CHAPTER 5

Collaborative Learning in Informal Spaces: Formulating a Pedagogical Project of Student-Centred Active Learning in Gender Studies

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'Because I'm a feminist!'
'I want to fight for women's rights'
'I'm a straight ally who wants to know more about the LGBT community and help them'
'Being bisexual, I need to learn more about my sexuality'

These quotes are somewhat representative of my undergraduate students' responses over the years to my question on why they chose to enrol in units (subjects) in Gender Studies. Their feedback registered a common theme that reflected the premise of Gender Studies at Monash University

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Malaysia: This area of study harbours a practical, real-world dimension that can potentially equip students with the necessary tools to engage in projects of community change and social transformation, particularly in issues of gender and sexuality.

At Monash University Malaysia, Gender Studies began life in the early 2000s in the School of Arts and Social Sciences as a few elective units before being elevated to the status of a Minor and eventually a Major in 2016 (Bong & Goh, 2018). The units which are parked under this area of study have been designed with the belief that Gender Studies should not serve merely as theoretical ventures, no matter how fascinatingly so, but more importantly as practical storehouses for action research. Many of the activities and assessments in each unit contain elements that prompt students to consider the irrefutable relationship between the classroom and the world. A diverse range of topics on gender, sexuality and sex are offered at the University, including complex intersections of heteronormative and non-heteronormative gender and sexuality issues with diverse facets of social and personal life, and sexual and reproductive health and rights in Asia and beyond.

As such, the pedagogical trajectory of Gender Studies is one that pursues and echoes an Active Learning Approach (ALA), itself 'a very broad concept that covers or is associated with a wide variety of learning strategies' (Carr et al., 2015, p. 173). While many interpretations of ALA abound, scholars generally agree that ALA refers to student-centred pedagogies or 'any teaching method that facilitates student reflection upon ideas and how they are using those ideas' (Jacob et al., 2016, p. 42), and lies at the opposite spectrum of passive absorption of information, rote learning and uncritical regurgitation of facts (Machemer & Crawford, 2007; Petress, 2008). ALA encourages learners to think deeply and critically, process what they learn, and meaningfully apply what they learn to the world outside the classroom (Chau & Cheung, 2017; Powner & Allendoerfer, 2008; Stolk & Harari, 2014).

In Gender Studies, I train students to think critically, take ownership of their own academic journey, study interdependently, and develop culturally sensitive and effective leadership skills. To this end, I deployed an experimental pedagogical project called Collaborative Learning in Informal Spaces (CLIS) that was fused with a Gender Studies elective Unit (subject) entitled *Critical Methodologies for Action Research* (hereafter *Critical Methodologies*). I taught this Unit, coded as AMU2908

(Monash University, 2021), over a 12-week semester from 4th March to 31 May 2019. This chapter details the ALA processes involved in the creation and implementation of CLIS-infused learning activities, and the eventual outcomes.

Collaborative Learning in Informal Spaces

CLIS was a project that was developed by a former colleague who was then in the Education Excellence Unit of Monash University Malaysia, Chan Chang-Tik—coincidentally a lead-editor of this volume—and further developed with the participation of a lecturer each from the School of Science, School of Information Technology, and School of Arts and Social Sciences.[1] Chan acted as my non-lecturing collaborator on *Critical Methodologies* for the duration of the semester. It was an opportune moment to experiment with CLIS as the University had freshly constructed several informing learning spaces. Representing the School of Arts and Social Sciences, I volunteered AMU2908 for the project only for 2019 but with certain modifications, chiefly that CLIS-specific sessions would be explicitly implemented for only four weeks during the semester.

CLIS is a form of ALA that looks to the Community of Inquiry framework (CoI), which 'focuses on learning processes from a collaborative, constructivist point of view [and] assumes that learning in online environments occurs through the interaction of three core elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence' (Tirado Morueta et al., 2016, p. 123). In other words, the CoI framework comprises the organised construction of a safe space for interaction and expression, meaning-making through critical thinking and effective communication, and pedagogical facilitation for effective learning engagements (Garrison et al., 2000; Lee et al., 2021). My interpretation of CLIS for AMU2908 focused largely on in-person, rather than online learner interactions. Drawing on the CoI framework, CLIS emphasised the element of social presence, which 'can help students feel safe to share ideas and collaborate with others on course content' (Wicks et al., 2015, p. 54) by fostering a safe and comfortable space for student-centred learning in

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[1] Monash University Malaysia comprises the School of Arts and Social Sciences, the School of Business, the School of Engineering, the School of Information Technology, the Jeffrey Cheah School of Medicine and Health Sciences, the Department of Psychology, the School of Science, and the School of Pharmacy.

informal spaces. According to Akyol and Garrison (2011) the framework was based on the socio-constructivist orientation where the focus was on the students' interactions in a socio-cultural context. I developed a climate for collaborative learning and made it comfortable for students to share their thoughts, and to avoid dominance and intimidation in order to build relationships and mutual trust. I intervened when students were overly polite and not willing to challenge misconceptions. Likewise, students were encouraged to resolve their own emotional conflicts, and only when needed my input and correction were provided with sensitivity and respect as shown in Table 5.1. Of note, when students are aware of the emotional status of the group members, they can initiate positive communication to overcome problems due to negative emotions (Zheng et al., 2022). Additionally, as Lavoué et al. (2020) reveal, emotional awareness may provoke positive emotions.

Although I believe that CLIS would augment the pedagogical strategies of many academic disciplines, I find that it particularly enhances ALA in Gender Studies because it promotes the values of mutual respect and appreciation in the process of learning highly controversial issues of gender, sexuality and sex, thus encouraging a free circulation of rational and mature ideas without the threat of belittlement or disparagement hanging over the heads of learners. Hence CLIS helps 'students construct the process of understanding together through the sharing of individual perspectives in a process called collaborative elaboration' (Chan & Goh, 2020, p. 2) by maintaining an atmosphere of respect and trust among learners in order to encourage open communication even if participants do not share identical views with each other but wish to air their personal convictions or debate the issue at hand. Therefore, peer-to-peer constructive feedback is crucial in all CLIS activities as it assists in the internalisation of deeper and more self-reflexive learning through peer interaction. There is thus an element of group efficacy in the process, or the belief that individual success is linked to group success in achieving the desired outcomes of the activity.

Introducing the Unit

In brief, *Critical Methodologies* focuses on the learning and deployment of feminist and queer theories in the formulation of team research proposals for the benefit of marginalised and vulnerable communities. These proposals form cumulative assessment tasks that are not meant to

Table 5.1 CoI framework for the implementation of CLIS

	Teaching presence		
	Design	Facilitation	Direct Instruction
Cognitive presence	• The pre-CLIS and CLIS sessions activities were designed to encourage students to move from a trigger event to resolution • Students were provided learning resources as pre-CLIS activities to assist them to find solutions to problems • Students discussed in small groups, shared ideas and reflected on their experiences during the CLIS sessions • Formative assessment was employed to set a constructive climate for collaborative thinking during the CLIS sessions and presentations	• Challenged students to defend their position, highlighted different students' opinions, and prompted them to consider alternative viewpoints during the CLIS presentations • Challenged their ideas, identified areas of agreement and disagreement, and focused the discussion during the CLIS presentations	• Scaffolded student knowledge and provided useful and timely feedback during CLIS presentations • Guided the learning process towards resolution by shifting direction and focus according to the academic needs during CLIS presentations • Intervened to address misconceptions and suggested alternative ideas when needed during CLIS presentations

Table 5.1 (continued)

	Teaching presence		
	Design	Facilitation	Direct Instruction
Social presence	• Students introduced themselves to group members and shared concerns about the course expectations, and identified their personal concerns before CLIS • Created "chat" room for informal interactions of the CLIS activities • Established participation protocol and online discussion etiquette for the CLIS activities	• Set a welcoming tone for openness by having clear norms and guidelines on how to engage socially and emotionally before the CLIS activities • Sustained group cohesion through the learning activities for pre-CLIS and CLIS sessions which were designed for purposeful discourse and collaborative engagement • Development of interpersonal relationship in a natural manner during CLIS activities • Creating trust at an initial stage of CLIS may be more important than challenging ideas of individual	• Developed climate for CAL • Avoided dominance and intimidation during the CLIS sessions and presentations • Intervened when students were overly polite and not willing to challenge misconceptions during the CLIS presentations • Students were encouraged to resolve their own emotional conflicts during the CLIS sessions

be implemented as actual research projects by students. Instead, they are academic exercises that provide opportunities for students to engage with the dynamics of qualitative research at an undergraduate level in Gender Studies that could prove useful should they venture towards researched-based Honours, Master's or doctoral programmes thereafter, and/or engagements at the workplace or with various civil society organisations.[2]

Feminist and queer theories are two critical theories which play a crucial role in Gender Studies as they prioritise elements of research which are often overlooked, dismissed, silenced or taken for granted in mainstream research projects that uncritically adopt more patriarchal, androcentric and heteronormative forms (Levy & Johnson, 2012). Both theories acknowledge that research projects are driven by bias from the outset. Such bias is politically potent as it aims at social change for the betterment of human lives (Browne & Nash, 2010; Harding, 1993). Feminist and queer theories privilege the recounting of lived experiences of subjects who are experts of their own lives through various forms of storytelling. They emphasise the need for consistent self-reflexivity, and the awareness of personal privilege and positionality as simultaneously insiders and outsiders in a research project (Bhopal, 2010; Kuga Thas, 2013). My conceptualisation of action research in this Unit is partially based on the notion of critical participatory action research which 'expresses a commitment to bring together broad social analysis, the self-reflective collective self-study of practice, and transformational action to improve things' (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 12).

In incorporating CLIS into *Critical Methodologies*, I designed and implemented learning activities that would enable learners to ponder deeply on the vital aspects of doing research with vulnerable and ostracised groups, which ranged 'from identifying a research topic, mapping research design, generating and analysing data to writing-up and disseminating research findings' (Monash University, 2021). Therefore, in *Critical Methodologies*:

> a feminist and queer ethos also find [sic] full expression in taking action as a primary outcome of the research process hence action research (e.g., change mindsets, review policy, formulate framework for activism, etc.). The transformative ends of such research potentially realise feminist and

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[2] For more information on the Honours programme, see Monash University Malaysia (2020).

queer praxis and in doing so, apply learning towards effecting social justice. (Monash University, 2021)

Journeying with Students Through the Project

Providing an Overview of the Unit

To accommodate the incorporation of CLIS, I took some time prior to the start of the semester to rethink the teaching presence element of the CoI framework, namely 'the design of the educational experience [which], includes the selection, organisation, and primary presentation of course content, as well as the design and development of learning activities and assessment' (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 90). The teaching presence through the design, facilitation and direct instruction categories play an important role in establishing and sustaining the CoI (Shea et al., 2006). In this regard, Keles (2018) concurs and adds that students should play significant roles in the teaching presence. Specifically, in the context of the cognitive presence the activities were designed to encourage students to move from a trigger event to resolution. In other words, students were provided learning resources to assist them to find solutions to problems, to discuss in small groups, share ideas and to reflect on their experiences. In addition, formative assessment was employed to set a constructive climate for collaborative thinking. Over the semester, I offered *Critical Methodologies* as a blended Unit that comprised both in-person and online modes. The provision of resources for all learning activities as well as the submission and consequent feedback for assessment tasks were all carried out through the open-source online learning platform Moodle.

I conducted an on-campus, offline two-hour lecture and a one-hour tutorial for *Critical Methodologies* on a weekly basis. The incorporation of CLIS necessitated a re-designation of some of these sessions to a '2-hour session' and '1-hour session' as any of these time slots could be devoted to lectures, discussions, presentations and self-studying. 20 students from Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Martinique, Pakistan, Singapore, the Maldives and the United Kingdom enrolled in the Unit. This cohort comprised individuals with a range of gender and sexual identities and expressions.

I designated the first two-hour, in-person session of Week 1 as 'Information Session 1'. Students were guided through the aims of the Unit and the various Topics that would be covered. I reminded them to strive towards the accomplishment of the learning outcomes through the

various learning activities and assessment tasks. I emphasised the significance of the learning outcomes, chiefly to learn the key features of queer and feminist theories and methodologies in order to compare their efficacy for application to real-life situations of marginalised and vulnerable communities through engagements with action research. Consequently, students were expected to design Research Proposals that would be interlaced with key queer and/or feminist concepts as the pinnacle of the Unit. Students were also mandated to carry out these tasks effectively and ethically with due consideration for cross-cultural sensitivity.[3]

In the following one-hour session of Week 1, termed 'Information Session 2', I provided a detailed overview of how CLIS was incorporated into the Unit throughout the semester for the first time as a pedagogical experiment. As a good practice of professional courtesy, I also gave students the opportunity to dis-enrol from the Unit if they felt uncomfortable with the arrangement. I was gratified (and relieved!) that all of them unanimously agreed on participation.[4] I informed students that Weeks 6, 7, 9 and 10 were dedicated CLIS study weeks. In a general sense, they were tasked with independent team discussions on various online academic resources in the two-hour sessions in Week 6, and then present the fruits of their discussions in the two-hour sessions in Week 7. This arrangement was to be repeated in Weeks 9 and 10.

While students were excited about CLIS as a new venture in learning, it was obvious that their willingness to engage with pre-CLIS activities, CLIS sessions, and CLIS presentations and feedback were prompted by the fact that these learning activities in Weeks 6, 7, 9 and 10 were annexed to assessment tasks. Admittedly, the interlocking of learning activities with assessment tasks was a calculated strategy to encourage the students to be more vested in the learning tasks. At the same time, a grade-bearing appraisal of learning activities was an important tool to convey to students the significance of their labours, chiefly that they could potentially achieve success if they devoted themselves to the Unit as individuals and teams. This approach is in line with one of the main elements emphasised in the learning-oriented assessment framework to ensure that the focus is on the

[3] To view a listing of the Learning Outcomes, see Monash University (2021).

[4] Students also read, signed and returned Consent Forms which were created for this purpose.

quality of student learning outcomes—the element is assessment tasks are designed as learning tasks (Leong et al., 2018).

Weeks 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8 did not feature dedicated CLIS sessions. Instead, the two-hour and one-hour sessions served as preparatory periods to help students engage in upcoming CLIS-focused weeks. Hence, these weeks were designated as lectures and tutorials on feminist and queer theories and methodologies for the purpose of grounding students in the relevant key concepts with which they would be engaging in the forthcoming weeks. Weeks 2 and 3 covered Topics 1 and 2 respectively on feminist theory and feminist methodology, Weeks 4 and 5 focused on queer theory and queer methodology respectively, and Week 8 laid emphasis on the notion of a researcher's sense of self-reflexivity from feminist and queer perspectives.

During Weeks 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8, which saw a 'combination of traditional (teacher-centred approach and direct transmission of knowledge through lecturing) and active (student-centred approach and constructivism through learning by doing) learning methodologies' (Chau & Cheung, 2017, p. 133), students were expected to share their views on how they deployed theories to analyse and interpret real-world contexts. Through the ensuing interactions that occurred with me and each other, students were encouraged 'to construct meaning through sustained communication' (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89)—a crucial feature of the CoI. I encouraged and guided them in refining, and to a lesser extent, rectifying their interpretations and applications of queer and feminist theories and methodologies. On many occasions, I lauded their efforts in comprehension and application.

It is important to note that these non-CLIS sessions were not 'traditional' or 'conventional' in a strict sense as they were infused with elements of ALA rather than patterned on a 'instructor-lecture student-receiver environment' (Nicol et al., 2018, p. 261). For instance, although these non-CLIS sessions saw more conventional styles of pedagogical delivery through the use of PowerPoint slides, lectures were also heavily peppered with the active elicitation of students' views on key concepts and interpretation of current events, through individual responses, think-pair-share activities and peer-to-peer constructive feedback on peer responses. Tutorials were dedicated to motivating students towards greater critical thinking, specifically in applying theoretical ideas to real-life situations. Peer feedback transforms the role of students and requires them to

generate and interpret feedback while engaging with their peers (Ion et al., 2017).

Pre-CLIS Activities

In Week 6, students were mandated to carry out several pre-CLIS activities. First, they were required to watch a 47-minute online documentary featuring the narration of personal experiences by several transgender people in the United States entitled 'My Transgender Life' (TMW Media, 2016). This documentary was made available to all students via Kanopy, an on-demand streaming video platform provided by the University. Second, they were instructed to engage with two book chapters on the appreciation of storytelling and lived experiences that utilised feminist and queer frameworks respectively. These readings were accessible online through the University's library search guide. Students were repeatedly informed that it was vital for them to go through these resources individually before discussing and ascertaining the key points contained in these resources as teams during CLIS sessions. I scaffolded their learning efforts with extensive and detailed Guiding Questions, the responses to which actually formed the main component for their CLIS session discussions and presentations. While watching the documentary, students were asked to reflect on these questions:

1. What were the challenges, affirmations and inspirations that the interviewees experienced?
2. What were the factors that led them to their self-realisation?
3. What are the factors that assist them in constructing their current gender identities?
4. How do they live their lives as transgender people?
5. How do the insights and lived experiences of these individuals challenge social and cultural norms?
6. What are some narratives that can best be analysed and interpreted through the key aspects of feminist and queer modes of enquiry?

Students were also asked to reflect on the following questions while going through the two academic readings:

1. Read the introduction and conclusion. What do the authors set out to do, and what have they concluded at the end?

2. What are key feminist and queer modes of enquiry that these authors use themselves?
3. Why do the authors place such great importance on storytelling and lived experiences in their research?
4. What are some findings of their research, based on the narratives of their research participants? Based on these findings, what are some key theoretical concepts that they have devised as their own modes of enquiry?
5. What are some key theoretical concepts from each author that you intend to use as modes of enquiry for narratives of one person who appears in the documentary?

Students were informed that they needed to collate their discussions in Week 6 for both their team presentation in Week 7 and to produce the first team-based assessment task, the 'Change It!' Team Video Essay. In other words, they were tasked to translate the outcome of their deliberations to an in-class presentation, and a media-based project that would eventually be submitted at the end of Week 7. In the one-hour sessions of Week 6 and 7, students were charged with crafting the script, filming, editing and refining the Video Essay in any informal learning space on campus. No formal classes were held during these one-hour sessions as students were given free rein to meet and work on their Video Essays at on-campus informal learning spaces.

Week 9 followed a similar pedagogical pattern. Students were instructed to participate in pre-CLIS activities by reading two journal articles on issues of research ethics and researchers' insider/outsider positions from feminist and queer perspectives respectively. While students were asked to plan their discussion-based team presentations in Week 10, they were also invited to begin preliminary discussions on the second and final team-based assessment task, the Research Proposal. Akin to Weeks 6 and 7, no in-person classes were slated for the one-hour sessions in Weeks 9 and 10. Instead, these time slots were earmarked for students to extend their discussions on, and write up the Research Proposal in informal learning spaces. I discovered later those students found these one-hour sessions useful. Although students met in person for these sessions, I see potential in holding these exchanges completely online in the future and thus be freed from the physical limitations of having to meet on campus. I suspect that online meetings could encourage students to 'communicate online with others in a cooperative and sociable manner' (Lee et al., 2021,

p. 3) and thus further enhance the element of social presence in CLIS. Nevertheless, social presence is more difficult to develop in an online environment. I would start by getting students to introduce themselves to their peers, share concerns about the course expectations, and identify their personal concerns. I would create a 'chat' room for informal interactions, and establish participation protocol and online discussion etiquette.

During informal chats with students on the Pre-CLIS activities, I learned that the vast majority of students enjoyed viewing the documentary as they were previously unfamiliar with the struggles and achievements of transgender people. A few commented on how some of the experiences of these transgender people resonated on several levels with their own, particularly the daily sense-making of their own gender and sexual identities and expressions. The online journal articles and book chapters were not as well received. Most students expressed difficulty in grasping both the language and content of the academic readings. Although several expressed their gratitude for ensuing team-based discussions that helped bring greater clarity to their comprehension and interpretation of the reading material, some felt less confident in their understanding of the academic readings without my intervention.

CLIS Sessions
During the two-hour CLIS sessions in Weeks 6 and 9, I made my 'rounds' or brief visits to the on-campus informal learning spaces that were occupied by the student teams. The purpose of these visits was to ensure that the students had indeed gathered for the CLIS sessions, were engaged in productive discussions and did feel 'abandoned' by me. I made it a point to arrive approximately an hour after the sessions were slated to commence as I wanted them to take the lead in discussions without my presence. I was also keen to witness them in the thick of their exchanges.

One team decided to meet at the *Lepak* Café and sipped Slurpees while discussing the resources. The other teams met at the Idea Link, the Hive and the Library Collaborating Space, all of which were informal learning spaces that were equipped with tables, chairs and whiteboards.[5] As I was later informed by students, the vast majority of students came well-prepared for CLIS and had gone through the various resources and

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[5] The composition of these teams, each with a student-elected team facilitator, was designated in Week 3.

were armed with notes. The discussions, as evident from my visits as well as video recordings made of each team during the CLIS sessions, were robust and boisterous.[6] The opportunity to discuss matters sans the lecturer's presence seemed to make for freer exchanges, although I learned later from students that those who were less prepared for the session or had a weaker grasp of the concepts felt less entitled to contribute to discussions. This did not, however, prevent them from engaging with other students in light banter and swapping jokes that seemed to heighten the social presence of the CLIS sessions, or 'the ability of participants to identify with a group, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personalities' (Garrison, 2011, p. 23). At each informal learning space, I greeted students and asked friendly, general questions like 'How's it going?' and 'What did you discuss?' My projection of a casual, non-threatening and an informal demeanour was intentional as I did not want to diminish the spirit of student-centred learning that had been created in each team. My objective was to develop interpersonal relationships in a 'natural' manner because creating trust at an initial stage may be more important than challenging the ideas of peers. This is in turn follows from the imperative to respect all individuals, and need to develop a sense of belonging so that over time, personal relationships may develop and thus establish social presence (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

Prior to their coming together in Weeks 6 and 9, I had informed students that I would be available for live chats via Google Hangouts with the team facilitators during CLIS sessions should they encounter a learning impasse. I soon discovered that the team facilitators deemed it unnecessary to avail themselves of this avenue. Instead, the teams decided to field questions to me during my visits. What was particularly noteworthy was that most clarifications were not sought after for complex theoretical concepts, but on *collated discussions on interpretations* of complex theoretical concepts. Rather than 'What does this mean?', I was asked, 'This is what *we think* it means, are we on the right path?' The absence of an academic authority created a relaxed, non-hierarchical atmosphere that impelled and invigorated efforts on the part of students themselves to unpack complex theoretical notions.

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[6] My collaborator Chan had organised for research assistants to video-record the sessions.

When there were diverse interpretations of the resources, teams would unanimously vote for a majority interpretation. Even then, as mentioned earlier, some students were not entirely convinced by the results of their discussions. Interestingly, none of the teams reported any conflicts during the CLIS sessions even though I had informed them that arguments and disagreements are common in such activities. I was also not informed of any conflictual peer-to-peer feedback during the sessions. Any sort of feedback between students seemed to take the form of polite exchanges of opinions that were readily rescinded when challenged. It is possible that students had consciously avoided any uncomfortable disputes for the sake of preserving friendships in their teams, or relinquished their right to debate on opinions due to either nonchalance or a lack of confidence, or just did not feel sufficiently invested in the Unit to go beyond acquiescence to adamant voices or the majority interpretation. According to Hung (2016), when students are anxious, they fear the possibility of conflicts with others and therefore avoid feedback discussions.

I wanted to reserve my personal feedback to guide and supplement peer-to-peer feedback for Weeks 7 and 10 when the entire student cohort was present as a sort of co-facilitation which I regarded as cohering with the CoI element of teaching presence that could 'support and enhance social and cognitive presence for the purpose of realising educational outcomes' (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 90). Accordingly, to facilitate the cognitive presence I challenged students to defend their position, highlighted different students' opinions, and prompted them to consider alternative viewpoints. To this end, I challenged their ideas, identified areas of agreement and disagreement, and focused the discussion. With regard to the facilitation of social presence, I set a welcoming tone for openness by having clear norms and guidelines on how to engage socially and emotionally. In order to sustain group cohesion, the learning activities were designed for purposeful discourse and collaborative engagement. In this respect, students gradually developed mutual trust when they interacted productively to achieve their mutual goals. Hence, I decided to provide more general responses to their questions during the visits. I either applauded them for being on the right path and then posed further questions to stimulate deeper reflection, or subtly informed them of blatantly erroneous interpretations, and provided additional guidance and direction on analysing the resources. Similar to the stance I took upon

visiting the teams during CLIS sessions, I wanted to maintain a student-centred learning ethos that could easily fracture under the articulations of my own opinions.

In Week 7, all four teams took turns to present the outcomes of their discussions via PowerPoint slides at the two-hour session at formal learning spaces. For each team, ten minutes were allocated for the actual presentation and 20 minutes for feedback. Whenever I deemed it necessary to provide some feedback throughout the session, I did so sparsely and concentrated on peer-to-peer feedback for the most part, in which students were to appraise each other's interpretation and analysis of the resources. This practice was meant to help build their sense of confidence and social interaction in learning and public speaking, as well as reinforce the strategy of mutual and collaborative learning that fostered a greater sense of social interdependent learning.

As most students were unfamiliar or uncomfortable with providing comments to their peers and/or regarded this practice as personal criticism, it was necessary for me to preface the session with assurances that peer feedback was a form of mutual, interdependent learning meant to elicit deeper thinking rather than a catalyst for inciting warring factions between students. According to Altiok et al. (2019), giving and receiving feedback in collaborative and peer learning environments are assured through social interaction and it also offers metacognition benefits. Initially, some students elected to stare at their laptop screens while others turned bashfully to each other. The hush that fell over the class was a clear indication of awkwardness. I attempted to ease students into peer-to-peer feedback by posing basic questions such as 'What do you like and not like about the presentation?', 'What are the strengths and weaknesses of what they presented?', 'What do you agree or disagree with?', 'What was missing?' and 'What do you think could have been improved or emphasised?'

Soon after, one or two students voluntarily voiced their opinions. The few students who took to peer feedback with increasing zeal asked poignant questions and offered good suggestions for improvement. Still, most students needed prompting to comment on the work of their peers and did so in the most diplomatic manner. By Week 10, more students gained confidence and the 2-hour session saw more mutual exchanges between students on their discussions on the resources provided for Week 9, which I interpret as an increase in learning experience in the form of the CoI element of cognitive presence, or the ability 'to

construct meaning through sustained communication' (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89). It is likely that the affirming experiences of both peer-to-peer and lecturer feedback in Week 7 as well as a growing familiarity and sense of ease with each other contributed to more verbose exchanges. In other words, I scaffolded student knowledge and provided useful and timely feedback whereby I guided the learning process towards resolution by shifting its direction and focus according to the academic needs. As mentioned earlier, I occasionally intervened to address misconceptions and suggest alternative ideas when necessary. While I tried to avoid excessive direct instruction to prevent discouraging students from participating, I also realised that too little intervention can also be a problem in driving forward the cognitive presence. Therefore, personalised feedback is provided when necessary, as this form of feedback can help improve the collaborative knowledge-building capability as well as elicit positive emotions and reduce negative emotions (Zheng et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, despite the modest success of both presentations and peer-to-peer feedback in both weeks, I intuited some uncertainty in the facial expressions and body language of students. They seemed more settled when I corroborated their analyses, or commended them on sound interpretations and gently corrected them on imprecise findings. While I did not explicitly elicit their thoughts on the matter, I am fairly certain that students continued to look to authority figures for assurances of their learning experiences. This is unsurprising as most of these students had been schooled in traditional learning styles that centre on passive assimilation of knowledge from the educator rather than active learning 'skills which cannot be imparted effectively using the traditional passive lecture format' (Jacob et al., 2016, p. 42).

It is important to note that the assurances I offered were not moulded on the right-and-wrong paradigm. I steered clear of binary responses to the students' findings and helped them to see that it was possible to provide different but sound interpretations of the material that they had studied and presented. The nature of Gender Studies was such that students could experience in-depth learning by considering various arguments for and against a subject matter. Firmer and more conclusive responses were given to the very few completely erroneous interpretations of the resources. I also provided summaries of the in-class peer-to-peer and lecturer feedback on a Google Spreadsheet that was shared with students.

Deploying the Assessment Tasks

In 2019, *Critical Methodologies* was designed with four assessment tasks in mind. Through Moodle, students were provided with rubrics for all assessment tasks in this Unit. A rubric is 'a set of criteria for grading assignments' (Rezaei & Lovorn, 2010, p. 19). As 'a rubric typically focuses on specific *content*, follows a particular *development process*, and targets at a particular application context' (Yuan & Recker, 2015, p. 18; original emphasis), I ensured that the students were clear about the criteria in the rubrics as they worked on their assessment tasks.

Two of the assessment tasks—what I refer to as minor assessment tasks—the Personal Audio Reflection 1 and Personal Audio Reflection 2, were individual 5–6-minute audio reflections with smaller grade weightages due for submission at the end of Weeks 4 and 11 respectively. These were minor tasks designed to facilitate students' reflections on their personal aims for the Unit at the outset and close of the semester, as well as the personal and socio-cultural challenges that they felt would influence/had influenced them in attaining these aims. Through these two open-ended Reflections, students were to plan and reflect on practical strategies towards mitigating and overcoming possible and imminent personal and social challenges. In building up this Unit, I was acutely aware of the political, socio-cultural and religious sensitivities that permeated the issues of marginalised and vulnerable communities in Malaysia and beyond. It was thus crucial that students, many of whom hailed from conservative Asian countries—including Malaysia—engaged in purposeful self-reflexive exercises and learned to communicate their realities 'perceptively, effectively and with cultural sensitivity' (Monash University, 2021). I believed that remaining oblivious to such issues could prove to be detrimental to their performance in the Unit.

In both Reflections, students spoke about personal challenges in realising their personal goals for the Unit, which mainly revolved around difficulties in understanding theoretical concepts, language barriers, distractions, poor time management, lack of familiarity with academic writing, challenges in writing and speaking in English, ineptitude in peer interaction, and mental and physical health issues. Some spoke of personal problems with regard to their families, friends and religious beliefs, especially on matters of gender and sexuality. In Personal Audio Reflection 2, several students expressed a certain degree of success in acknowledging and owning their personal challenges. A few spoke of overcoming their problems while others shared on tentative resolutions.

The Personal Audio Reflection assessment tasks also included a section on students' expectations and experiences of CLIS. In Personal Audio Reflection 1, they were asked how CLIS would help them achieve the Learning Outcomes of the Unit. In Personal Audio Reflection 2, they were required to comment on their experiences of CLIS and if CLIS had helped them achieve their personal learning goals. The earlier submissions of the Personal Audio Reflection contained more generic and even idealistic responses. Conversely, at the end of the semester, I received a wide variety of reflections on CLIS. Some students found the requirements of CLIS convoluted and/or demanding. One of their main concerns—as mentioned earlier—was their lack of confidence in personally grasping the core contents of the resources and accepting the interpretations of their teammates. Other students expressed their deep satisfaction with the incorporation of CLIS into *Critical Methodologies*. In particular, they enjoyed the camaraderie that was fostered in their teams, the relaxed atmosphere in which they could analyse the resources at their own pace, and the peer-to-peer learning during CLIS sessions that helped affirm and clarify their understanding of the material. According to Carvalho and Santos (2022), peer learning helps to enhance collaborative skills and metacognitive awareness, particularly to the mentors, as it requires them to recall and use skills of learning to master competence.

The first of what I consider as two major assessment tasks in the Unit was the team-based 'Change It!' Team Video Essay, a project meant to train students to critically appreciate and appraise media texts, and to analyse and interpret these texts using relevant theoretical feminist and queer concepts. As the media both reflects and constructs reality through imagery (visual representation) and rhetoric (speech representation), they frequently create and promote stereotypes that exacerbate marginality and vulnerability (for instance, Gooch, 2010). Yet, while the media can act as 'sites of oppression' (Yee, 2009, p. 53), they are also avenues for resistance and counter-speech. As part of the assessment task, students were required to watch and reflect on the 'My Transgender Life' documentary.

Each team was then tasked to choose some 'thick' narratives of one out of seven transgender people who appeared in the documentary, and to analyse and interpret these narratives using key concepts from two book chapters that featured storytelling and lived experiences from feminist and queer perspectives. I did not receive any negative feedback from students for the Team Video Essay in terms of the content of the documentary, fulfilling the requirements of the assessment task or collaborating with

each other. In fact, a few students casually remarked to me that they enjoyed the experience of learning about transgender lives. They also expressed their delight in being able to apply key aspects of feminist and queer modes of enquiry to the narratives they had collectively chosen without much difficulty.

The second major assessment task, the Research Proposal, served as the pinnacle of student evaluation for this Unit. After having studied numerous topics of feminist and queer theory and methodology throughout the semester, students were tasked to demonstrate their individual and collective grasp of these topics, and how they could be applied to actual action research. Students were instructed to come together mini-teams of two or three and select a current issue involving marginalised or vulnerable groups from a specific political and socio-cultural context that could make for a good Research Proposal. At every stage of their Research Proposal, they needed to consider and integrate these topics, namely storytelling, lived experiences, ethics, insider/outsider positions and self-reflexivity. Students were also required to strategise on how the eventual research findings could be effectively and practically communicated and disseminated.

Students eventually submitted a spectrum of Research Proposals with titles such as 'Social Challenges: Same-Sex Couples in a Heteronormative Society', 'Child Marriages and Their Implications on Human Rights of Girls in Malaysia', 'What Instigates Acid Attacks in Pakistan, and How Prevalent Are They?', 'Queering Identities of Muslim Hijras: Practising and Negotiating Religiosity in Masjids', 'Queering the Veil: Transgender Women's Navigation of the Hijab in the Indonesian Context', 'De/reconstructing "Asian Values" through Narratives of Muslim Trans Women and Act of Veiling', 'Experiences of Malaysian Women Within Same-Sex Relations: Significance of Sexual Health Knowledge', 'Mental Health Issues within LGB Individuals in Malaysia', 'Stigmatisation of Transgender Individuals in their Professional Careers or Workplace in the United States', and 'The Role of Religiosity in Female Labour Participation in the Maldives'. All the Research Proposals were replete with feminist and queer theories and methodologies.

For both the 'Change It!' Team Video Essay and Research Proposal, just as I was eager for them to gain mastery of feminist and queer theories and methodologies and their application to real-world affairs, I was also keen on helping students develop the skills of team work. As I had given permission for students to choose the composition of their own teams, it

did not come as a surprise that none of them reported any collaborative conflicts. Students spoke briefly of the enjoyment and trust that came from working with peers who were existing friends or who became friends during CLIS sessions.

For CLIS Session 2, teams were asked to discuss two academic readings on the topic of research ethics and researchers' insider/outsider positions from feminist and queer perspectives in Week 9. This discussion was intended to prepare students to design Research Proposals on real-life issues involving marginalised and vulnerable communities, which in turn served to appraise their ability to grasp and integrate the numerous topics in feminist and queer theories and methodologies for action research. When I spoke to students at the end of the semester, I learned that CLIS Session 2 was unfortunately not as enriching an experience for them as CLIS Session 1. Reading up on and discussing two journal articles for a Research Proposal did not seem to speak to them as effectively as watching a documentary and analysing it via critical theories. While the lack of appeal in CLIS Session 2 may have been due to students' struggles in fulfilling a more academically challenging task in the form of designing a Research Proposal, it may have proven helpful to include a media-based element to accompany the scholarly readings, such as a footage documentary depicting the experiences of a researcher in fieldwork or a short video portraying the lived experiences of a marginalised or vulnerable group.

Towards the close of the semester, the two-hour session 'In-Class Brainstorming Session' and one-hour session 'Workplace' in Weeks 11 and 12 respectively provided an opportunity for students to amend and/or refine their Research Proposals through peer-to-peer and lecturer feedback. As such, a substantial degree of autonomy was accorded to students for independent learning without relinquishing my role as mentor and guide in my students' undergraduate journey.

Conclusion

Based on my experiences of deploying CLIS as a form of ALA, I wish to highlight some practical considerations for ALA learning projects. First, pedagogical designs and implementations of ALA learning projects must emphasise a socially conducive environment for learning. In the absence of a safe space for expressing, discussing and debating personal ideas that enables students to become cognisant of their roles as active instead of

passive learners, students will find it challenging to hone the skills of critical thinking, personal confidence, mutual respect and mutual learning in and beyond the classroom. It is important to bear in mind that the creation of a safe space is an ongoing process that may oscillate between an increase and a decrease in the level of camaraderie and social ease during learning activities. However, what is vital is that students are aware of, and encouraged to play an active role themselves in pursuing this safe space.

Second, the linking of learning activities to assessment tasks is an effective strategy to promote a greater sense of commitment among students to the learning process in ALA. While it may seem like a disingenuous act of 'dangling a carrot' in front of students, experience shows that this strategy actually acts as a powerful incentive that can encourage students to develop a deeper appreciation of, and commitment to their learning efforts.

Third, although the goal of ALA is to instil a sense of independent and interdependent learning among students by training them in critical reflection, appraisal, investigation and communication (Fink, 2013), it does not abrogate the role of the lecturer in providing gentle—as opposed to heavy-handed—mentoring and guidance to students. Fourth, the incorporation of various forms of audio-visual media in ALA activities is indispensable as it acts as an additional tool to prompt students in the analysis and (co-)production of knowledge.

CLIS has shown itself to hold great potential in being developed as a viable strategy of 'student-centred learning [which] is characterised by active learning techniques that push students to be responsible participants in their own education' (Machemer & Crawford, 2007, p. 10). CLIS also creates an environment that supports the CoI framework in that it fosters the elements of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence for more holistic learning. Through the learning activities and assessment tasks that are infused with elements of CLIS, and aided and mentored by the lecturer, students are trained to take charge of their own undergraduate journey. More importantly, CLIS prepares students to embrace, participate in, and transform the world in which they live.

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