

# Creating communities and connections in a digital age: a distance learner's reflection

Ayesha Jamal

Reflective practice is the cyclical process of reflecting upon experiences, gaining new perspectives and taking action as a result (Jasper 2013). The act of reflection is essential for practitioners seeking to develop their professional identity and realise their vision of practice as a lived reality (Johns 2017). As part of my reflective process, this article shares my experience of volunteering as a Course Representative and working as an Editorial Intern for *Reflective Professional*.

When I enrolled in the online Information and Library Studies MSc, I set myself two goals: to achieve academic excellence and to push myself outside of my comfort zone. The first step towards the latter was taken by volunteering as a Course Representative, a role which entails gathering student feedback on behalf of Robert Gordon University (RGU Students' Union 2022). The course began in September 2020 during a time where the impact of COVID-19 on loneliness was a prevalent concern (NHS 2022). Therefore, course leader Dr. Konstantina Martzoukou was keen for Course Representatives to implement new strategies to support student socialisation.

In contrast to on-campus students who attend lectures and engage in social activities together, distance learners often feel isolated from their peers (Fulford et al. 2014). However, from the introductory forum posts and email conversations, it soon became evident that there was a strong desire within my cohort to build interpersonal relationships.

The Teams group *A Wee Blether* was created by Dr. Martzoukou as a social channel that students can structure and use however they wish. Students have also created group chats on WhatsApp and Discord as informal social spaces. Using these platforms, I have collaborated with my fellow Course Representatives to deliver a wide range of activities over the past two years. This has been shaped by consulting students on their preferred activities and incorporating suggestions for improvement. I post a weekly study checklist listing all module tasks in bullet point format. I regularly organise social events such as video chat 'hangouts', assessment question and answer sessions, and virtual study rooms. In addition, I also host a reading group which meets once per semester to discuss student-selected fiction novels.

The feedback from students regarding the above activities has been overwhelmingly positive. 75% of students agree that the current social activities meet their needs and 83.3% of students agree that they have developed a sense of community and belonging in the course (November 2021 course feedback survey). This has led to the school academic board observing "a noticeable difference in student satisfaction in the learning community aspect which rated more highly than other School of Creative and Cultural Business courses in the Student Experience Questionnaire" (School Academic Board 2021). This satisfaction score for the course was also rated higher than the Robert Gordon University average.

Alongside my Course Representative activities, I also took the initiative to work as an Editorial Intern for *Reflective Professional*. This virtual work placement contributed towards my Professional Industry Experience module. Work placements are valuable for gaining real-life understanding of careers, developing skills, building contacts, gaining experience and opening doors to jobs (Rook 2016). I was keen to apply for the Editorial Intern placement due to my strong interest in academic journal publishing and the potential to pursue this as a future career.

As an Editorial Intern, I edited and proofread journal articles to a professional standard according to the *Reflective Professional* style guide. I checked articles for third-party copyright requirements and learned how to use the journal hosting service to upload articles, add metadata and edit descriptions. I also attended regular Editorial Team meetings on Microsoft Teams and Zoom to discuss the publication progress and brainstorm ideas.

Although my work placement was carried out virtually, I did not feel that my experience was any less valuable to my personal development than had it been face-to-face. This may be due to the fact that I already held the requirements for a successful remote internship such as a private work space, ICT access and virtual collaboration skills (Bowen 2020). I was able to improve my transferrable soft skills in online communication, critical thinking, initiative, self-confidence, and flexibility. Furthermore, proofreading and editing student dissertations was valuable in helping me to construct my own dissertation research proposal.

My experience of being a distance learner volunteering as a Course Representative and Editorial Intern has been incredibly rewarding. Technology has acted as a vital platform for building an online student community and creating connections with peers and professors living across the world. The effort I have put into engaging with my learning has not only strengthened my academic knowledge but has also led to new friendships and an improved sense of wellbeing. Overall, studying an online course such as the Information and Library Studies MSc can open new opportunities for both career development and personal growth.

## References

- BOWEN, T., 2020. Work-integrated learning placements and remote working: Experiential learning online. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*. [online]. Available from: <https://www.ijwil.org/> [Accessed 13 April 2022].
- FULFORD, H. et al., 2014. Building online learner communities: an activity theory perspective. [online]. *Proceedings of the ProPEL international conference*. 25-27 June 2014. Aberdeen: OpenAIR@RGU. Available from: <https://rgu-repository.worktribe.com/output/247206> [Accessed 12 April 2022].
- JASPER, M., 2013. *Beginning reflective practice*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Singapore: Seng Lee Press.
- JOHNS, C., ed., 2017. *Becoming a reflective practitioner*. 5<sup>th</sup> edition. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell
- NHS, 2022. *Coping with loneliness during COVID-19 – Every Mind Matters – NHS*. [online]. Available from: <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/coronavirus/coping-with-loneliness-during-coronavirus/> [Accessed 12 April 2022].
- RGU STUDENTS' UNION, 2022. *Class reps*. [online]. Aberdeen: RGU Students' Union. Available from: <https://www.rguunion.co.uk/whoweare/reps/> [Accessed 12 April 2022].
- ROOK, S., 2016. *Work Experience, Placements & Internships*. London: Palgrave.