

Is it possible to teach and learn collaborative skills while still having fun?

Using an on-campus scavenger hunt to answer the question



Jane Burns

Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland & University College Dublin
janeaburns@gmail.com
@JMBurns99

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Background

I am a library information professional with over twenty years' experience of working in a variety of library and information environments, and am a part-time lecturer in the School of Information and Communication Studies at University College Dublin. In 2012 I began teaching a course to Masters degree students in Library and Information Studies (MLIS), and in Computer Science students (MSc). The course is entitled Management for Information Professionals and it covers a range of management theories. A significant component of the coursework for the MLIS and MSc involves working in collaborative teams on group projects. Sorenson (1981), after interviewing over 200 students who had been involved in group work, found a high level of dissatisfaction with this assessment approach for several reasons, such as grades, interpersonal considerations, poor outcomes of group work and group organisation factors. I decided to take a new approach to teaching collaboration skills and addressed these areas of concern. My approach involved group-based and individual assessment. I have used the scavenger hunt exercise, with some modifications, for three semesters. UCD campus is quite large so I needed the help of the previous year's Management Studies students as volunteers. They were strategically placed throughout the campus to help current students with clues and to ensure there was no cheating. This is a great way for former students to re-connect with classmates and with UCD, and current students responded well to instructions from their peer groups.

University College Dublin campus as setting

University College Dublin (<http://www.ucd.ie/>) in south County Dublin has a beautiful, extensive campus. The UCD sculpture trail is a walking trail lined with many beautiful art works by well-known artists such as John Burke, Jason Ellis, Thomas Glendon, James Hogan, Kevin O'Dwyer, Bob Quinn and Giorgio Zennaro (<http://www.ucd.ie/campusdevelopment/announcements/ucdsculpturetrail/>). It runs along the core of the Belfield campus and is linked to pedestrian routes. The sculptures are as much a part of the landscape of the campus as are the flora and fauna. The decision to use the sculpture trail as the path of the scavenger hunt was made for several reasons. Primarily, it has a defined route, so for safety reasons students are confined to the campus; secondly, many students, and possibly staff, at UCD do not know about the sculpture trail; and thirdly, it was hoped that making students aware of and engaged with it would encourage them to return for their own enjoyment and relaxation.

Assessment construction

The assessment of the scavenger hunt was divided into three parts: participation in and preparation for the hunt carried most points; teams were also awarded points for their success in finding objects and clues as well as for the creation of short video captured on the hunt; and students wrote a personal 1,500-word reflective paper highlighting prime theories of collaboration relating to their experience. These components comprised 30% of the overall course grade.

Key objectives

The exercise provided an opportunity for students from the two masters programs to mix with each other. This was a key objective for all students, and especially for the international students. At the first session of the semester students are put into random groups of no more than ten, each of which is assigned a colour. On the day of the hunt, they are issued with a bandana of the same colour. This helps them to perceive themselves as members of cohesive groups.

Prior to the hunt there are lectures about the many aspects of collaboration. Being put into a random team can reflect what happens in the work place.

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From their reading of case studies, students can appreciate parallels with the workplace, where staff are often put into groups or onto committees with people they don't know, who come from different backgrounds and who have different objectives. These experiences have the same elements of pressure, time limits and resources that must be balanced against achievable results.

Teams meet to decide how they will communicate, and everyone writes down what they think their role will be on the day. Many students reported that they had not been aware of the existence of UCD sculpture trail, so this addressed another learning objective, which was to develop awareness of one's environment and any clues it may hold, and to use this when making decisions.

Tools and techniques

Scavenger hunts have many applications. For example, Massimi et al. (2007) identify the scavenger hunt model as a suitable prototype by reason of its game format, which uses the elements of timed task, teamwork and mobility to create a prototyping method for mobile collaborative problem-solving systems. These elements of the scavenger hunt mimic several field challenges in the lab and can be applied to program and systems design. The tools and techniques used for this assessment were very low tech. Each team was issued with a campus map and a list of clues. Many of them set up WhatsApp groups or used text messaging. Some students have suggested that an alternative project for this course could be to create an app for orientation purposes for other students and visitors to explore the UCD sculpture trail.

Renner (2016) examines the use of a low-tech scavenger hunt with mobile phones for student engagement with library staff and for student use of the library facilities at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This was a joint library and faculty initiative in the Allied Health Sciences programs to encourage students not to use library services exclusively by remote means. It involved the design of questions by library staff. Students were given clues to solve around the library, and when they thought they had the right answers these were sent to the librarian for validation. This could be done on a group or individual basis.

A scavenger hunt can use apps or QR codes hidden on the trail, and it is possible to make them very complicated and technical if that is an objective. Lu, Chao & Parker (2015) describe the use of scavenger hunt activities involving augmented reality. Whilst these seem very interesting and engaging, it would take a high level of skill and design to create them. The objectives of this exercise focused on identifying and developing skills and then reflecting on how the theory related to the learned experience. Low-tech tools and techniques were deemed suitable for attaining these objectives.

Learning outcomes

Students appreciated that different people have different strengths and that working together helped them to be successful. The scavenger hunt approach is a safe, fun way for students to see how collaboration works. They can reflect on their own experiences and perceptions of their roles in groups, in the light of their performance with regard to theoretical understandings of collaboration concepts. In this exercise they developed a new appreciation of their campus and it is hoped that they will engage more fully with the aesthetic opportunities it has to offer them. Their awareness and appreciation of the UCD sculpture trail is one such opportunity. Clues are also hidden in other places on campus that I wanted to bring to student's attention. For example, in the foyer of UCD James Joyce Main library there is a swop bookshelf set up by Carmel O'Sullivan, Associate Librarian, where the last clues are hidden in the books on the shelves. This simple act of hiding the clues in plain sight has drawn students' attention to the swop bookshelf, which many had reported they had not noticed before.

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Challenges

If you are thinking of using a scavenger hunt for collaboration or discovery in your teaching or your library there are few things to be aware of. It takes a great deal of effort and time to write clues and to map out the various routes, and then to ensure that it can be accomplished in the time allotted. Volunteers can be helpful. Students must be made aware of health and safety issues and reminded not to take any unnecessary risks. It is also important to be aware that some students will not like this experience for a variety of reasons.

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