

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Disrupting Zoom Space: Lessons on Supporting Post Graduate Research Students' Mental Health through COVID Lockdown from SGSSS Homestretch Programme

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: Drawing on previous work to support international students and feedback from on-line research training provided early within lockdown, academics and PhD students partnered with SGSSS to provide on-line support sessions during winter Covid lockdown (<https://social.sgsss.ac.uk/groups/homestretch-conversations/>). The sessions incorporated playful use of the visuality of zoom space, embodied inquiry activities, visual journalling, and time for small group discussion. Lessons were derived from an iterative review process during facilitation, an open question survey of participants that provided feedback on their experience and their assessment of the sessions' theoretical frame and a co-inquiry evaluative workshop. The sessions were experienced as qualitatively different than normal zoom meetings and provided a welcomed place to share and process experiences. Participants indicated the activities within and the sessions themselves should be mainstreamed. The role of the sessions in preventative support requires further theorisation and research as does culture change to support mental health.

Paper: Restrictions that Covid pandemic has placed on postgraduate researchers have meant this community faces particular challenges to their work, their mental health and social connectedness (Ghogari et al 2020, Hamza et al 2021). Whilst data is still emerging about the mental health impacts of social distancing, evidence makes clear that issues are likely to be heightened and that preventative work is needed (Galea, Merchant and Lurie 2020, Hughes 2020). Digital spaces lacks many of the paralinguistical affordances which we normally rely upon. Over-reliance on screen is correlated with increased fatigue, a sense of heightened self-scrutiny and isolation. However, innovative ways of working with these spaces that disrupt the two-dimensional grid can mitigate some of the impact. This paper takes a co-inquiry approach (Armstrong and Banks 2011, Brookes, McFarlane, Cross 2012, Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers 2015) that draws upon post-humanist sensibilities (Taylor 2016) to exploring the benefits, dynamics and challenges of a preventative on-line support project. Posthumanist sense-making opens up a reconsideration of embodied and embedded knowledge of lived experience. Building on previous work to support international students (Abdessalam et al 2019), a weekly lunch time programme facilitated by a team of academics and students was developed incorporating playful use of the visuality of zoom space, embodied inquiry activities, visual journalling and time for small group discussions, (<https://social.sgsss.ac.uk/groups/homestretch-conversations/>). Lessons can feed into continuing mental health support in the recovery from Covid and within the increased hybrid learning conditions likely at universities going forward.

Research Aims:

- to discern together the features and aspects of the activities, and the degree to which they facilitated enabling conditions of mental health for participants
- to examine the digital constraints and enablers in the context of other physical and affective conditions with sensitivity to more than human agency
- to share findings with the wider academic community to contribute to the emerging lessons of Covid particularly as may inform continued forms of hybrid working and learning.

Research Design:

- Discourse Analysis of facilitation review notes and responses to a short open question survey of participants
- Co-Inquiry Evaluation Workshop

Sampling: The approach required purposive sampling consisting of those PhD students interested in the role of creative methods to support social interaction and mental health through digital media.

Evaluation Survey: The survey consisted of open ended questions that asked the respondent to reflect on their experience of the workshop in light of their on-going experience of coping with lockdown conditions. The questions were limited to a few to encourage participants to respond fully (Hertlein and Ancheta 2014). Open ended questions provide the best opportunity for participants to describe their experience in their own words and thus convey the nuance of their experience (Denzin and Lincoln 1998) and enabled respondents to question implicit assumptions (Hyttten 2004).

Workshop: Programme activities were explored, reflective discussions supported by journaling exercises provided an opportunity to extend and collate the discernment process. The co-inquiry process were guided by the principles of UWS Code of Ethics. Taking inspiration from the collective biography work of Davies and Gannon, we worked to make visible and therefore revisable the discourses through which we make meaning and selves in order to deconstruct the idea of the individuals as independent of collectives, discourses, histories and places (Davies and Gannon 2013:7).

Analysis: Monaghan's (2020) call for concurrent sociological inquiry as we grapple with Covid and their question: 'what sort of society are we heading towards and what sort of world do we want to share?' oriented our inquiry process. Our analysis searched workshop, survey and facilitation notes and compared our coding of themes, revisiting the data and testing alternative meanings and interpretations (Davis and Gannon 2013).

Findings:

The regularity of the sessions helped inculcate habits that supported wellbeing both for facilitators and participants.

The activities that broke with normal zoom meeting frame helped sessions feel supportive. As survey respondents commented:

Opening the session with physical movement and some 'unexpected' ways to interact with the other cameras on screen was a great way to 'flesh out' those interactions. I really appreciated the invitation to be in my own body and I would appreciate if other types of online meetings/workshops began with this.

I was surprised by how engaged I was throughout the entire session. They really felt like a break to me instead of another thing on my calendar.

Although supportive space was developed within the sessions the departure from that space was still experienced as abrupt.

Continued mental health stigma means further culture change work is needed. Mainstreaming activities within Homestretch can contribute to this.

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