Learning Without Borders: Moving Beyond the Comfort of the Classroom Cohort to an Inter-cohort

Tutaleni I. Asino, Phil Tietjen, & Sarinporn "Yam" Chaivisit

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This study explored student responsiveness to using social web technologies as a tool for fostering dialogues across university boundaries. Focused on the theme "Learning Without Borders," this study explored student responsiveness to using a video discussion tool (Flipgrid) to facilitate an inter-cohort collaboration between classes from two universities. The results highlight students' appreciation towards practicing "Learning Without Borders" rather than simply reading about it. Also, students' reflections on the experience raises their awareness about learning as occurring in one centralized location versus a distributed phenomenon mediated by social technologies. The authors argue for a new direction in online classes, one that moves the conversation from siloed, limited engagement to supporting a paradigm of Learning Without Borders.

Introduction

Technological advances have made it easier to connect globally. Despite vibrant networks of learners and content around the world made possible by social web technologies, the benefits of extended learning communities expanding beyond the immediate boundaries of the classroom remain unexplored. This study discusses an inter-cohort collaboration between classes from two universities. Focused on the theme "Learning Without Borders (LWB)," the study used a video discussion grid tool (Flipgrid) to facilitate conversations across classroom communities on this topic.

While the advent of video in online classes is rightfully celebrated as a good innovation, the authors argue that there are many missed opportunities. As Mott and Wiley (2009) assert, most current use of video presents a picture where " . . . instructors and institutions are essentially making the old, content-centric paradigm more efficient, but leaving it largely unchallenged and unquestioned" (Mott & Wiley 2009, p. 6). Expanding their critique, they argue video use in educational contexts is unnecessarily limited by three common characteristics: a) imposing artificial time constraints on learning; b) privileging instructors as the foci in the learning process; c) situating teaching and learning in "walled gardens that are

disconnected from the rich and vibrant networks of learners and content in the wider world" (Mott & Wiley, 2009, p. 7). It is the third element of this critique that has particular relevance to our study of video and the concept of LWB. Similarly, the study aims to respond to this gap by recognizing and supporting the synergetic learning occurring through networked collaborative discourse (Chen, 2019). Regardless of whether text or video is used, the ultimate goal of discussion boards is to promote engagement in a course. Therefore, the authors argue for a new direction in online classes that moves the conversation away from siloed, limited engagement (Asino & Tietjen, 2018) and towards supporting a paradigm of LWB.

Many class-based learning communities remain housed within the safe borders of their respective educational institutions despite the often-cited promises of web-based technologies to eliminate conventional boundaries such as geography. West and Williams (2017) propose further research should explore questions such as how new media technologies (e.g., Flipgrid) "clarify our understanding of the boundaries in learning communities" and "What relationships and/or level of interdependence can exist between learning communities defined by these various boundaries" (p. 1578)? This study used the video posting tool, Flipgrid, as a small step towards exploring student responsiveness to this type of mediated inter-cohort communication. Overall, students found it a positive experience and appreciated the opportunity to practice LWB rather than simply reading about it.

Literature Review

LWB is used in the literature frequently, but often without an agreed upon definition. In general, it is most often used as a way to describe any type of learning outside a classroom. According to literature, understanding of LWB comprises of three key aspects: learning in service, removing distance, and collaborating on activities.

Service Learning

One of the most common uses of LWB refers to service learning. Flipsen et al. (2009) used the LWB concept to refer to community-based service learning in an international context. The authors viewed LWB as providing a way for students across national borders to work together. When engaging in LWB:

> *The cultural component stretches over the continents and stimulates participating students, instructors and communities to develop a flexible way of working, using all kinds of techniques and communication methods to work together adapting to different points of view and attitudes. (p. 5)*

Cox et al.'s (2008) concept of LWB describes service learning using the following example. For instance, taking students on trips to provide medical service as volunteers in countries such as the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Guatemala. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2013) reported taking students to the Gambia to find solutions that address and convert agricultural waste to fuel briquettes. Kirkup (2015) discussed LWB in terms of bringing students to a university as a means of enhancing campus diversity. In the above instances, the term LWB was used as a reference to moving students from their physical borders on campus to an unfamiliar terrain to demonstrate learning is not bound to their campus.

Removing Distance

A second reference to LWB in the literature refers to removing distance or showing distance should not inhibit learning. In their reflection on the disruptive impact of COVID-19 on clinical care and medical education, Brady and Pradhan (2020) linked LWB to the opportunities afforded by distance learning. They discussed how current technologies removed borders by allowing flexibility of not having to be physically on campus. Students can learn asynchronously, but also contribute synchronously from remote locations. Brown et al. (2018) associated LWB to distance education and blended learning experiences. The authors argued despite the borders distance provides, it was still possible to provide learners with meaningful experiences, including blended formats. Medina and Todd (2017) explored the issues through a lens of online safety, arguing for "learning without walls, learning without the sense of personal or system safety being compromised" (p. 203) no matter where one is located. In these examples, the concept of LWB was used

to reference the removal of physical distance through technology by reminding learners that in the age of technology, safety awareness is not limited to safety in the physical world.

Collaborating on Activities

The third type of LWB discerned from the literature included bringing students together and collaborating on problem-based learning challenges. In one case, students from the United States and China developed problem-solving and online collaborative skills through a virtual classroom exchange. In 2010, the State College Area School District (SCASD) in Pennsylvania, USA agreed to help develop a virtual international classroom exchange called the Schoolwires Greenleaf program. The program's project-based curriculum paired U.S. students with Chinese learners to collaborate, foster global citizenship, and prepare students for the digital work environment. In the work of Livshits and Vasilyev (2013), LWB means:

> *Students will have no borders: political (they can participate in international projects); without strict educational frames - they follow their schedule and took necessary subjects; they are also free to participate in the projects with professors and adult researchers - so they are not limited only to students projects'. (p. 4)*

In this case, LWB was conceptualized as not just about physical space but also collaborating and broadly removing various borders.

Defining "Learning Without Borders"

As the literature review illustrates, there are many different definitions and conceptualizations of LWB. For purposes of this study, we conceptualize LWB as removing the borders of grades (undergrad/grad), institutions, Learning Management Systems ("LMS"), and other related bureaucratic borders (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Conceptualizing Learning without Borders
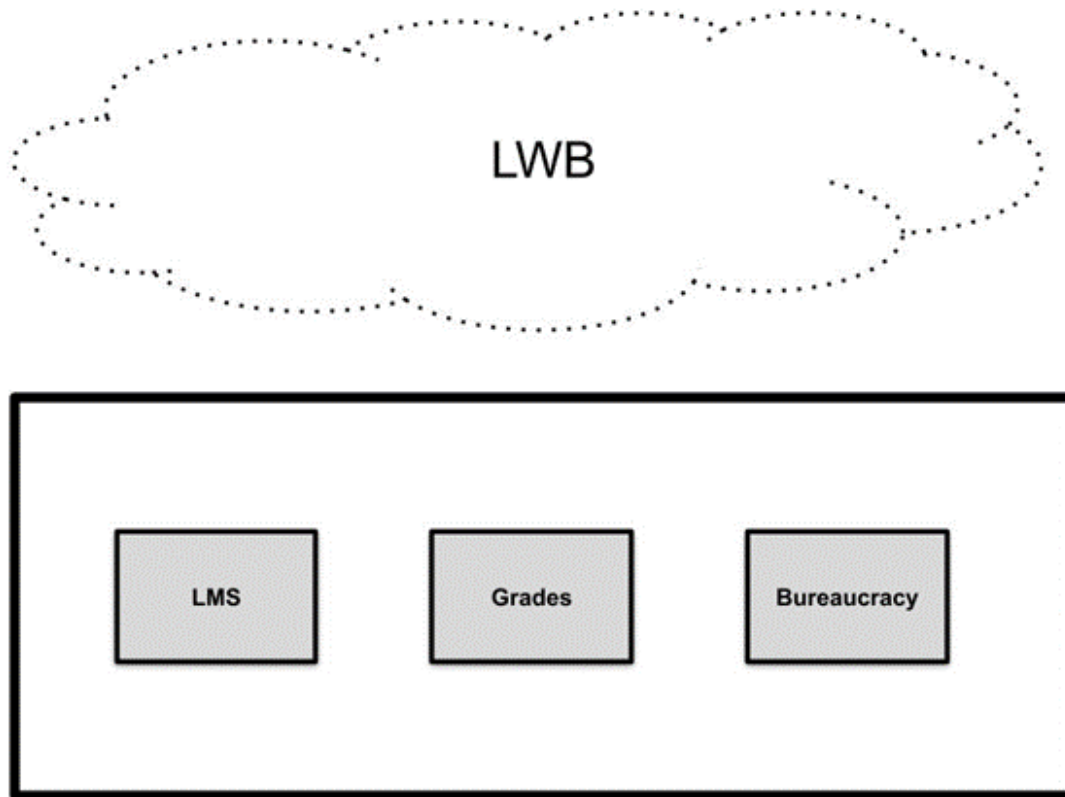
A picture showing the conceptualization of Learning without Borders

Method

This study employed a design experiment, which involves an iterative cycle of designing, implementing, and evaluating (Cobb et al., 2003; Barab, 2014). For this paper, we report on the third iteration of the study.

Participants & Context

This experiment featured one cohort from a university located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. ("Cohort 1") and another university from the southwestern region of the U.S. ("Cohort 2"). The Cohort 1 class consisted of 12 graduate students enrolled in an instructional technology and design program. The Cohort 2 class consisted of 20 graduate students enrolled in an educational technology program. Students were at varied levels in their master's journey and included in-service teachers as well as graduate students from various industries.

Design Intervention

The design intervention involved three phases. The first was an initial meet-and-greet where students posted a video introducing themselves. The second phase asked students to respond to the Positing the future of the field (Asino, 2015) column published in TechTrends. The column consisted of two articles. The first was, Contemplating the Future of Educational Technology by Dr. Patricia A. Young of University of Maryland Baltimore County, and the second section was The Future of Learning Design: The Future's So Bright I Gotta Wear Shades by Dr. Kyle Peck of Penn State University. The column was selected because it highlighted aspects of LWB, specifically culture and systems thinking. In the first section, Young (2019) "emphasizes the importance of culture in our field and the design of learning and learning tools" (p.20). In the second section, Peck (2019) reflected on his "four decades career as a systems thinker and shares his optimism about the bright future ahead for the field" (p.20). In the third phase, we asked the students to reflect on their experience of participating in this "beyond borders" collaboration. A central question that guided this

design intervention was, did the participant's conceptualization of LWB, change due to this experience? Accordingly, we focused our analytical lens on two aspects: (1) how the participants defined LWB at the beginning of the experience and (2) how they defined it at its conclusion.

Results & Analysis

Participation Data

Before presenting a more detailed analysis, a summary of participation data across the three main activities is provided (See Table 1).

Table 1

Participation Data

Activity	Responses	Replies	Views	Engagement Hours
Introductions	42	48	1579	20.3
Article Reflection	38	94	1655	40.2
Reflection Activity	17	26	455	8.7

Analysis

Our data analysis consists of two levels. The first is a summary of emergent codes generated through an analysis of the transcript. The second is a comparative analysis of how participants described their conceptualization of LWB changing, or not, as a result of the experience (i.e., How do you define Learning Without Borders? After participating in this discussion activity, how has your definition of Learning Without Borders changed?).

Level 1 Analysis: How are the Participants Talking about the Experience?

Before immediately delving into a comparison of how definitions of LWB may have changed due to this inter-cohort experience, some insights were made based on how the participants from these different universities were talking about and characterizing LWB. What keywords, phrases and words frequently emerged in their descriptions, framings and perceptions of LWB? Analysis of the transcripts revealed seven codes:

1. Space and time
2. Physical geography
3. Access
4. Autonomy
5. Collaboration
6. Pedagogy
7. Praxis

In the paragraphs below, we provide a definition and brief example of each code.

Space & Time

The code of Space & Time referred to instances where a participant described how LWB meant learning was not restricted to a predefined classroom space and time. Similarly, this conceptualization of LWB meant the student could tailor learning to a time that was most suitable to their schedule. An example of the "Space & Time" code is demonstrated in the excerpt:

> It means being able to learn share communicate without the confines of 4 walls or the confined of having to do it at us in very specific time. It is open. I can do it with any one, it doesn't matter where they are located.

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Physical Geography

Similar to "Space & Time", the element of physical geography emerged in participants' definitions of LWB when they explicitly referred to their physical location and how it related to learning (e.g., as an obstacle being removed). For example, in the following excerpt is "It doesn't depend on where you live. It's about your desire to learn and you're not confined to only knowing about the things that are going on in your area."

Access

Access generally pertained to when participants contextualized LWB as providing all people equal access to resources for learning. An example of this is "Learning Without Borders to me means that we should really have all the information at our fingertips. And that everything would be accessible to us."

Autonomy

The characteristic of autonomy surfaced when participants defined LWB by how it enabled one to pursue self-directed learning. An example:

> I'm a big believer in trying to better yourself and be better for this world so I think that that's all great. There's a lot of great things out there, I've really enjoyed this week, collaborating with Oklahoma State. I think it's great to get a different perspective from people that we wouldn't normally interact with everyday.

Collaboration

The element of collaboration could be observed when a participant defined LWB as support for building understanding across divergent viewpoints. An example is in the following excerpt:

> What Learning Without Borders means to me is the realization, or the fulfillment of what the Internet dreams of the Internet originally came with in the late 90s, where people were talking about communication with people from all over the place not necessarily just your own country not necessarily your own ethnicity or culture. . . . should be able to have a classroom where I can join students from Africa from Asia from everywhere and the same thing.

Pedagogy

The element of pedagogy was noticed when participants defined LWB as how it stimulated new ideas for changing their teaching practice. An example is "I've had a lot of fun. I look forward to doing more of these styles of assignments and classroom education, and I might start incorporating something similar to this in my own work, education."

Praxis

Praxis most notably surfaced in the data when participants described how they saw the current activity as a form of applying or doing LWB rather than just reading about it. An example of this is "we're practicing learning Without Borders" and " . . . so after this week. I feel like my understanding of Learning Without Borders has definitely increased and I feel that after having this experience **I have gone just from learning and talking about Learning Without Borders actually doing it** [emphasis added]."

Level 2: Content Analysis

To better understand student responses towards extending the boundaries of their respective classrooms, our second level of analysis of the data primarily focused on student reflections and how the experience impacted or changed their notions of LWB. More specifically, the analysis focused on two categories of change as a result of participating in this experience: (1) those participants who explicitly acknowledged a change in their definition of LWB and (2) those who said the experience did not change their definition or only in very small ways.

Change in Definition of LWB

We begin this level of analysis by focusing on examples of participants who described their definitions of LWB as changed. To adequately contextualize the nature of this change, the definition they gave before participating in the experience and the definition they shared afterwards are provided. In this first example, the participant conceptualizes LWB primarily as an issue of access to resources and the importance of equity when it comes to the access of educational resources:

> Before: "And Learning Without Borders means to me that. We can all have access to the same information. And it doesn't matter where we're from what we look like? What other resources we have things like that."

> After: "so after this week. I feel like my understanding of Learning Without Borders has definitely increased and I feel that after having this experience I have gone just from learning and talking about Learning Without Borders to actually doing it. It's been really helpful in showing me the benefits that learning Without Borders and online learning can have with students, especially students who don't have the same type of access to learning materials as other students and so this has been a really helpful experience. I really liked it and I feel like I've learned a lot."

In the case of this participant, a transition in their definition of LWB from one that is more abstract and arguably idealistic (e.g., "We can all have access to the same information") to one that is more concrete and specific (e.g., "after having this experience I have gone just from learning and talking about Learning Without Borders actually doing it") is apparent.

In the next example, the participant explains the change in their LWB definition has undergone a small, but nevertheless noticeable change:

> Before: "Learning Without Borders means to me, giving students the freedom to learn any place at any given time. It allows individuals who may work, a 9 to 5 job or even though they have families. The ability to continue their education."

> After: "overall, I definitely enjoyed this week's discussion and it kind of changed my viewpoint a little bit about learning Without Borders. And I just think it's a great tool and I hope that we can use this in many ways. I just want to think also doctor [name of professor facilitating the experience] for putting this together and allowing us to join you guys an open this up in a different format."

Initially, the participant conceptualizes LWB as affording an individual personal flexibility with regard to their professional and family responsibilities. After the experience this participant envisions LWB as more specifically connected to pedagogy, and specifically how it presents opportunities for more creative teaching and learning experiences by engaging in conversations with cohorts from different universities. Therefore, the participant expresses how it is now seen as a "great tool" for experiencing learning "in a different format."

No Change in Definition of LWB

Next, the analysis shifts to examples of participants who's definition of LWB remained the same. In this first example, the participant conveys the lack of change in definition in a nuanced way stating initially their definition "hasn't changed" but then later that it "has been enhanced."

> Before: "To me learning Without Borders means I can learn from anywhere at any time with any resource available to me, I can reach out to people across the Globe and in turn, they can reach out to me and it just takes it much further than just the local schools."

> After: "And I think that my understanding of Learning Without Borders hasn't changed. It has been enhanced. I think I have a better understanding of collectively what we all think it is. There are parts and pieces that maybe I hadn't thought of that were brought to my attention and I think that we're all on the

same page when we're talking about Literacy and digital literacy and the future of where instructional design and digital education is going. . . . I look forward to doing more of these styles of assignments and classroom education, and I might start incorporating something similar to this in my own work, education." (userid: yj)

Enhanced understanding of LWB develops through the participant's recognition that "parts and pieces" introduced new dimensions of awareness. In addition, this richer depth of awareness involved more than viewing LWB as anywhere-anytime learning, but also suggested notions of learning as part of a larger collective leveraged for furthering advancements in educational pursuits such as digital literacy and instructional design. This enhanced understanding of LWB parallels previous participants (e.g., "ks"; "yj") who are drawn to the creative possibilities of the pedagogy. This is illustrated, for example, in the utterance "I look forward to doing more of these styles of assignments and classroom education, and I might start incorporating something similar to this in my own work." In this example, the participant has been inspired to think about how this experience could be applied to their own professional practice.

In the next example, the participant shared their definition of LWB through the lens of their job and related work:

> Before: "Learning Without Borders to me means my customers which are our students at [name of university] as the production manager for [name of agency], we make videos for all of our online courses. So all the people that take the courses that watch videos they're watching the videos I make so all of the people that I work for basically are learning Without Borders. They're getting their degree all over the world through [name of university] and some of them might not ever set foot on campus at my alma mater."

> After: "As far as my understanding of Learning Without Borders goes, it's remained the same basically been reinforced from other experiences I've had with other online classes. But getting past theories and actual practical use, I guess. As far as I am concerned as a student. It was just reinforcing things I've heard about but actually doing myself, I've just come to notice that. You know. Especially with as far as student community involvement goes where you are kind of building a community, people's responses to each other and videos and sharing thoughts and ideas so those are my thoughts."

This participant clearly conveys their definition of LWB has not changed. Their definition is an extension of what they already do in their professional work context. In addition, the participant uses variations of the word "reinforce" to show the high degree of overlap between the classroom learning experience facilitated by Flipgrid and other aspects of their professional and personal life. Also yielding worthwhile insights was comparing "before" and "after" statements. In the "before" statement, the participant's vision of LWB is transactional and unidirectional. The statement "they're watching the videos I make . . . " includes little to no mention of any reciprocal dialogue with the audience to whom the video content is being shared. However, in the "after" definition, this participant revealed slight malleability in the definition by pointing to LWB as relating to "building a community" – an intrinsically dialogic function. The participant exhibits a small shift from a perspective on LWB less about the geographical movement of the communication and more about the dynamically moving social processes of "sharing thoughts and ideas" to facilitate the construction of a community.

In this last example, the participant envisions LWB through a philosophical lens, and while their philosophical perspective has not changed, the recent learning experience has prompted them to think about how it can impact their teaching practice.

> Before: "Learning Without Borders to me just means thinking about learning more expansively more broadly, so for example, I've used Flipgrid with my students before to have had them record book reviews. But I never thought about using the discussion feature to have them communicate with each other, or to communicate with people in other places so maybe just thinking about even an existing tool using it in a new way."

> After: "I think my basic idea of Learning Without Borders **has stayed kind of the same** [emphasis added] as far as Conceptualizing it. what I think this experience has done and **what has changed is I been able to take it from theory to practice as it were, and think about ways to use it in my classroom**. [emphasis

added] It's very much more concrete and accessible so I've been thinking about ways to use Flipgrid in this way, with my students for example, to connect them with people and ideas, they wouldn't have access to otherwise. You know whether that's from other schools or just other parts of the country. You know it always thought before. You know learning Without Borders is. You know something wonderful that I should be doing, but it's probably very expensive and complicated. And now I see that it's it doesn't have to be."

Similar to some of the previous examples, this participant also adopts a nuanced perspective when it comes to expressing their thinking on the concept of LWB. On the one hand, they state their definition of LWB "stayed the same," yet they qualify this position by qualifying "kind of" (i.e., kind of stayed the same). The depth of this qualification becomes more evident as they describe how this learning experience inspired them to think how LWB can be transformed from an abstract, philosophical concept into practical application for teaching. Specifically, LWB expanded their thinking (e.g., "I never thought about using . . . ") about how LWB is realized through tools such as Flipgrid because the tool enables students to "communicate with people in other places." Another interesting detail surfacing in this participant's post-experience definition is how it has changed the participant's view of the cost or economics of implementing this type of learning experience. As Flipgrid is free to educators, the prior belief that LWB was a costly venture has become much less so. This, in turn, has reshaped their understanding of LWB as something that is a lofty philosophical principle to one that can be practically achieved.

Discussion

In general, students explained that while their definitions of LWB did not change dramatically, this experience did, however, prompt them to think about it in more deliberate and deeper ways. A key pattern emerging in this initial round of analysis was how students made the metacognitive connection between the general goal of the design activity and their own internal thought processes. One way in which this surfaced was when students described much appreciation for actually practicing the concept of LWB rather than just reading about it. These metacognitive reflections provided greater insights into students' overall receptivity of the experience.

From a somewhat different angle, students' reflections conceptualize the learning space as something not restricted to the physical classroom but rather extended by connections made through the Internet. Similarly, students' comments suggested recognition of a shift from seeing learning as occurring in one centralized location (e.g., classroom) to a distributed phenomenon mediated by social technologies such as Flipgrid. Other students commented directly on the partnership between the two different cohorts which signals students' willingness to extend the classroom beyond conventional boundaries. Finally, it was promising to see some participants talk about how the experience served as inspiration and encouraged them to try something similar in their own teaching practice.

Conclusions

This study explored student responsiveness to using social web technologies as a tool for fostering dialogues across university boundaries (i.e., LWB). Overall, students found this experience to be a positive one and appreciated the opportunity to practice LWB rather than simply reading about it.

This study sought to address the primary issue of better realizing the potential for using social web technologies to foster learning connections beyond the boundaries of the conventional classroom cohort. Despite the often-cited promises of social web technologies to eliminate conventional boundaries, such as geography, many class-based learning communities remain housed within the safe boundaries of their respective educational institutions. Comparatively, little progress has been made to expand the classroom boundaries to include and collaborate with students from other universities. One possible obstacle may be lack of rich media (e.g., video) to enhance meaningfulness of collaborative conversations. Another possible factor might be the logistics for coordinating an inter-cohort collaboration are too time-consuming or detract from the primary course content. However, the authors argue

this type of inter-cohort learning experience can be adapted for any disciplinary area. Moreover, the social learning processes embedded within this experience proves immensely rewarding and complementary to student learning. Several participants pointed that they realized through participating in this project the value and the opportunity to practice LWB rather than simply reading about it. Similarly, Flipgrid represents a promising social technology tool for facilitating this type of inter-cohort communication.

In considering future paths of investigation, this study represents only initial steps towards exploring how to use computer-mediated discussion technologies in more creative ways. Similarly, this study raises a variety of questions to guide future investigations. Future questions guiding further research include:

- Are there certain disciplinary subject areas where these digitally-mediated inter-cohort learning communities show stronger evidence of success?
- Could digitally mediated inter-cohort learning communities encourage or promote higher levels of student engagement? Agency?
- How would a study such as this change if the length of engagement was longer or more frequent?
- How would a study such as this change if participants were asked to assess the experience either privately with the instructor or more publicly through social media?
- In what ways could the designs of these inter-cohort learning community experiences be shared and developed as Open Educational Resources (OER) and/or as exemplars of Open Pedagogy?
- How would the nature of the conversations among the cohorts change if the primary discussion mechanism was something other than an article? For example, what if students shared a personal artifact that had special meaning to them?
- How would a study such as this change if a different technology was used such as for example the synchronous, audio platform, Clubhouse?

These options only scratch the surface of what is possible for future avenues of exploration. While educational research has generated a substantial body of research on learning communities, most of it is restricted to traditional classroom-based cohorts. This study aims to advocate for using the affordances of social web technologies to build inter-cohort learning communities to encourage students and faculty to move beyond the safe comforts of traditional boundaries.

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Tutaleni I. Asino

Oklahoma State University

Tutaleni I. Asino, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Educational Technology and Director of the Emerging Technology and Creativity Research Lab in the College of Education and Human Sciences at Oklahoma State University. His research agenda includes Comparative and International Education, mobile learning, diffusion of innovations, and Open Education.

Phil Tietjen

Pennsylvania State University

Phil Tietjen received a PhD in Learning, Design and Technology from the College of Education at Pennsylvania State University. His primary research interests include Open Educational Resources, e-Learning pedagogy, group cognition and active learning spaces. He is currently the Director of Learning Design at Davidson-Davie Community College.

Sarinporn "Yam" Chaivisit

Oklahoma State University

Dr. Sarinporn Chaivisit, also known as Yam, graduated from the Educational Technology program at Oklahoma State University in 2021. She earned a B.Eng. in Computer Engineering from Chiang Mai University in 2010 and a M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction from Oral Roberts University in 2015.