CRITICAL CHALLENGE QUESTION:

"Using mobile devices and their affordances, is it possible to establish and maintain a strong sense of community, student and teacher connection, and active participation for K - Gr. 6 students in a distance learning environment?"

My guiding question addresses the OLTD 508 Critical Challenge Question:

"In what ways can mobile learning and technologies be utilized so as to benefit students and teachers, both in and out of the classroom?"

- To determine a sound answer for my guiding question, I will be sharing examples of activities and practices that I implement and provide for my online students (some of which have been introduced to me during my OLTD coursework studies).

- I will also be sharing research evidence of various aspects of my guiding question, as well as reflecting and sharing my experience using different tools and platforms, to increase student connectivity, sense of community, and active participation in a distance learning environment.

For this assignment I will be presenting tools, applications and website platforms that are accessible through mobile devices to explore how this process can address my guiding question.

I will also be sharing experiences and observations from my own teaching practice that will hopefully address and help answer my guiding question.

I will be focusing on the usage of tablets/iPads and cell phones as the primary mobile devices that my students and parents use. I will be discussing and considering their affordances (i.e. built in camera, voice recording feature, capability for recording videos, accessibility to different learning apps etc.) to determine whether they can be used effectively to promote connectivity, participation and a strong sense of community development.

Background information

 I currently teach forty students in Kindergarten through Grade 6, in a strictly online distance learning environment. My teaching role is rather that of a resource facilitator and learning liaison. Through collaboration and consultation with parents a student learning plan is established for students.

Parents work directly with their children as their main "teacher". It is my job to monitor student learning, provide any assistance if it is needed, and assess student progress through review of student work samples and formal assessments. My role as a distance learning educator is different from what it would look like in a traditional classroom setting. This is the lens through which I will be conducting my research and presenting my findings.

By completing this inquiry project I hope to find ideas, strategies and evidence that help answer my guiding question, are relevant and purposeful for me, and can be put into action immediately. I will be collecting and presenting findings that are appropriate for me and my current teaching capacity, and that reflect how mobile devices and their affordances can best be used by students, parents and myself within my homeroom at EBUS Academy.

It is important to note that most of my correspondence with students is filtered through their parents or involves having parents nearby as overseers. Any email feedback on student work or dialogue with my K - Gr. 6 students goes through their parents first.

Parents share my feedback with their child, which traditionally up to this point, has always been in the form of typed comments in emails and through grading in Moodle.

For some of my older students in grades 5 and 6, "typed" messaging from me directly to the student takes place using our LMS Moodle platform and grading system.

When students register in our Elementary program, the requirement that students and parents must have access to a PC and or mobile device is clearly stated during the initial intake process. This ensures that students can fully participate and are set up for success in our distance learning elementary education program and course delivery.

Mobile devices such as tablets, iPads, and cell phones are becoming increasingly more common in the hands of our elementary students. At EBUS Academy Kindergarten students can opt to be a part of our iPad loan out program. Kindergarten students are assigned a gently used, refurbished or new iPad for their personal use, for the duration of their time spent with us.

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At EBUS as part of our Elementary program, we offer a multitude of different websites and subscriptions to our students which can be accessed through a personal computer, laptop, or mobile device. The apps for these websites allow for the portability and mobility of student learning. For the purpose of this assignment, I will be focusing on a few of my favorite apps and platforms used with mobile devices, that I believe truly do foster connections, a sense of community, and active participation amongst my students.
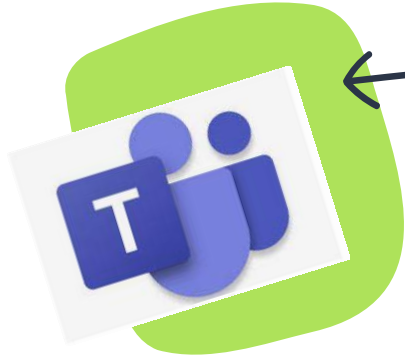
There is an inordinate amount of tools and applications available to parents and students through mobile devices. I will be selecting a few of my favorite tools and platforms I currently use, that I have found to be very effective in establishing a sense of community with my students, increasing connections between students and that increase levels of student participation.
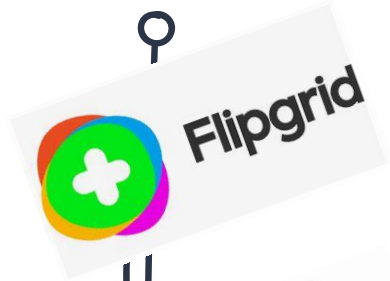
The platforms and tools I will be focusing on for this assignment include my use of: Flipgrid, Padlet, Blackboard Collaborate, Google Forms, Microsoft Teams, and Microsoft Voice Recorder, Bitmojis, and Kahoot with my students in K through Gr. 6.
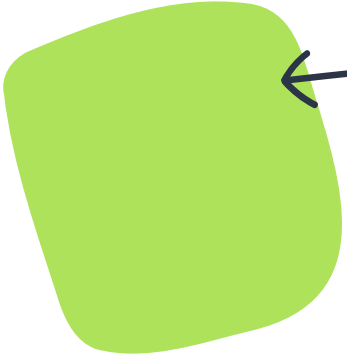
Some research

Relevant Articles to Answer My Question

One article I discovered that illustrates the importance of connections and community and made me reflect on how mobile devices and their affordances can be used to achieve this, is Xavier Aubron's article titled "How To Use Social Learning in eLearning".

In his article Aubron presents the 70:20:10 Learning Model. Although the 70:20:10 Learning Model is used often in the business world, I feel it can also apply to distance learning environments for elementary students. This model states that 70% of what we learn comes from observing others, 20% of learning results from interacting with others and that only 10% of learning is derived from more traditional learning practices. Aubron states the idea that social learning is the "natural way to learn". (Gutenberg Technology, 2018)

This 70:20:10 learning model supports the idea that as many opportunities should be provided for students to interact with and connect socially to promote optimal learning. Using mobile devices and their affordances to offer learning activities where students can observe other students or experts in their field is key. Social learning is learning from and with others.

Aubron states there are four ways to recreate social interactions in distance learning (which I feel ideally lead to connectivity and an increase in active participation among students). The four guidelines include: providing opportunities for the learners to express themselves, letting students compete with their peers, arranging for interactive Q&A sessions, and last allowing learners to have group discussions.

Aubron's suggestions are practices that I offer my online students and are integrated through their use of mobile device tools and applications. Using FlipGrid, Padlet, and hosting Vclasses for my homeroom students using Blackboard Collaborate are mediums through which I regularly practice/implement Aubron's guidelines of recreating social interactions in my distance learning environment.

Using the Blackboard Collaborate app to access my Vclasses, students can actively participate, connect with each other, and contribute in different ways that exemplify Aubron's guidelines. They can take verbally share their thoughts and ideas by taking the mic, writing comments in the chat window, choosing and using emojis (i.e. clap, smiley face etc.) for connecting with their peers, and take part in Q&A sessions or break out into break rooms for smaller group discussions.

(*See Blackboard Mobile App Help Info by clicking on icon*.)

In the article titled "Can Mobile Devices Transform Education?" (Allen, 2011), Rick Allen states that in a pilot project study conducted at Dixon and Southwest High School for algebra students who were given smartphones to use for their learning, anecdotal evidence shows students reported increased communication with teachers and peers, were more engaged in their learning, and used their devices to consult with other students to share tips, solve problems and clarify understanding of concepts with the teacher.

Allen's summary supports that mobile devices and their affordances do in fact result in a stronger sense of student to student connection and student to teacher connection.
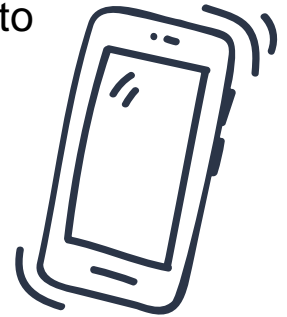
Hew and Cheung (2007) conducted a study to examine which facilitation techniques used by facilitators to attract students to take part in asynchronous online discussions were most effective. The facilitator techniques included the following: giving own opinions or experiences; questioning; showing appreciation; establishing ground rules; suggesting new direction; personally inviting people to contribute and last summarizing. They found that facilitators should be aware of three critical phases of facilitating online discussion: the Introduction phase, the Engagement phase and the Monitoring phase.

Hew and Cheung found that setting ground rules and welcoming students during the Introduction phase are not sufficient to attract students to continue to participate in a discussion thread. They stressed that facilitators should continually monitor student discussion threads to ensure discussions are on topic and summarize to help other students keep track of the discussion. They further state that facilitators who provide personal opinions and questioning, are effective and result in an increase of overall student participation.

Hew and Cheung's findings are meaningful to me, as I try to find answers in how to increase participation for my online students. In recently inviting my students to get to meet their peers in an October FlipGrid challenge, I recognize the need for providing questions and opinions to the individual student video posts to help expand the thread of discussion and maintain optimum and continued active participation. I also have realized that students need to do this as well to the video posts of their peers. This is an area I will continue to work on, as I ultimately would like to see 100% participation from my class of forty students.

Flipgrid as a connection building tool/app

Flipgrid is an application that my students can actively use and participate in with my monthly Fraser Flipgrid challenges. It involves and encompasses many of Hew and Cheung's facilitator techniques. I'm also sharing this example to reveal the level of student participation after being open to my families for one week. 10 out of 40 students participated in my initial Flipgrid challenge (the first one of the year) which was disappointingly only 40% participation. I'm hoping that by leaving this block open and extending gentle reminders to my families (through emails, accessed on mobile devices) that the number of students participating, will increase closer to 100%.

Fraser FlipGrid Club
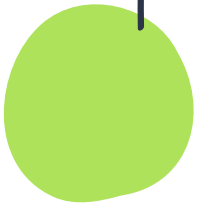
Fraser FlipGrid Club 2020

Welcome to this year's **Fraser FlipGrid Club**

We will be doing a FlipGrid Challenge (video sharing) every month! This is a safe place where you can meet other students in the class, share ideas, and get to know each other a bit more. We've got a big class this year full of 40 kids in Kindergarten all the way up to Gr. 6!

Click on the FlipGrid link/button below. Enter your **FlipGrid password** -(refer to your EBUS Subscriptions Passwords list or ask me). Then start your recording.

October FlipGrid Challenge

If you are using your phone or iPad, you'll need to download the free Flipgrid app, and enter the **Flip Code:**
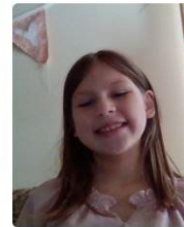
As part of my inquiry I was curious what professional reviewers might be saying about using Flipgrid as a teaching tool for connecting students and building community. According to Common Sense Education media specialist/librarian Melissa Powers (2018), "when used purposefully, Flipgrid is an engaging way for teachers to foster discussion and collaboration in a space that feels like the best parts of social media discussion without the free-for-all feeling of Facebook or Twitter".

Powers states that Flipgird offers a worthy, flexible venue for teachers and students to communicate. She adds that through this tool, students can learn to articulate their ideas with well-planned responses and consider alternate viewpoints as they listen to their peers' responses.

On a cautionary note however, Powers indicates that some of SM (social media) style features of Flipgrid, do have the potential to distract students from the purpose of the assignment (i.e. frames, emoji's, special effects etc.). Power's "bottom line" however, is that she feels Flipgrid is a simple way for students and teachers to create online discussions, as long as one's classroom composition is responsible and considerate in its use.

Flipgrid is something that is relatively new for me and something that I only began using with my online class last year. From what I am finding, it seems like there is an initial sense of enthusiasm by a select number of students, to share their videos and comment on other student posts.

Using the mobile app of Flipgrid as a tool for making connections and establishing a strong sense of community in my homeroom, is still a work in progress in terms of determining its overall effectiveness. I feel that through time, and repeated exposure, increased usage with the app and "buy-in" from parents, I will see greater overall student participation and interaction with one another.
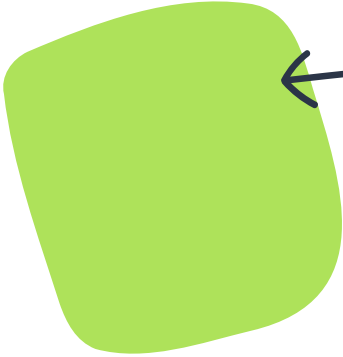
MORE RESEARCH

Relevant Articles to Answer My Question

Sergiy Movchan (2018) states that in the absence of meaningful interaction with the instructor, learners can get disoriented and may feel disconnected. This makes students unmotivated and causes students to start losing interest in course learning.

Movchan suggests a number of proven ways to establish personal connections with your students in an online learning environment. These include: Introducing yourself, humanizing your course (making it more interactive), leveraging online discussions, enrich multimedia with personalization (i.e. providing podcasts, interactive games, youTube videos etc. for different learning styles etc.), creating cooperative learning opportunities, creating a choice option (ie. allowing students to be part of the decision-making process), enabling interactive communication to develop a sense of connectedness, and last finding your student reward.

Many of Movchan's suggestions are reflected in the activities I offer to my students through Padlet share outs, VClasses and Flipgrid challenges with video uploads. In all of these activities, I introduce myself first and what I'm all about, then extend the invitation to my students to communicate and connect with their peers. For future Vclasses I will be including competitive and cooperatives games based on student interest and choice. I also provide student choice by offering a range of diverse optional and mandatory learning activities in my monthly activities for my students.

"Humanizing" my feedback to students is something I continue to be tweaking. Traditionally I have sent email or typed feedback to my students and their parents. Providing feedback in audio form and on special occasions/for more in-depth projects video feedback, is something I am currently learning about (through Microsoft Voice Recording) and Moodle inserts of audio recordings. Having been on the receiving end of video and audio feedback through my OLTD coursework, I feel it is something that would truly benefit student-teacher connection and relations. Adding the audio and video component to feedback, makes feedback so more personalized and meaningful - hearing the voice matching the comments.

My thoughts and connections

My experience with padlet

padlet

Maggie Fraser ✦ 8 · 5mo

What Was One Fun Thing You Did, or Good Memory You Have From The Past 3 Weeks?
Include a photo, or a learning sample, and a brief comment. I can't wait to see what you share!

Maggie Fraser 7mo

Hi Families,

Hoping we can start things out in a fun way, fresh back (almost) from Spring Break and after being home with each other – by sharing something fun you did (either on your own, or with somebody else, or as a small group/family) or something that is special to you. Please share and post! I can't wait to see!

♥ 2

2 comments

Anonymous 6mo
I like your cartoon! -Addy

Anonymous 6mo

Maggie Fraser 7mo

What I Did Over The Break

I went for a walk across a frozen and snow covered lake with my best friend - staying 2 meters apart. I also saw my daughter's beautiful cat named Sushi. To keep me busy, I finished a 500 piece puzzle and did a couple projects for my University Online Teaching coursework. Oh, and I did a teeny bit of house cleaning.

♥ 2

4 comments

Anonymous 7mo
Awwww what a cute cat!

Anonymous 6mo

Is making a social distancing YouTube video possible? - Bradaigh Bridger-Taft

As a matter of fact it is. My friend and I went on a bike ride and vlogged basically the whole thing! It sounds hard to socially distance and record the video at the same time. But really it wasn't! We wore masks and stayed 2 meters apart at all times. We rode our bikes up a mountain and we took breaks and recorded for about three minutes at each stop. Eventually we got to the top of the mountain and filmed the beautiful lake view. The best part about the adventure was going down the long road looking at the mountains and the lake. That was my fun experience from the last three weeks!

padlet
& Student Collaboration

26

Humanizing emails and messaging

I do also try to personalize my emails to promote connection with my students by including appropriate Bitmojis of myself. My students seem to appreciate and have let me know that they enjoy when I do this. I also regularly include my teaching mascot "Snoopy" into all of my weekly announcements, "Thank-you" ecards I send out, and within my Moodle Fraser Homeroom.

Students quickly identify that Snoopy is my hero and are entertained by this. Mobile devices can of course be used to access Moodle our LMS for our elementary students, to snap pictures and videos and to share them for our sharing activities and challenges.

Meet Your Teacher

MAGGIE FRASER

Getting to know me, and getting to know my students

A bit more research

To Help Answer My Guiding Question

Dani Kennis (2020) insists that personalizing communication with students is essential for building community and connecting during distance learning. As a Special Ed. Social Studies highschool teacher and teacher leader, she advocates using Bitmoji's in her communications and correspondence with her students (i.e. within slide show presentations and emails etc.). As indicated previously, this is a practice I currently do for my students.

Kennis (2020) also suggests using a Google Form to check in with her students, so that they feel they have "a say" in the decision-making process and in the planning and delivery of her teaching.

I have used Google forms in the past at the end of the year to conduct a parent satisfaction survey. Sending a survey to my students (instead of the parents) to fill out, is something I intend to be doing soon, now that the "busyness" of September Back to School start-up has slowed down a bit. I feel this will be a valuable tool for me to use, to increase my connections with my students. Surveying my students will give them an opportunity to exercise their voice, to feel listened to and appreciated, will invite future dialogue and assist me in planning engaging activities based on their feedback.

A student satisfaction survey

Here's a sample of a Student Satisfaction Survey that I would like to begin using with my students as soon as possible.

Students in K – Gr. 3 or those students on IEPs may need extra assistance/supervision completing the survey.

Click on the image to view entire survey.

Student Satisfaction Survey #1

Please take a moment to fill in this short survey, to let me know how you are liking things so far and to share ideas on how we can make our year together in Fraser Homeroom even better!
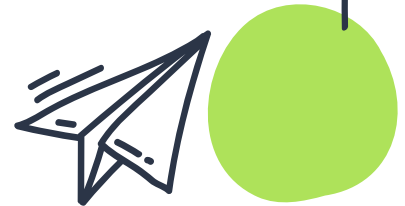7 questions - Thanks for your input!

* Required

1) How often would you like me to "check-in" with you for a Teams Video Chat? *

○ Once a week

○ Every couple of weeks

○ Once a month

○ Only when you need help, or when you send me an email asking for a Check In

○ Randomly once in awhile, and by surprise (just because)

And some more research

To Help Answer My Guiding Question

Katie Martin (VP of Professional Learning at Altitude Learning) (2020) stresses the importance of 10 things that are crucial for connecting with learners in distance learning to intentionally get to know them, understand how to best serve them, and help students feel connected to their learning community. She recommends the following:

- Conducting virtual family meetings for a personal touch that sets students up for success;
- Having one on one or small group check-ins (empathy interviews),
- Providing opportunities for students to share their profile (i.e. strengths, challenges and goals etc.),
- Inviting the co-creation of community guidelines (i.e. including students in deciding how they would like to be treated and how to treat their peers),
- Establishing classroom jobs (i.e. managing the chat during Vclasses etc.),
- Creating and practicing routines,
- Having morning meetings or sending out a morning message,
- Creating message/discussion boards where students can chat and share what they are learning/doing,
- Incorporating learning circles or collaborative groups involving a common thread or theme (i.e. Vclasses and breakout rooms etc.).

Martin (2020) states "Relationships are foundational to learning and what makes school so special. The teacher plays a pivotal role in connecting with individual students and their families, while also creating the community where students develop relationships with one another. This connection to one another and the community is more important than ever for our social emotional well being and academic growth."

As the role of the educator evolves, human connection and guidance will become increasingly more- not less- important.

Katie Martin
Learner-Centered Innovation

Using Microsoft teams for video conferences

This year I decided to use Microsoft Teams to connect with my families and students instead of phone calls, for my September Welcome to EBUS start up parent teacher meetings. It worked for all but one of my families. Parents and students were instructed how to download and install the app onto their mobile devices in advance of the meeting and were reminded with a calendar notification.

I found these meetings where participants could see each other throughout the entire conversation as well as be able to share screens, was incredibly rewarding and satisfying - much more than our traditional way of connecting with families via phone calls. I have since been using these video conferences for regular check-ins and when parents/students are requesting extra support. I intend to learn more about hosting a group Teams meeting for my class in the future, as Zoom is not permitted in our school district.

Keeping humans connected behind video screens

Additional strategies that I discovered through researching my guiding question include Edutopia's video titled "Keeping Students Engaged in Digital Learning" (2020), which reminds online teachers to make time for small group work and relationship-building activities to foster a sense of belonging and community among students.

This will keep the humans behind the texts or video screens connected. The info video recommends participating in discussion threads, offering guidance and encouragement regularly, and building in polls.
Click on the image to view entire video.

KEEPING STUDENTS **ENGAGED** IN VIRTUAL SETTINGS

- Mobile devices can foster a strong sense of community in terms of teacher's employing best practices that promote student retention.

- For example taking advantage of and regular using of their audio/video recording capacities for Facetime and Teams chats (scheduled and impromptu visits and check-ins)

- Students are able to upload work samples and receive teacher feedback through email or messaging format with estickers and emojis etc.

- Teachers replying to email help requests in a timely fashion

More recent research

Answering My Guiding Question

As Daniel Kim states in his 2020 Sendbird article "online communities can help to promote student retention by allowing relationships to form between participants, motivating them to keep returning".

Kim's statement resonates strongly with me. I have been teaching at EBUS for six years now and have experienced the privilege and joy of teaching many of my students for five or more consecutive years. Seeing and working with my students as they grow and develop, from when they were in Kindergarten to when they move to the Middle Years Program in Gr. 7, is a truly special and unique experience. In establishing and fostering a strong sense of EBUS community spirit and Fraser Homeroom connectivity with my students over the years, my student retention continues to remain high. These social learning activities and opportunities for my students are of course not delivered F2F (with the exception of field trips to meet our students across the province) but rather virtually, through mediums and platforms accessible to all students, using mobile devices and their many affordances.

Kim (2020) states that "successful online learning communities are reliant on the active participation of their members. For those looking to build one, the crux is providing the right tools to empower students to easily collaborate and learn socially. These tools are the very tools, applications and affordances that mobile devices indeed provide.

Kim (2020) suggests ways that teachers can facilitate learning through online community (which can of course be easily accomplished through mobile learning and their affordances). He mentions the following ways to promote community: including discussion forums, using group and one to one chat functions, hosting interactive video lessons, facilitating virtual breakout groups, ensuring a safe environment, and leveraging gamification.

Kim's suggestions of facilitating a sense of online community can easily be implemented (as mentioned earlier) through mobile devices being used by students to access virtual classrooms (Vclasses) hosted through Blackboard Collaborate or through Microsoft Teams - Google Classroom (as discussed earlier).

Gamification for connecting

- As Kim mentions, leveraging gamification is one area that I would like to improve upon within my Vclass delivery and with students use of their mobile devices. I am very eager to begin using more gamification for my homeroom students – particularly trying out Kahoot. I only used Kahoot as a participant on a few occassions. It is one of my goals to begin incorporating Kahoot into my Vclasses and group meetings as a host.

- I feel Kahoot is a great way to establish a bit of competition and/or cooperation if students are set up in teams. It has potential to bring my students together and result in students getting to know each other better in a fun, games-based way.

- Depending on the nature of the content I would likely choose to host a Primary (K - Gr. 2) Kahoot and a separate Intermediate (Gr. 3 - 6) Kahoot to set the stage for success and comfort level using this platform.

Click on the image below to watch a short intro video about the benefits and simplicity of Kahoot and how it can be used in the classroom.

KAHOOT

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through my research and reflecting on my current teaching practices using mobile devices with students, I feel I was able to answer my guiding question:

"Through the use of mobile devices and their affordances, is it possible to establish and maintain a strong sense of community, student and teacher connection, and active participation for K - Gr. 6 students in a distance learning environment?"

I conclude the answer is yes, a sense of community, student and teacher connection, and active participation for K - Gr. 6 students can result from regular, purposeful and well-planned activities using mobile devices and their affordances.

- I learned that practices I am currently using support research based and opinion-based findings of activities and suggestions, that have been proven to promote community, connection, and participation with learners. Because this assignment was considered to be a "small scale" inquiry due to a limited period of time to conduct research, investigate, observe patterns and collect data etc., I feel there is still room for continued exploration and validation of more first-hand experiential results.

- I feel that through continued and more regular use of incorporating Flipgrid challenges, Padlet student sharing opportunities, student satisfaction surveys, audio feedback files, individual and family Teams video chat check-ins, small group and whole class Vclasses or Check-in meetings my critical challenge question could be answered more completely. Having only just begun using these platforms, I am still essentially still in the process of discovering the mobile device affordances' true potential.

CONCLUSION CONTINUED

- Some things that should be taken into consideration in terms of how accurately my own teaching observations provided answers to my guiding question are the following limitations: having a homeroom that spans seven grades; having students on individual learning plans who each have unique strengths, needs and interests; understanding that families have differing schedules; acknowledging that formal assessments for students were taking place during this study; and appreciating that many families and students at the time of this inquiry were presented with an onslaught of information as they transitioned into online learning.

- Using mobile learning devices and their affordances can help establish a strong sense of community, connectedness and active participation with online distance learners in a K - Gr. 6 classroom. Determining the actual degree of effectiveness of mobile devices and their affordances achieving this for students, would require a longer study, with a greater number of opportunities for students to demonstrate evidence of these outcomes, and more in-depth data collection (i.e. through surveys, anecdotal observations, percentage of class participation per activity etc.).

CONCLUSION CONTINUED

- I felt this inquiry was valuable for me, in that it confirmed using mobile devices and their affordances does promote, establish and maintain community, connectivity, and participation for students.

- My research and self-study/retrospection validated that I do provide a variety of learning opportunities and employ mobile devices for multiple purposes in my practice, for these outcomes to occur.

- It has inspired me to continue to offer purposeful activities that can be accessed and utilized through mobile devices, and to add to that repertoire as needed (dependent on student engagement and voluntary participation) for years to come.
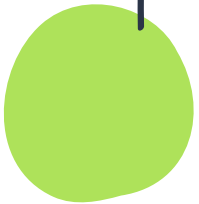
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Kahoot (calvertlibrary.libnet.info)
Common Sense Media (Wikipedia en.wikipedia.org)
Flipgrid (flipgrid.com)
Katie Martin images (Learner-Centered Innovations)
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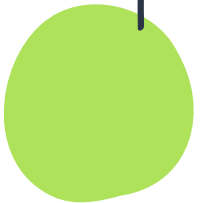
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