project plan.

Through questionnaires, interviews, webinars and conferences we came into dialogue with students, teachers and researchers investigating the engagement of both passive as well as active learners.

However, another finding that became visible in our investigations, was that being passive seems to be an active choice. That is an interesting contradiction which gives the sentence in the project application high relevance:

... rather than focus a significant effort on encouraging adult learners to participate in active forum use, the emphasis may need to be shifted to ensuring that appropriate/sufficient material is available to 'passive engagers'...

The main conclusion of the project was that educators need to design for diversity, recognising that learners have a range of learning strategies and that visible activity is not always a sign of effective learning. Educators need to develop ways of preparing for a diverse group of participants with diverse needs and thus predicting the need for more individualized or diverse learning resources that support silent learners.



We asked about how they participated in educational events such as webinars and found the following levels of participation:

They do not follow the learning activity closely, often doing other activities simultaneously (multitasking)

They follow the activity closely, but do not feel that they know enough to get involved in the discussion

They follow the activity, but because of introverted personality traits they just listen and reflect, and possibly follow up later

They do not feel confident enough to contribute because the activity is not in their native language.



What do we mean by silent learner?

There are a number of closely related terms that are used to describe learners who do not actively participate in class discussions or take visible initiatives with their peers.

In the traditional classroom there have always been passive or silent learners who never make a vocal contribution unless specifically asked. In many traditional classes these passive learners outnumber the active ones, some of whom tend to dominate all class discussion, but they are visible and the teacher is usually aware of the passive majority. In an online context this group becomes almost invisible; almost never contributing to online forums or group work, but still submitting their assignments on time and clearly learning despite their low social profile.

These learners are often referred to in online courses as *lurkers*, a rather pejorative term for someone who “lurks” in the shadows without revealing their identity and whose intentions are not clear. Courses like MOOCs have typically thousands of such learners who register, but

leave very few traces of their progress. However, being passive does not mean that no learning is taking place, they may learn just as much as more active participants but they do not make their learning publicly visible. Some have suggested more positive terms such as peripheral learners or silent learners. In this project we preferred to use the term *silent learner* to stress that learning happens even if it is not so visible.

WHY ARE SOME LEARNERS SILENT?

Learners can have the following reasons for not being active in an educational context:

- Prefer to work alone without disturbance; a genuine introvert
- Unclear about how to be active in an online course – unfamiliar with the ‘rules’ or



Source: flickr.com/English106

etiquette of participation. Waiting for a cue to participate

- Need more time to think before contributing
- Feel overwhelmed and ignored by the extrovert members of the group. Hard to make yourself heard
- Leave the course when you have learned what you want/need
- Only interested in getting a certificate and want to progress as fast as possible
- Shy and nervous about participation in general
- Low confidence – any setback can confirm feeling of inadequacy.
- Due to perceived language difficulties

- Forced/obliged by employer to participate in course
- Cultural reasons – not polite to question the teacher or start talking without permission
- Ill, frustrated, depressed.
- Lesson/course is simply boring
- Fear of making a mistake in front of a senior colleague (especially in corporate training)

Some of these reasons can be taken into consideration when designing a course whereas others are hard, or impossible to anticipate. In the following sections in this guide we will offer some ideas on how to make your course more inclusive in terms of silent learners.

Guidelines for teachers

Teaching in an online environment presents many challenges and opportunities for teachers.

Developing and running genuinely interactive and engaging online courses demands a high level of digital literacy and this in turn requires educational institutions to develop clear strategies for online education with quality assurance, competence development and qualified support for teachers. Effective teaching today, whether on-site or online, requires teachers to work in teams with support from educational technologists and librarians. Too often teachers are expected to do everything themselves and that pressure can lead to considerable stress and feelings of inadequacy. They need to improve their digital literacy levels but should not feel that they need to master a vast range of digital tools – that is where an educational technologist can help.

Traditional online courses tend to focus on information transfer and consist of recorded lectures, reading material, tests and assignments but often lack genuine interaction and a sense of community. As a result, there is often a considerable number of participants who fail to complete the course. They often feel isolated and invisible since online education has until recently tended to focus on self-study rather than collaboration. The challenge for the teacher is to create that sense of community at the start of the course and help the learners to interact and support each other. Only when they feel secure and recognised will learners begin to truly engage in group discussions and genuinely collaborate.

In this section we will offer some recommendations and tips to help teachers involve silent learners and make their contributions more visible.

These are divided into the following sections:

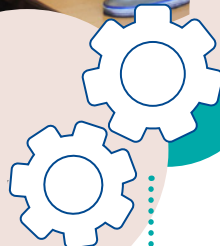
4.1 GETTING TO KNOW YOUR LEARNERS AND THEIR STRENGTHS



4.2 ACTIVITIES THAT INVOLVE ALL LEARNERS



4.3 TEACHING A VARIETY OF SKILLS/ LITERACIES



4.4 COURSE DESIGN



4.5 INCLUSIVE COURSE DESIGN



Source: flickr.com/Shane Global Language Centres

4.1 Getting to know your learners and their strengths

Ask learners to assess themselves as learners as a pre-course activity. How much do they enjoy participation/group work, reflection, reading, analysis etc? What course situations do they feel comfortable with and what situations do they feel unsure or uneasy about? This can be done either face-to-face, in an online meeting or by a short questionnaire (eg. in Google Forms)

Try to identify what kind of support each silent/invisible learner needs by, for example:

- making a deal with the student
- asking right questions and reading between the lines
- collecting background information from networks
- reading students' learning logs
- analyzing the data collected from the learning management system



Source: Pexels

For more about online guidance for silent learners watch the recording of our webinar held 18 May 2016;

see the description of the webinar including the recording and the materials <http://nvl.org/Content/Online-Guidance-for-Invisible-and-Silent-learners>.

4.2 Activities that involve all learners

Synchronous activities require different skills compared to asynchronous ones. The more silent learners will benefit from asynchronous discussions where they have time to reflect before answering. If you have a brainstorming session or an active discussion, consider giving silent learners the responsibility to summarise or analyse the session in a written report or as a presentation.

Here are some ideas to get everyone involved from the start.

- Introduce rules to ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak and that everyone is listened to. Help the group decide on these group rules.
- Develop question skills to help colleagues explain what they really mean.
- Allow learners to contribute using different media (text, video, audio) and set assignments that allow learners to adapt to different media, i.e. not always text answers.
- Encourage all participants to take on different roles from time to time: for example asking the most active participants to take a back seat in a synchronous session, taking notes or developing a mindmap of the discussion.
- Encourage active listening skills by asking certain participants to write reflective blog posts after a discussion.
- Let silent learners be responsible for summarising and reflecting on the week's course activities. This role should be circulated around all learners but the silent learners can be role models for the others to learn from.
- Get everybody in the same boat, making sure that everybody knows the expectations, understands the instructions and can use the required tools.
- All learners should write some kind of reflective learning journal (eg blog) where they focus on their own learning process and practice reflection and silent learning skills.
- Use more formative assessment and develop peer review. Provide guidelines to help learners to give constructive feedback to each other.



Source: flickr.com/Penn State

4.3 Teaching a variety of skills/literacies

Discuss modes of participation, preferences and roles explicitly in the group to increase awareness of diversity and how different approaches can enhance the learning process. Make learners more aware of different roles in all assignments and let them test unfamiliar roles.

Work on developing a mix of skills: listening, deep reading, analysis, collaboration, reflection etc. Learning involves all of these and all should be practiced by all learners during the course.

- Introvert learners can contribute to collaborative tasks by writing summaries of group discussions, providing input to discussions by writing outlines of the main discussion points etc.
- Invite the extrovert learners to be silent observers from time to time and be responsible for summarising the discussion afterwards. This would create space for the more silent learners to take the floor and learn how to actively contribute.
- Assign tasks that focus on reading longer texts and drawing conclusions from them. Introverts can often be best at this and can be a role model for the rest of the group.
- Activities like creating collaborative mindmaps (using tools like *Mindmeister* or *Coggle*) from an article or to describe



Source: flickr.com/Open Data Institute Knowledge for Everyone

a complex theory can also focus on reading and reflecting.

- Learner blogs is an excellent way to promote reflection and meta-cognitive skills.
- If the study groups are large consider pair work where the silent learners get more space to work.
- Before a synchronous group discussion ask everyone to spend five minutes or so to write down their ideas on the topic. This must be done in silence and forces everyone to reflect before speaking. This could be repeated halfway through the discussion with a new question that invites them to reflect on what has been said so far.
- A variation on the above is to start with individual silent reflection on a topic, then discussion in pairs and finally an open discussion. This gives everyone the chance to get warmed up.

4.4 Course design

Many courses are designed around active participation and collaboration and tend to reward activity and visibility. Although this is, of course, very valuable there should be a balance in the design to ensure that reflection, deep reading, self-study and the development of meta-cognitive awareness are also developed.

Students are, of course, a very diverse group. A lot of students are happy to be active and visible. Others, the more introvert students, prefer a different approach and have different needs to contribute to the learning group. When you collaborate with introvert colleagues on rethinking or redesigning your course, it will be more inclusive. Ask a second opinion from introvert students if you are meeting their needs in the course design. They will be happy to help.



Source: Pixabay

Course design must address the following challenges:

- Creating an inclusive and supportive community in your course by giving space to needs of diverse students
- Providing clear pre-course information and guides on how to take an active part in the course, learning outcomes and how they will be achieved, teaching and learning methods, assessment methods, support and how progress is monitored. A well-structured, logical, transparent plan with clear links between activities creates a safe context for students.
- Offering a variety of learning paths that allow silent learners to shine by aligning each learning activity with students' needs.
- Providing alternative access to course material (eg. video with subtitles and text transcript) and alternative methods for collaborative work.

- Collaborate with introvert peers (teachers) when designing a course or rethinking teaching to get a diverse group of instructional designers
- Students need to get used to paying attention to the process of learning when collaboration leads to frustration. When students are able to freely express what they need to participate or collaborate it becomes easier.
- Ask all students what they think their strengths are and build opportunities around them
- Use a variety of teaching methods to ensure that everyone is seen and heard: using different media, diverse learning materials and offering reflective as well as active assignments

Gilly Salmon's *5 step method* provides an excellent base for designing your course to focus on building a learning community where all learners feel welcome and that each learners can make a valuable contribution to the journey ahead.

4.5 Inclusive course design

How can we design the learning activities to meet the needs of all students including the silent learners? Here we will refer to the categorisation of learning activities described in the *ABC Learning Design* method devised by Clive Young and Nataša Perović, University College London. The coloured headings and descriptions are taken from their work.

Thanks to our Dutch colleague *Francisca Frenks* (XWebinar.nl) for input to this section.

INVESTIGATION ACTIVITIES

Learning through investigation guides the learner to explore, compare and critique the texts, documents and resources that reflect the concepts and ideas being taught. For example: web search, OER search, literature reviews and critiques.

Silent learners often like to work with a clear vision on what they are investigating. Vague concepts and ideas or changing methods of investigation can cause frustration during collaborative investigation tasks. Silent learners prefer objectivity and a long term perspective. They value quality, logical thinking and detail. They prefer individual

investigation activities. If the objectives or resources are unclear and the assessment is not logical and linear they may become frustrated and demotivated.

Other learners, in particular extroverts, don't need such a clear plan for investigation activities. They tend to enjoy looking around and pick up whatever they find meaningful, even if they can not explain yet why it is meaningful.

How to improve the learning activities to meet the needs of different learners?

Make clear in the group that there are different ways to investigate. Let them explain how they prefer to work and show some alternative methods, this is also a 21st century skill. Collaborative work can cause trouble when the learning process or the working process have not been fully discussed.



Source: flickr.com/Andrew Newill

ACQUISITION ACTIVITIES

Learning through acquisition is what learners do when they listen to a lecture or podcast, read books or a website and watch demos or videos. For example: guided reading, podcast, webinars, videos etc.

Silent learners tend to love reading and watching alone and at their own pace. Their learning style is linear.

Other learners could find it difficult to fully focus on longer texts or have trouble identifying structures.

How to improve the learning activities to meet the needs of all learners?

Give the more silent learners the opportunity to demonstrate their skills by analyzing the message or structure of the book, video, webinar in a discussion or to discuss the meaningfulness of the content related to the objective. They can explain to other learners (peer to peer) what they have discovered. They can provide useful help to other learners on how to approach tasks like deep reading and analysis. Make sure they have enough time to prepare the discussion and get time to speak, without too much interruption.

PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

Learning through practice enables the learner to adapt their actions to the task goal and use the feedback to improve their next action. For example: online role play, reflective tasks, case-studies.

Silent learners will do the exercise precisely but if it is not clearly related to the objective, there could be a problem. They want to think before they act. They want to do it perfectly. If the assignment is formulated vaguely or the objective is unclear, they feel uncomfortable.

Other students are much more ready to try new things, experiment and then reflect afterwards. They respond well to elements of play and do not need a full explanation for the activity. This will of course come into conflict with those who want order, structure and clear objectives.

How to improve the learning activities to meet the needs of different learners?

Discuss the activity first and specify what possible roles will be needed. Encourage learners to take on different roles and see the activity through someone else's eyes.

COLLABORATION ACTIVITIES

Learning through collaboration embraces mainly discussion, practice and production. Building on investigations and acquisition it is about taking part in the process of knowledge building itself. For example small group projects, building joint output, discussion.

Silent learners are often great at giving direction to the process of the group. They analyze well and are keepers of group norms and values, so they can be good group leaders.

Other learners are generally happy to accept a leader who can be calm in difficult times and is able to make explicit what is going on. They may however get impatient because (s)he starts at the beginning and ends at the end and they may prefer to see a leader who shows more passion and enthusiasm.

How to improve the learning activities to meet the needs of different learners?

Give silent learners the roles they do best, for example making a summary of the discussion at the end of the session or make a long-term plan for the group work. Help students to embrace and work with diversity and make it explicit during group work.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES

Learning through discussion requires the learner to articulate their ideas and questions, and to challenge and respond to the ideas and questions from the teacher, and/or peers. For example: class discussions, discussion forums, webinars.

Silent learners When the discussion is well structured they will participate but they will expect the discussion leader to give them the floor and are very unlikely to interrupt or simply speak up. Their input can be very valuable but it requires effort and understanding to make sure they are allowed to contribute.

Other learners can be irritated at what they see as passivity. They are impatient and want to move on and the more reflective group members' attention to detail and procedure can lead to frustration.

How to improve the learning activities to meet the needs of different learners?

- Make the group aware of the value of diversity in the group discussion. The silent learner often expresses values, principles and vision. (S)he can stay objective and providing structure.
- Do some listening exercises (note-taking, letting everyone speak without interruption etc) to make group members aware of the fact that their listening skills can be improved.
- Let students prepare discussion topics on their own. Some students are not able to listen to others because they have too much in their head they want to share.

PRODUCTION ACTIVITIES

Learning through production is the way the teacher motivates the learner to consolidate what they have learned by articulating their current conceptual understanding and how they use it in practice. For example: essays, designs, animations, videos, slideshows, blogs.

Silent learners are mostly thinkers and writers; doing things is less rewarding to them. Allow them space to work alone sometimes and give them enough time to make a production. When they are involved in production, they will maintain the group vision, give structure to the process and can be very helpful even if they do not do the hands-on work.

Other learners could think the silent learner is lazy because (s)he does not take action. They get irritated because they want to act first and the more silent learner wants to plan and reflect first.

How to improve the learning activities to meet the needs of different learners?

Talk about the process of production, before and after. Experiment with diversity, change group composition and reflect on it. Talk about the value of contributions after production. Let the silent learner give a presentation of her/his production when (s)he is satisfied about it. They will gain respect and often prove themselves as great "teachers".

Guidelines for learners

Teaching in an online environment presents many challenges and opportunities for teachers.

Learning is very much a social process and you need to learn to work effectively in groups with people who have very different ideas, personalities, experience, knowledge and cultural background. Before you start a new course, take some time to reflect on your own learning and how you interact with others.

Do you always take an active part in discussions or do you prefer to listen and reflect on what others say?

Do you find it valuable to collaborate or do you find group work frustrating, trying to get the group to work effectively?

Do you often take the initiative and enjoy leading group work or do you prefer to contribute as necessary?

Do you enjoy group work or do you prefer to study alone, at your own pace and with your own clear objectives?

Which types of co-learners do you find easiest/hardest to work with and why?

What are your strengths and weaknesses as a learner? Speaking, listening, writing, reading, teamwork, self-study, leadership, analysis etc. How can you improve your weaker areas on this course?



GROUP WORK

One of the biggest challenges in any course is working in groups. This will always involve a lot of negotiation, compromise and understanding since you will be working closely (physically or online) with each other for several weeks in order to solve a problem, write a report or discuss coursework. Working in online groups tends to be more demanding and it is easy to misunderstand each other but online work can also be very rewarding and effective if the following issues are taken into consideration.

- Spend time getting to know each other. Have an online meeting where you introduce yourselves and try an ice-breaking activity like seeing how many things you all have in com-

mon, share positive experiences from previous courses, favourite holiday destinations etc.

- Work out ground rules for the work you are going to do and write them down. For example: informing the group if you can't attend a meeting, letting everyone speak without interruption, keeping to deadlines.
- Take time to discuss each member's strengths and use these to help the work process. Some are good at brainstorming and creative thinking, others are good at analysing and planning etc.
- Share roles in the group work, taking turns at note-taking, leading meetings, doing research etc.

Conclusion

– inclusive learning

Although the focus of this guide has been online learning, most of the principles should also be applied in classroom teaching.

The issue behind this guide is making education more inclusive and so we need to offer alternative pathways for learners and ensure that different competences and learning strategies are recognized. Collaboration does not always demand noisy synchronous meetings but can also involve more silent asynchronous activities where everyone can contribute using a variety of media. Introverts are often invisible in synchronous group work, but if that discussion is continued in an online asynchronous learning space then the more reflective learners are more likely to contribute effectively. Developing better asynchronous collaboration also empowers learners with special needs by allowing them more time to make a response and thereby making a valuable contribution to the

group work. Another group of learners that would benefit from a more flexible and inclusive approach are non-native speakers who generally need more time to understand the subject matter and formulate their ideas and are therefore disadvantaged in synchronous discussions.

We started this project looking at the silent learners or “lurkers” in online courses but as the project progressed we realized that the issue we were investigating was inclusion. Digital learning spaces and tools enable greater flexibility in how learners can access learning resources, participate in collaborative work and take charge of their own learning. We need to use these tools and spaces wisely to widen access to education and open up the classroom.

Further reading

Here are some articles, books and videos that shed more light on teaching silent learners.

The Challenges of Online Learning: Supporting and Engaging the Isolated Learner,
Jenna Gillett-Swan, Journal of learning design, 2017

The Case for 'Passive' Learning – The 'Silent' Community of Online Learners,
Donna Smith, Katy Smith, EURODL, 2014

Unpacking the Problem of Unmotivated Online Students, Michelle Pacansky-Brock,
blog post 2016

'Student engagement' and the tyranny of participation, Lesley Gourlay, Teaching in Higher Education, 2015

Elegant lurking, David White, blog post 2015

Building a Sense of Community in MOOCs,
Robert McGuire, Campus Technology, 2013

Strategies to Ensure Introverted Students Feel Valued at School,
Elissa Nadworny, KQEDNews, 2016

Quiet In The Classroom: How To Recognize And Support Introverted Entrepreneurs,
Robyn D. Shulman, EdNews Daily

Quiet pupils can be effective learners,
Gunnhildur Óskarsdóttir, Jón Torfi Jónasson, Nor-DiNa Nordic Studies in Science Education, 2015



Source: Pixabay

De stille elevene, Universitetet i Stavanger,
2016 (in Norwegian)

Du må være utadvendt, Simen Frogner,
Studenttorget.no 2012 (in Norwegian)

Book: Human Dynamics : A New Framework for Understanding People and Realizing the Potential in Our Organizations, Sandra Seagal (Pegasus 1997)

Video: The Power of introverts, Susan Cain
(TED talk, 2012)



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