



Technical Report

A history wall task for an online Change Laboratory workshop

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Abstract: This research attempts to document moving from a face to face, brick and mortar environment to online environment from a student's perspective. This was investigated by using Cultural Historical Activity Theory as a starting point, and one on-line synchronous Change Laboratory to collaboratively co-create and document the experiences of students. It used two primary online tools to facilitate this process—Microsoft Teams and Microsoft OneNote. By using Microsoft OneNote as a tool, this allowed for synchronous online collaboration both between research and participants, and between the participants themselves. It demonstrates how this shared meaning and understanding of their new online environment (new activity system) in a live environment opened real time discussion of shared issues (contradictions) and fostered solidarity as they moved forward towards the end of their online learning experience.

Keywords: Online Change Laboratory; Task design; Technological tools.

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Bligh

1. Introduction

This research focused on using a history wall as a primary method of data collection. This method was chosen by the researcher to actively engage research participants, during the live change laboratory session, to share their individual experiences, in their own words, of the new online system. This allowed participants the freedom to express their experiences with the information flow moving from participant to the researcher, rather than more traditional



approaches i.e., an interview which often contains predetermined questions and information typically instigated by the researcher and answered by participants.

Some challenges that were experienced by carrying this process out online were that some participants needed more clarification on what was required than others. It was difficult to go into any detail on explanations as time was always a factor. Also, only one participant used the headings of the new activity system to structure their history wall contribution (see Figure 5 below), and while this was not a requirement it was suggested by the researcher as a possible way the participants could structure their walls. This sometimes led to a lot of unstructured information on walls, which made it a bit more challenging to extract information on certain topics.

2. Context

At the end of 2020, due to Covid 19, educational institutions, in particular third level institutions, had to move online to finish out the academic year. This has been termed ERT (Emergency Remote Teaching). However, in September 2021, nearly one year later, students continuously voiced their dissatisfaction with the online delivery at the time. There is currently a gap between what institutions think that students want and what students actually want, including what works and what does not work, particularly in that unprecedented time. Previous literature focused on the period of ERT (approx. 18 March 20 to 30 Jun 20) however there is very little literature on student experience of what has happened since.

Previous research indicates that it may be possible to bridge this gap in expectations through a process of 'co-creation' in which staff and students work together to voice their experiences of the past system and the current system and identify weaknesses that will help them to position themselves better in their online community going forward.

I piloted the Change Laboratory as a methodology to carry out this research in an online environment where all communication takes place through technology. I chose this as a methodology at this time as it is a recognised research methodology for helping groups undertake tasks together to bring about improvements in practices.

The ultimate goal of the research was to assist students in bringing about an awareness of the different components of the new activity system that they were currently operating in that would allow the researcher to experience and highlight student voice, and to give them an opportunity to feel that they were heard through the participation in the study. This was to address the main issue at this time that the students felt unheard.

Some obstacles that were overcome by opting for a live synchronous Change Laboratory:

- Access to research participants during a particularly turbulent time that was not time intensive for them;
- Supports the goal of assisting with the sharing of experiences with each other in a live environment to capture how they were feeling in that moment and to appreciate how others may feel similar or different and experiencing others point of view of their issues;
- By introducing them to the theoretical framework of activity theory this assisted me to explain through this framework the different factors at play in both the old and new systems and give them an insight into different components of the activities.



3. Approach taken

Initially I explained the concept of a change laboratory in the participant information sheet. I also explained the traditional approaches of Change Laboratory in the literature reviewed to date and highlighted that as my approach was going to be a “live”, once-off 2-hour synchronous session, it was very much experiential as to my knowledge this has not been attempted to date in the current literature.

An extract from the Participant Information Sheet:

What will happen if I take part?

The online meeting of myself as researcher and students will run using a methodology called the Change Laboratory as noted above. In the meeting you will be invited to:

- *discuss the face to face “activity system” experienced last year and compare to your experiences online this year*
- *consider how participation in this activity will help you position yourself for the remainder of the academic year.*
- *give feedback on your experience of being involved in the process, and offer any thoughts on how the process might be improved for future use.*

The agenda and process for the Change Laboratory session will be explained at the start of the meeting before any discussions take place.

When participants consented to take part, I then set up a Microsoft Team specifically for this online change laboratory as can be seen in Figure 1 below.

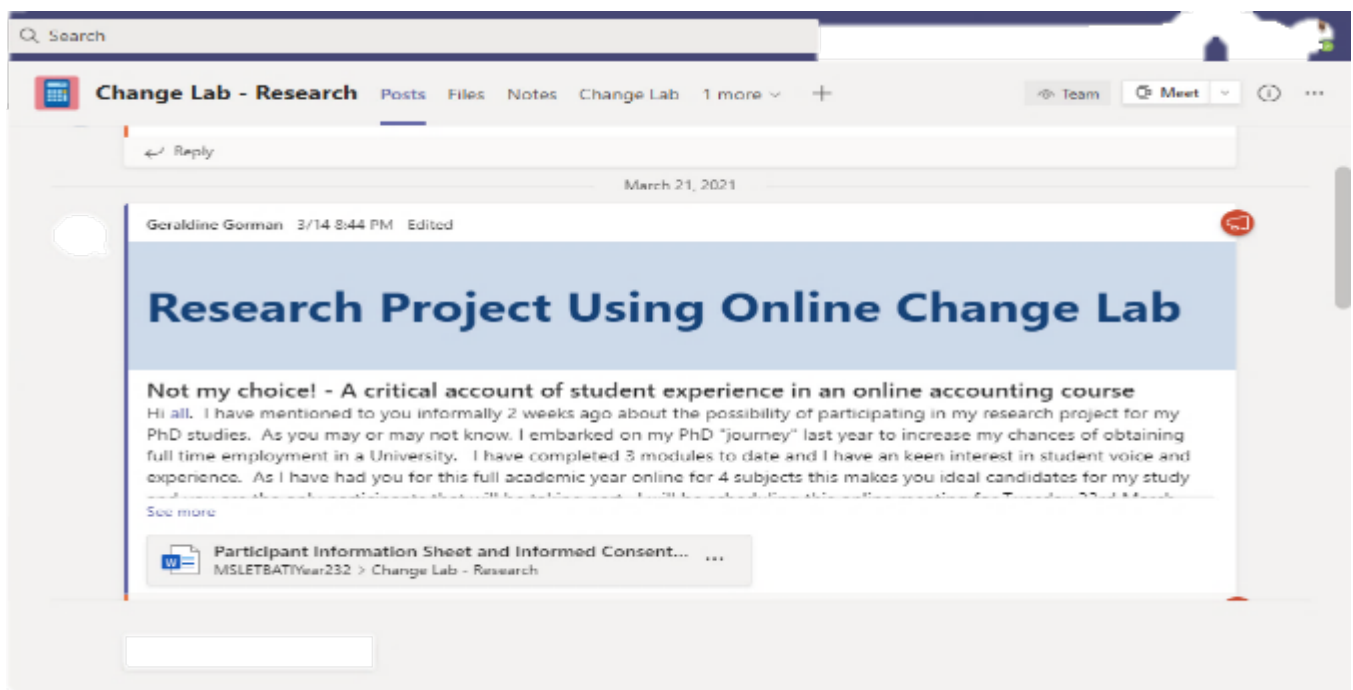


Figure 1. Information and PIS displayed for research participants in Microsoft Teams.

I then spent quite a considerable amount of time preparing for the live session. As this was a once off session, I was cognisant of the pressure to achieve what I wanted to achieve in a very small window of time. Small obstacles could turn out to be detrimental to the process on



the day, e.g., if the technology did not work at the allocated time. The saying *fail to prepare, prepare to fail* rang true during this time. On the evening of the session all participants logged into the team and was then presented with a one note document. One note was chosen as the collaborative tool for this process as it allowed participants to share ideas in a live environment and allowed transparency of entries both between participants and researcher and between the participants themselves.

Change Laboratory

Saturday, March 20, 2021
8:51 PM

The change laboratory is as method based on the theory of **expansive learning** (Engestrom 1987). The outcomes are designed by participants as they work out expansive solutions to developmental contradictions in their activity system.

Focus	Problems	Solutions
Invisible systematic structure of the collective activity	2. Disclosing the systemic Causes of the visible Problems in the activity	3. Finding a way to Overcome the problems by expansively reconceptualising the idea of the activity
Immediately visible events and problems in individuals actions within the joint activity	1. Identifying the obvious (visible) problems	4. Taking new kinds of Action : implementing New instruments, rules, ways of dividing labour and collaborating

Engestroms Six Steps of Expansive Learning

1. Charting the situation - something must be done, rejecting established wisdom, commitment to change
2. Analysing the situation - how did we work in the past (history)? What are our present troubles and contradictions?
3. Creating a new model - how do we want to work next year and beyond
4. Concretising and testing the new model - what changes do we want to try now?
5. Implement the new model - putting into practice the first steps. Pushing for the next steps. Extending and enriching the model.
6. Reflecting on the process - Evaluating the current process. Teaching others what we have learnt.

Questioning

What is currently totally inadequate in the current system ?

Analysis - Look at the present way of doing things and how they were done in the past.

Why are they like this right now?

What was your experience of change before ie moving from open book exam to closed book exam.

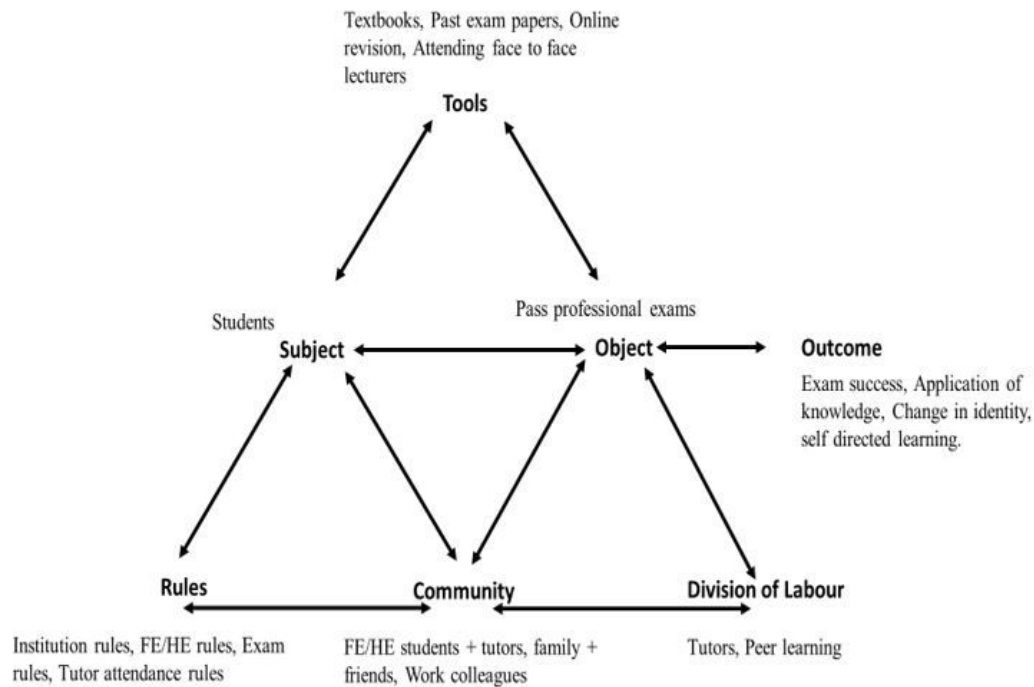
Reflection -

Figure 2. Opening of the Change Laboratory Session Using OneNote through Microsoft Teams – Explanation of the expansive learning process.

Then participants were brought through their old activity system of their current course in the historic face-to-face environment. Each object was explained by the research and in agreement with and participants this old system was subsequently labelled. Then participants were presented with a blank system and were asked to label their new current system.



Old System – Face-to-Face Environment



New System – Online Environment

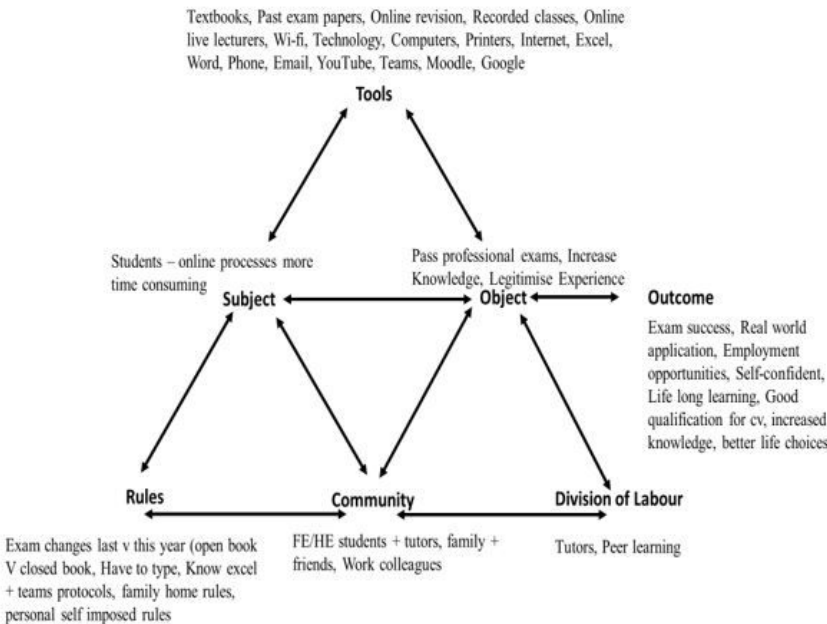


Figure 3. Comparison of 'old' and 'new' activity systems.



After this process the participants were then asked to complete a reflective learning log (history wall) (Sannino, 2020) for the year (see Figure 4). This tool was used to help the researcher and the participants document the first steps of the expansive learning cycle of questioning and analysis. Participants and the researcher as interventionist then read each other's walls and contradictions and tensions were discussed. This was a good example of live member checking in action. Using Microsoft OneNote for the process worked particularly well. Each participant had their own "tab" in OneNote, and both participants and researcher could move seamlessly in real time between tabs noting the contributions. Below is a short video (54 sec) of the synchronous session showing the Microsoft Teams set up and participants contributing to their history walls using one note.

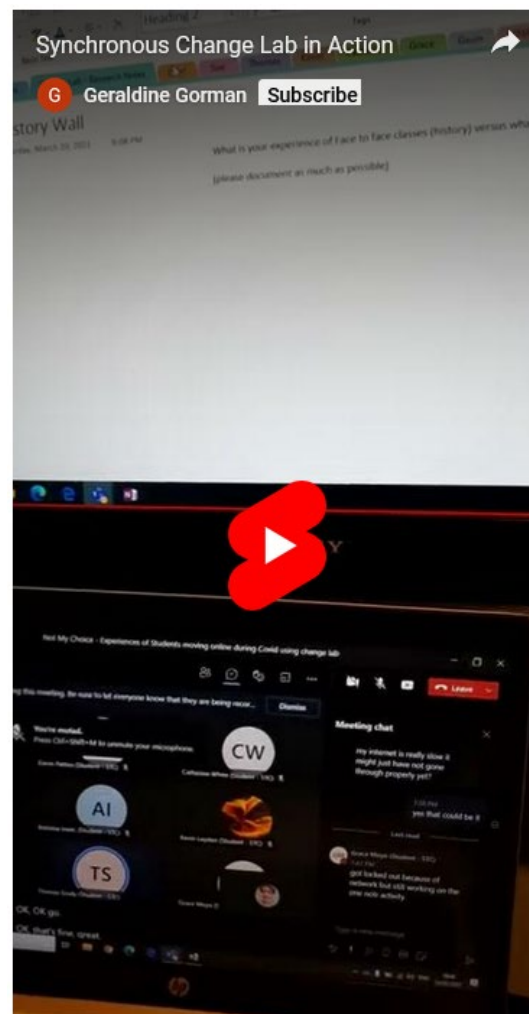


Figure 4. Synchronous Change Lab in action

(link to video: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/PovdSRDx0ac>)

The history walls then became the primary method of the data collection process. The researcher also transcribed the full two-hour session verbatim, and took notes during the session.



If it were only the ATI on-line course and the books, it would be a bit lonely. It is motivating to have Geraldine come along on the week's evening for 2 hours and push me along with the course. Hands down, if it wasn't for Geraldine's support last year and the peer group support, I don't think I would have done the exams. I would have chickened out and then be annoyed with myself that I didn't keep going. Autumn would come around, and I would have been wondering will I bother to pick up on the course, and probably would have said, "ah no, I'll leave it until next year". So, here we are with 2 months to go before exams and at times it seems very overwhelming but doable.

The current situation with all learning and exams on line is far from ideal for me. I'm not confident from a IT perspective and feel I'm at a disadvantage before the exams begins as this brings additional stresses. If I had known that delivery was on-line I would not have signed up for the course which has left me demotivated. Given I had completed one year of a two year course I felt I had no option but to see it through. I find the current teaching method far more time consuming and difficult to fit into a work/life balance. To keep up with class involves weekend study which I cannot motivate myself to do. The changes in exam structure from open book to closed book has been disappointing and unfair when the second year students last year were afforded this option.

The reason I finally started to study as an accountant technician was that it was a been delivered in a class room, I had previously had looked into it but it was online and the idea of spending two years looking at a computer screen was not for me. Now it's all just one, I get up study for an hour at the kitchen table, go to work 3 days a week at the Kitchen table, then have lectures 3 nights a week at the kitchen table and get some study in at the kitchen table.

I feel that maybe have let us down the way the course is been delivered, you are either a partner college and they provide the lectures or you are an online student and you study online. To have access to an online course and not be able to ask questions as you come across a problem is madness, they say you can listen back to the recordings, but if you don't understand something listening to the same things you couldn't understand doesn't mean you will get it. When you are with a lecturer especially in the smaller classes we began in, you develop a rapport, the lecturer picks up on stuff you are confident in, sees where you are struggling and can support you in your studies. I don't find that in the online lectures, the live lecture are a great benefit but I have an issue and I have to wait two weeks to discuss it that does not support my learning it slows it down. The comradery of the face to face lectures where you sit own for a 10 min cup of tea and realise you're not the only one struggling is gone so it's a much lonelier learning experience.

In online learning I find it hard to connect with other students and because the live class is once a week I can have a question and end up forgetting or work it out with questions sometimes I focus on being able to apply it on a question even if I might not fully understand because it take more time until the next class.

More work could be done in a classroom whether it was homework or practise questions. I was in full time study which meant we could finish a chapter and revise it and get enough questions done with the Tutor. We had more days to get work done with online learning we have 1 day interaction with the tutor for 2 hours which we also look forward to so we can get to the next chapter especially to understand the recorded moodle classes.

I also have internet challenges that I face which makes it hard to finish all work at once.

I lack the discipline to study properly without some degree of structure, having it entirely online removes any real structure for me. I miss interaction with classmates/tutor(s) in person. I lack an area to study effectively, This is also leaving me easily distracted when I try to study. Bit annoyed by the closed book exams but not surprised either general motivation going down in regards to course having done courses with pitman training before I knew going into online I would struggle as I hated their format of sitting in front of a computer listening to audio recording and working from there.

Tools

Although we have arguably more tools available to us this year, it has actually been for me too much. It is daunting trying to keep up with lectures, especially not being able to ask questions in real time. Our weekly 2 hr sessions with a live lecturer are the most beneficial to me. The advantage from last year is they are recorded so I can go back and look again at something I am unsure of. Having got to know the lecturer in year 1 there is also a rapport and understanding of their presenting. The weekly recordings from other lecturers would be better if they were just pure teaching. Listening to inane questions from people you don't know is boring and frustrating and makes me turn the lecture off.

Subject

I have struggled this year keeping motivation going. Only the weds evening sessions with Geraldine have kept me engaged. I would have given up if I had only had recorded online learning.

Rules

Not having to sign in to a class each week has allowed me to get behind at times.. I am not enjoying online learning to this extent. The change to the exam format this year is unfair. I feel like we are the guinea pigs for a new system coupled with the pressure of learning in a new way with less 'live face to face' support than any previous ATI

Figure 5. History Wall extracts constructed by participants during synchronous Change Laboratory.

Overall I think this research was successful as it assisted with developing a positive attitude generally in the participants as they moved forward towards the end of their course. The use



of a change laboratory as an intervention was initially a risky option, but reflecting back I am looking forward to using it again, along with all the steps in the expansive learning cycle on a more robust project.

4. Thoughts for other people trying to do it

There is a lot of work in the preparation stages and keeping the momentum throughout the different stages of the expansive learning cycle. You will also collect robust data which may require a lot of work to decode and present. However, the quality of the data, in my experience, gathered through this methodology gives deep insights to the experiences of participants. So, if this is one of the primary goals of your research, I would highly recommend it 😊.

A list of authors that I referenced through my study can be found in my paper (Gorman, 2022).

About the author

Geraldine Gorman is a professional accountant with 20+ years' experience in industry with 15 of those years also in education. She has been responsible for the implementation and delivery of many online courses since 2008 for several providers, primarily focusing in the areas of business and accounting. Geraldine's main research interests are in digital skills for students in preparation for the working world and getting student/educators voices heard in relation to policy and practice. Geraldine is a PhD student with the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK.



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