THERE'S NO 'I' IN TEAMS

Creating community in the (online) classroom

Pierre Botcherby

PhD Candidate & GTA Tutor, History Dept.
Administrative Assistant, Warwick Oral History Network
Student Experience Intern, Warwick Arts Faculty
Correspondence: p.botcherby@warwick.ac.uk

Pierre Botcherby is a PhD candidate in the University of Warwick's history department. His thesis studies de-industrialisation and (post-industrial) regeneration's impact on community via a case study of St. Helens (Merseyside). He is also Administrative Assistant for the Warwick Oral History Network. Pierre has been a seminar tutor for 3 years, holds Associate Fellow status of Advance HE, and has been a strong advocate of undergraduate research. He and PTC team-mate Liz are responsible for the project's website, Moodle, and social media. *Editor's note: Pierre has a regrettable propensity for terrible jokes and should not have been encouraged to use what barely qualifies as a pun in the title of this article.*

Abstract

This short reflection is about community-building in the classroom. It draws on personal experiences of Microsoft Teams from the last twelve months or so, and makes some suggestions for why community-building doesn't always work as well as desired. I don't propose hard-and-fast rules or specific 'do's' and 'dont's' but, hopefully, some light food-for-thought and reassurance for tutors who've been suffering connection issues whilst teaching online.

Keywords: community; choice; remote learning; Microsoft Teams; Warwick University

There's No 'I' in Teams

I have community on the brain. This is hardly surprising as I wrap up an 80,000 word thesis the main theme of which is community. It's also a concept which has been much-evoked during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in Britain's spring 2020 lockdown when the 'clap for carers' and the mushrooming of neighbourhood support groups were seen to revive old notions of community spirit (**Marr, 2020**). It has also been a recurring concern as academia and education have grappled
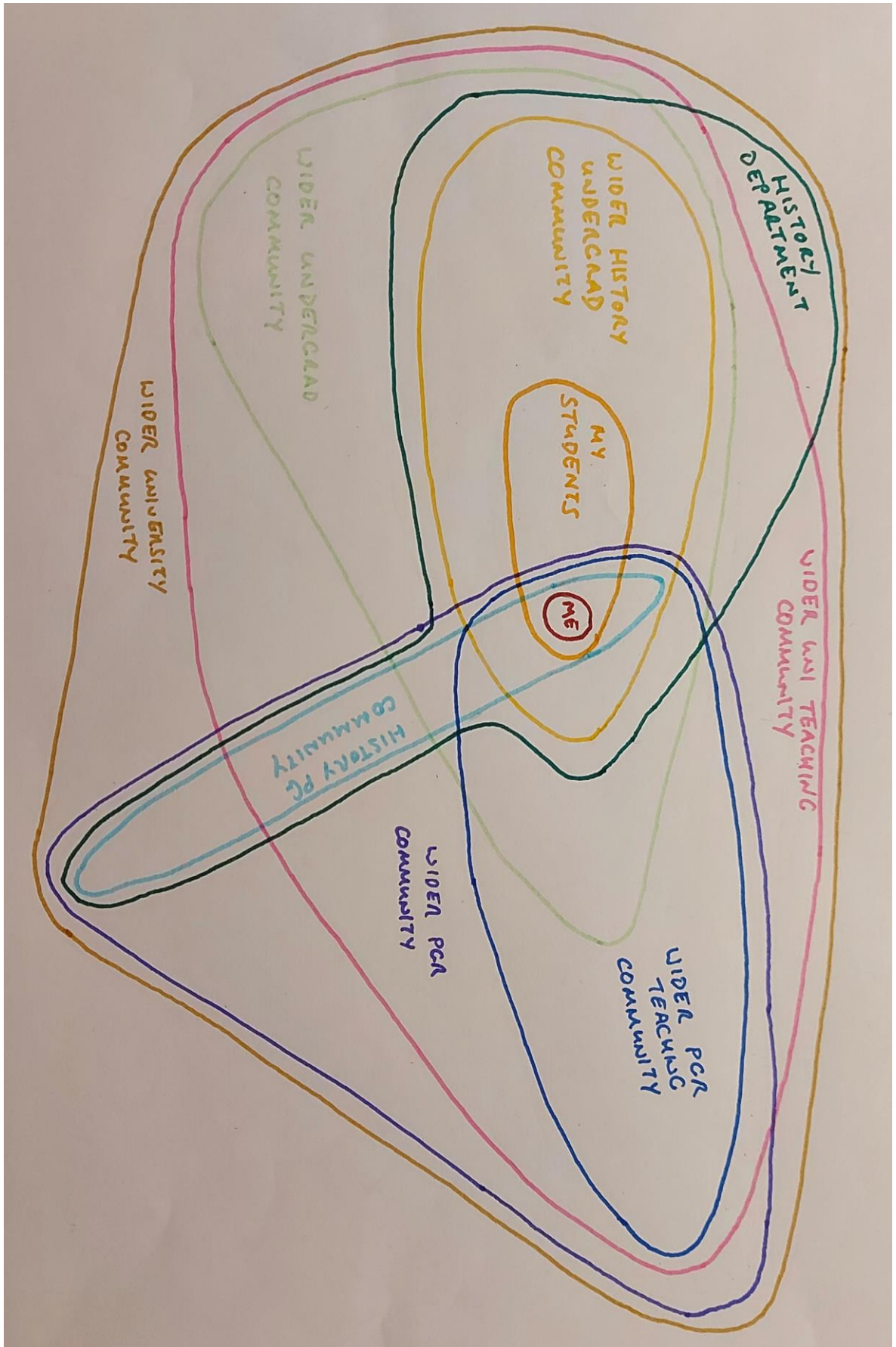
*Fig.1. T*he over-lapping communities at a university (drawn by the author).

with the challenges of remote learning (**Batty & Hall, 2020**) – specifically, the challenge of how to create and ensure community in the online classroom.

I never worried about 'creating community' pre-pandemic: milling around the corridor before class, seeing people in the flesh, chatting to stragglers on the way out, bumping into people in the coffee shop… community just seemed to happen. Working with students and with PGRs and staff who love teaching is my favourite aspect of my PhD, I love being part of that community. And when I stop to think about it, that community was not just some random groups of students and a handful of colleagues but multiple, complex, over-lapping communities (**Figure 1**).

Belonging to a community doesn't mean your sense of attachment (or even your awareness of it) is consistent. For instance, your sense of community with your students is likely to be stronger within the classroom during the timetabled session than outside of it. But the time in the classroom is a point of attachment or connection that you draw on if you run into them in the corridor or the cafe. Likewise, you may only be faintly aware of PGR tutors in other departments unless you choose to follow an interdisciplinary training course like APP PGR – but the shared experiences and status as a PGR tutor give you a point of attachment or connection to your coursemates and offer potential bases for community formation.

Take all these away and stick a computer screen and miles of not-always-well-behaved internet between everyone, and it's easy to start missing the connection of these communities you quite possibly – as I did – took for granted. As a tutor, you still meet your students each week for an online class but it's not the same. You can't oblige cameras to be on (for various reasons, including but not limited to: connection and camera quality issues, students' personal preferences, a student not wanting you to see where they are working from) so you often don't get to see

them; I'm not sure how many of my students from this year I would recognise unless they shouted me from behind. You lose seeing them arrive and leave: who's always early or late, who can't wait to leave and who's hanging on your every word, who sits with who… During the class, you lose the visual cues and reactions which often tell you more than their verbal answers about what they think of the class, of each other, of you… (**Naughton, 2020**). All these little quirks that help you and the students get to know one another, the imperceptible shared experiences which create a sense of belonging, togetherness – community – in the classroom, are very hard to replicate online.

One reason it's hard is because it's less natural online. Consciously or unconsciously missing our in-person communities, desirous to give our students a good teaching experience and a sense of belonging despite the distance, we've been trying to forge – force – a tangible version of something that was in many ways intangible. Based on my experiences this year judging the Warwick Awards for Teaching Excellence (WATE), it is possible to forge community online. For some tutors, having to think on their feet has unleashed a creative side they may have been less inclined to explore if community had kept just happening (**Warwick University, 2020**). Chapeau to those tutors because, from my experiences with my seminar group, it isn't easy.

I'm a History PhD candidate so I teach History. This year I was teaching Britain in the Twentieth Century, one of several seminar tutors working under a module convenor who set the syllabus (lectures, readings, essay questions, etc.). Teaching was initially going to be one-week-in-person-one-week-remote but quickly became entirely online. At Warwick, online teaching takes place on Microsoft Teams.

Teams wasn't new to me at the start of the academic year. I'd used it the previous summer term in my role as Project Officer for

the student-led research project 'Then & Now: Arts at Warwick'. In addition to Teams' basic functionalities, I'd seen its potential as a collaborative workspace capable of sustaining a sense of community amongst students, particularly in small groups. The community aspect of Then & Now's pivot online was mentioned in multiple participants' reflections on the project. I'd also seen Teams' drawbacks, including the general unfamiliarity with it, technical issues linked to internet speeds or audio and camera quality, and accessibility issues due to the different settings in which people found themselves working from 'home' (**Woods & Botcherby, 2021**).

With these experiences in mind, I wanted to ensure a sense of community amongst my seminar students. I felt this was particularly important as mine were first years who, due to social distancing restrictions, may not have met many people at the university – or may not even have bothered moving to the campus (**Conlon, Halterbeck, & Williams, 2020**). I employed various community-building tactics, which I deliberately kept simple. All were situated within Teams itself, rather than requiring other platforms which may have exacerbated existing accessibility or technical issues:

- Before the first seminar, I invited the students to introduce themselves by posting to the Teams channel. I asked them to say where they were from, why they chose the module, and suggest events/people/themes they thought would be particularly significant. This worked quite well, with 12 of 16 students engaging, and gave me a sense of who I had 'in front' of me (MS Teams, 2021).

- Each week, I posted the seminar questions and readings in the group's Teams channel. Students were asked to comment with a question based on the week's pre-recorded lecture or readings and a comment about something

they'd found interesting. In Term 1 this worked well, with 10 or 11 students replying each week; in Term 2 the figure was more like 7, with one week, coinciding with a coursework deadline, seeing only 3 (**Microsoft Teams, 2021**). This allowed students to contribute without speaking in front of the class, and enabled me to structure the seminar around what they needed or wanted. However, not all students contributed – some never did – and, despite my encouragement, students rarely interacted with one another's posts even when raising similar issues or themes. What I'd hoped would mimic a social media thread (albeit without the attendant vitriol!) was mostly a series of individual contributions.

- I also encouraged students to use Teams to post spontaneously about anything course-related they came across (books, films, TV series…) to encourage informal interactions in between classes and uncover mutual interests. Unfortunately, despite being a module not lacking in relevant popular culture, students only rarely posted and even when I tried to kick-start something it had little impact.

- When teaching in person, I regularly use small-group activities so I created sub-channels to recreate the small-group feel. I opted for sub-channels over breakout rooms because some Teams users cannot access breakout rooms, and I wanted the small groups to have a permanent space (the sub-channel 'Files' tab) to store their work. When used in class for small-group discussions or activities, these worked well – dropping in and out of their calls at random, discussions were usually vigorous and provided extra material I could use with the whole class. I also tried using these sub-channels to facilitate group-based seminar preparation. Although the groups

produced good work, for instance short presentations the slides from which could be retained in the Files tab for future reference, students commented in feedback at the end of Term 1 that this asynchronous preparation was onerous time-wise (on top of watching lectures and doing the readings) and that they struggled to find convenient times to schedule it, so I stopped (**History Department, 2020a**).

One explanation as to why my community creation was less successful than those I judged for WATE might just be that I'm not as good a tutor as they are, not as good as I think I am, not as good as I think my students think I am. I can't be the only tutor to have spent a lot of time this last year wondering if I've lost my touch?

Another is the students. Look at my different experiences with Then & Now and my students this year. The Then & Now participants, further advanced in their studies and more firmly integrated into the university community/communities, had met one another in person during the pre-pandemic phase of the project so had formed the basis of a community prior to the shift online. My seminar students, by contrast, were incoming first years who had possibly never met in person and were getting to grips with university life and learning amidst constantly changing rules and, with term barely underway, a new lockdown.

Putting my thesis hat – pretty tattered after nearly four years – back on, it could also be that artificial or forced community doesn't really work. There's a degree to which community formation – of any kind – relies on people buying into the idea. Scholars of nationalism talk about there being far more potential nations than actual nations because, unless enough people jump on the national bandwagon, it won't go anywhere. E.P. Thompson's seminal definition of social class hangs on a similar requirement of shared experiences and interests:

class happens when some men [sic], as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men [sic] whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs (**Thompson, 1966**)

In my experiences, good online community has formed when the people involved genuinely buy into it, when the community being formed is a community of *choice* rather than necessity (**Lawrence, 2019**). This isn't to say community can't be forged in necessity – history (including Covid-19) shows quite the opposite – but it still requires people to buy into it. Recent sociology suggests we increasingly prefer our communities chosen not given – and when we genuinely want to be part of something, we're more likely to buy into it (**Spencer & Pahl, 2006; Savage, 2010**). The Then & Now project, the Student Research Portfolio I've been managing as Arts Faculty Student Experience Intern, and this Warwick Postgraduate Teaching Community are all extra-curricular initiatives, participated in by choice, by people with a predisposition towards the idea, and with a flexibility and freedom to participate as much or as little as they want. Timetabled seminars, by contrast, are more communities of circumstance or necessity.

So, should we forget about using Teams to create community? No! A blended or hybrid model of learning, with larger classes such as lectures conducted remotely and smaller ones like seminars or tutorials in person, will be in place for the foreseeable. This means community-building can once again start more naturally through in-person sessions, rather than being forced from scratch, somewhat mitigating the chosen-versus-given conflict. If students feel belonging and togetherness in-person, platforms like Teams should prove able (as with Then & Now) to build on these intangible bases. Teams can be a one-stop shop for storing class materials, contacting students and conducting 'office hours' more informally,

posting queries and questions about class prep/coursework, undertaking asynchronous group activities, hosting Moodle spaces and Padlets and more... It could even allow students (or tutors!) unable to attend in person to follow/lead an in-person class remotely, a hybrid approach proposed by Warwick's History department for research seminars, and increasingly seen with academic conferences (**History Department, 2020b**).[i] This will hopefully extend and reinforce the sense of community generated within the classroom beyond the timetabled session. There's no 'I' in Teams, but there is one in community and, whatever the shortcomings of my own efforts this year, that is clearly the best place for it.

References

Batty, David, Hall, Rachel, 2020. 'No campus lectures and shut student bars: UK universities' £1bn struggle to move online', *The Observer*, 25.04.2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/25/degrees-of-separation-can-universities-adapt-in-the-rush-to-online-learning>, accessed: 24.08.2020

Conlon, Gavin, Halterbeck, Maike, Williams, Rhys, 2020. 'Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on university deferral rates and student switching', <https://londoneconomics.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/LE-UCU-Deferral-Analysis-20-05-2020-FINAL-ABB.pdf>, accessed: 19.06.2020

History Department, 2020a. Department of History Interim Module Feedback.

History Department, 2020b. 'A proposal for departmental seminars', received by email May 2020.

Lawrence, Jon, 2019. *Me Me Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford).

Marr, Andrew, 2020. *Elizabethans: How Modern Britain Was Forged*, (William Collins, London).

Microsoft Teams, 2020. Data collected from my seminar group's Teams channel.

Naughton, John, 2020. 'Working from home was the dream but is it turning into a nightmare?', *The Guardian*, 15.08.2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/15/working-from-home-was-the-dream-but-is-it-turning-into-a-nightmare>, accessed: 16.08.2020.

Savage, Mike, 2010. *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940: The Politics of Method*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford).

Spencer, Liz, Pahl, Ray, 2006. *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton).

Thompson, E.P., 1966. *The Making of the English Working Class*, (Vintage, New York).

Warwick University, 2020. 'Teaching excellence: showcase of award-winning teaching', <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/academic-development/promotingexcellence/excellence/>, accessed: 16.08.2020.

Woods, Kathryn, Botcherby, Pierre, 2021. '*Then & Now: Arts at Warwick* student project: co-creation in the Covid-19 crisis', *Exchanges*, 8:4, 55-75. See also: 'Then & Now: Arts at Warwick', <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/applyingtostudy/currentstudents/thenandnow/>, accessed: 14.08.2021.

---

[i] An example of an academic conference taking this hybrid approach is the 2021 European Labour History Network and Worlds of Related Coercions in Work joint conference, with roughly 1/3 of the 300 participants on site and 2/3 remote.

Journal of PGR Pedagogic Practice