

# **Adventures in International Collaboration: Facilitating Globally-Created Student-Generated Mobile Movies Using a Blend of Online Tools**

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## **Abstract**

The burgeoning of international connectivity has, in the last few short years, opened up new arenas of artistic collaboration. The next generation of filmmakers will certainly engage with an ever-greater degree of remote collaboration, as more teams work together on projects across the planet. There are now many choices of tools and platforms available to link the world through connected devices. How these tools are strategically employed can mean the difference between a smooth, successful collaboration and one that's fallen short of its potential for full member involvement. So...is there such thing as a perfect recipe for an engaging international collaboration?

This paper examines one evolving case study in international collaboration within an educational context, parsing the choices made and measuring them against student uptake and involvement. Entertainment Lab for the Very Small Screen (ELVSS) is an evolving experiment in remote collaboration by international student teams collectively making movies on their mobile phones. As the ELVSS project has expanded and grown more complex since its inception in 2011, so have the lessons to be learned from it. What light can this globally collaborative effort shed on all future international collaborations, particularly ones involving mobile moviemaking?

To what extent did the combination of smart phones and Web 2.0 platforms assist or impede fluid communication, seamless workflow and creative contribution amongst the huge cohort? What were its successes, what were its lessons? How can we continue to improve the pedagogy of collaborative practice with mobile moviemaking to best prepare students to become productive contributing members of the new synergic world?

Keywords: Remote collaboration, mobile movies, collaborative practice, innovative pedagogies.

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

With the decline of the Hollywood system as we know it [1], and with the exponential increase in new media tools available to all, we sit at the crest of a huge new wave of content-creativity [2]. Movies shot with the HD cameras that sit in the pockets of filmmakers the world over will increasingly be gracing our screens. And part of this revolution will surely involve work that is made through collaborations by individuals and teams who are in vastly disparate locations.

Entertainment Lab for the Very Small Screen (ELVSS) is an evolving experiment in remote collaboration by international student teams collectively making movies on their mobile phones. In its third year, ELVSS-2013 surpassed its previous iterations, both in size and in content [3]. Over 100 people around the world combines forces to create eight collectively-created mobile movies which provided the basis for a video backdrop to an opera performance at the Tête a Tête Opera Festival in London in August 2013.

A globally collaborative project of this complexity is bound to have some successes and also some opportunities for improvement. This paper will look at a few factors at play - including organisational methods and the quality of creative collaborations - in hopes that other internationally collaborative endeavours can benefit from our experiences.

## **2 COHORT SIZE & ALLOCATION OF STUDENTS TO TEAMS**

### **2.1 Report**

ELVSS has grown larger in scope each year. The 2013 iteration involved a total of ninety-six students and six lecturers from five educational institutions, which spanned four countries in Europe, South

America and Australasia. Suffice to say, ELVSS-13 was not a small project. Here are the participating schools and the amount of students from each:

- Salford (Manchester, UK): 54
- Unitec (Auckland, NZ): 13
- Université de Strasbourg (Strasbourg, France): 6
- Universidad Externado (Bogota, Colombia): 6
- AUT (Auckland, NZ): 17

The opera, entitled “State of Being”, was written and performed in eight acts, ranging from five to thirteen minutes. We wanted to evenly assign the population of students (96) to the opera’s acts (8). The no-brainer solution was to allocate twelve students to each act. However, one lesson learned from ELVSS-12 was that the larger each student team was, the fewer of them (proportional to the team) engaged meaningfully with the project. While one or two keen and engaged students in each team would take the lead in project contribution and organization, the others would disconnect and retreat, leaving those who stepped forward to do all the work. So large international teams compromised the collaborative nature of the project, and created an inequitable learning experience. This year, however, we were constrained by our numbers. We had ninety-six participants; this could not change. The opera had eight acts; this could not change. But we still needed smaller teams to maximize each student’s engagement.

The way we handled this was to divide the cohort into eight Teams, corresponding to the eight acts. Then each Team of twelve was further sub-divided into three Groups of four people each. This would, we speculated, provide a more intimate and tight-knit working group with which to go forth and be creative. It would also provide more focus on each individual to pull their weight in the responsibilities related to various parts of the workflow.

As graphically illustrated in Fig. 1: the imbalance of school representation was the next significant issue we needed to tackle in our planning. Purely a factor of course enrolments, this imbalance challenged equitable distribution amongst the international teams.

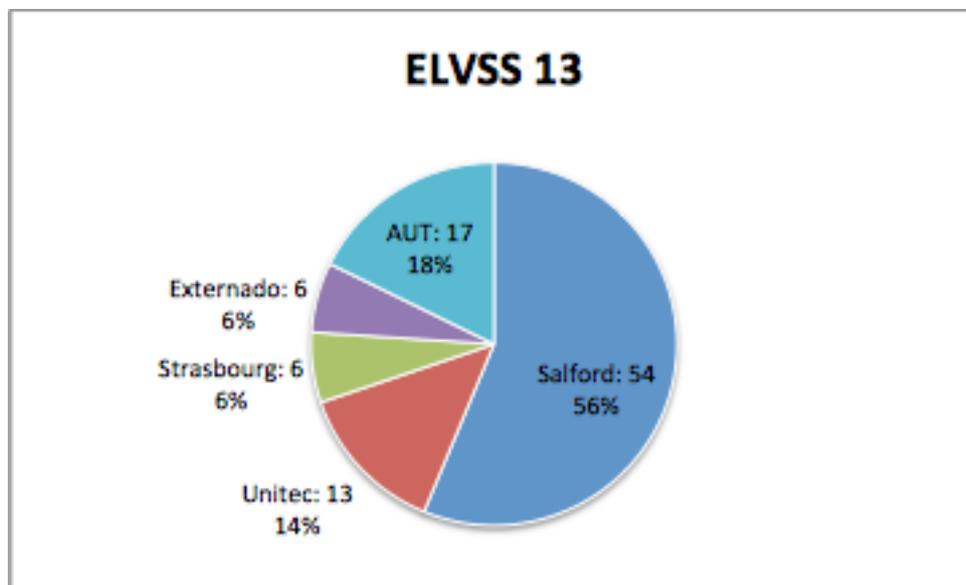


Fig. 1 - Proportional distribution of institutional representation

In our early planning sessions, we discussed the students sorting out their own group distribution (in the social constructivist spirit of the project). But we thought better of it, realising that we were on a short schedule and that the self-sorting process would take an inordinate amount of time better spent on the project itself. So we worked out our own allocation system, based on the alphabet.

| total # | School  | Manchester | amount of students from each school | TEAM (total: 8)  | GROUP # (total: 24)  | First Name  | Surname   |
|---------|---------|------------|-------------------------------------|--|--|-------------|-----------|
|         |         |            |                                     | A)Love<br>B)Dance<br>C)Science<br>D)Jazz<br>E)Sex<br>F)Drugs<br>G)Death<br>H)Truth | (each TEAM has 3 GROUPS contributing to that Act of the Opera) |             |           |
| 14      | Salford | Manchester | 1                                   | E - Sex  | E1   | Reiss       | Anderson  |
| 15      | Salford |            | 2                                   | E - Sex  | E2   | Faiz        | Barber    |
| 16      | Salford |            | 3                                   | E - Sex  | E3   | James       | Bishop    |
| 17      | Salford |            | 4                                   | F - Drugs  | F1   | Kayleigh    | Bradbury  |
| 18      | Salford |            | 5                                   | F - Drugs  | F2   | Joseph      | Cafferty  |
| 19      | Salford |            | 6                                   | F - Drugs  | F3   | Lewis       | Carville  |
| 20      | Salford |            | 7                                   | G - Death  | G1   | Diana       | Castro    |
| 21      | Salford |            | 8                                   | G - Death  | G2   | Paul        | Chambers  |
| 22      | Salford |            | 9                                   | G - Death  | G3   | Rob         | Clark     |
| 23      | Salford |            | 10                                  | H - Truth  | H1   | Taylor      | Cole      |
| 24      | Salford |            | 11                                  | H - Truth  | H2   | Simon       | Coley     |
| 25      | Salford |            | 12                                  | H - Truth  | H3   | Thomas      | Cone      |
| 26      | Salford |            | 13                                  | A - Love   | A1   | Amy         | Cook      |
| 27      | Salford |            | 14                                  | A - Love   | A2   | Shaun       | Cooper    |
| 28      | Salford |            | 15                                  | A - Love   | A3   | Max         | Dabrowski |
| 29      | Salford |            | 16                                  | B - Dance  | B1   | Ryan        | Deane     |
| 30      | Salford |            | 17                                  | B - Dance  | B2   | Thomas      | Deegan    |
| 31      | Salford |            | 18                                  | B - Dance  | B3   | John        | Dipper    |
| 32      | Salford |            | 19                                  | C - Science  | C1   | James       | Dominey   |
| 33      | Salford |            | 20                                  | C - Science  | E1   | Nathan      | Freeman   |
| 34      | Salford |            | 21                                  | C - Science  | C3   | Christopher | Gainsbury |
| 35      | Salford |            | 22                                  | D - Jazz   | D1   | Dionne      | Grailey   |
| 36      | Salford |            | 23                                  | D - Jazz   | D2   | Paul        | Handforth |
| 37      | Salford |            | 24                                  | D - Jazz   | D3   | Michael     | Jones     |

Fig. 2: a sample of the ELVSS roster.

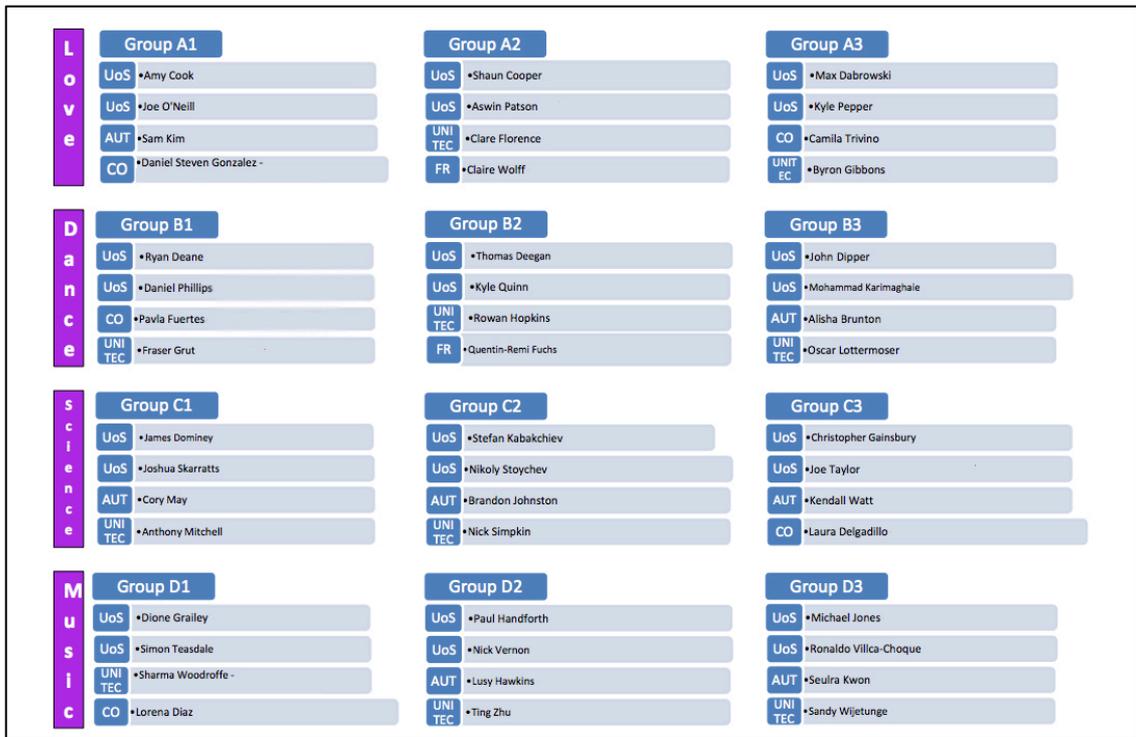


Fig. 3: This is a graphic of the divisions by Team/Group. This image is one of two charts, and as such, represents half of the cohort.

As you see, due to the enrolment proportions, each Group had two Salford (UoS) students; some had three. Since we limited our Group sizes to four members, the result was that no one from the schools other than UoS was able to be in a Group with any of their own classmates. This was brought up by several students in their reflections as something they would have valued.

## **2.2 Discussion**

The sheer size of the student population of ELVSS-13 ultimately proved to be a distraction from both the quality of the students' experience and the quality of the output.

We resolved to avoid, in future ELVSS iterations, projects which require a specific quantity of outputs (such as the eight acts in this case), concentrating instead on fostering small autonomous teams who feed individual content into larger theme-based projects which can have as many outputs as interest generates. Then, ELVSS will remain flexible to accommodate as many or as few students as are involved.

We also agreed to explore methods of pre-ascertaining students' level of enthusiasm and sense of connectedness with the concept of international collaboration. Perhaps those who display interest in mobile moviemaking in general, but not so much in international collaboration, can be streamed into separate satellite projects within each individual class, keeping the international experience for those who have a clear understanding of its importance. This, of course, would necessitate each lecturer (with large class sizes) managing two simultaneous projects (and assessments), but perhaps this is the price for a more robust global engagement. The goal here is to find ways to keep small international teams, despite large cohort sizes.

Another factor discussed in the Lecturer's ELVSS Debrief was the criteria by which we allocated the students into Teams and Groups. In our efforts to allocate impartially, we simply took our cue from the alphabetical listing of the students (see Fig. 2). In retrospect, this method might have inadvertently given rise to a "mismatch" of the groups. As it turned out, the keen ones in one country were grouped with less enthusiastic ones in other countries. This led to a less-than-satisfying experience for those who really wanted to make the most of working with others from different lands.

Furthermore, each of the different classes of students from the various schools were coming at the project from different disciplines. [This is due to the fact that we lecturers, mobile movie enthusiasts all, each teach into different disciplines.] The Salford participants are in a course called Social Technologies, which sits inside a Sound and Acoustics programme; the Unitec participants are all film students (with specialisations such as Camera, Production, Sound, Editing, Directing and Writing); the AUT participants are Graphic Design students; the Externado participants are enrolled in an Audiovisual Language course and the Strasbourg participants are studying motion graphics. In our desire to level the playing field, we chose to look past these discipline differences. In so doing, we might have missed a golden opportunity for specialisation-specific participation.

In future, rather than underplaying their discipline differences, we will endeavour to celebrate and utilise them so that each class group can contribute according to their training. Prior to launching the main internationally collaborative mobile movies project, we might ask each local cohort to collaborate as a class to create small mobile movies about their area: Graphics Design basics; Filmmaking basics; Sound Design basics, etc. This applied exercise in peer learning would give each local cohort an opportunity to practice collaboration within the class group prior to taking it out into the world at large; it would allow students from each locality to exchange information with students from the other localities, and to share with them their area of developing expertise, increasing everyone's familiarity with one another, and with each others' learning. By teaching each other the basics of their field, students will be building bridges of specialist understanding that can only raise the quality of all of their mobile movies in the major project. As ELVSS is an exploration of new pathways for user-generated content, beginning the project with the students sharing knowledge with one another through mobile moviemaking is one way of utilising the creative pedagogical possibilities offered by mobile phones.

## **3 PROJECT MANAGEMENT VS. CREATIVE COLLABORATION**

### **3.1 Report**

Coordinating international schedules was particularly complicated this year, due, in part, to differing academic timetables between the northern and southern hemispheres. This afforded a very narrow window for simultaneous participation by all institutions. An added layer of complication was created by the scheduling differences of the specific learning modules in which ELVSS was placed within each institution. As a result, there was only one week during which the entire global cohort was all in class at the same time! One thing that was important for us was to continue the tradition we'd begun with ELVSS 12, where all the students in all institutions participated in one giant "Great Global Hangout" to kick off the project. In this event, all the classes arranged to be online at the same time (8am in NZ; 10pm in France) - each class sharing one computer in their classroom, as that locality's Hangout portal - all saying, effectively "hello! here we go!". It's a high-energy way to begin and everyone immediately gets the power of international collaboration. However, as Unitec was just beginning our semester's work, Salford was just about to go on Easter holiday for two weeks. So once the project brief was circulated to all students, they needed to immediately dive in and begin their collaborations forthwith. This was less than desirable, as we had precious little time for the students to imbue themselves in the mobile aesthetic [4], or to get to know their teams before jumping into making.

## 3.2 Discussion

Partially due to these externally imposed scheduling constraints, the quality of the creative collaboration was not what we feel it could have been. Potentials were missed because of our (necessary) focus on project management and on meeting our deadline rather than on the authentic creative journey of the participants. The extreme complexity of this project was managed capably, but what suffered was the spirit of creative adventurousness we'd hoped would be present. The project itself was innovative, but the content could have been more so. In future iterations, we will prioritise innovative content over the accomplishment of a single huge coordinated effort.

Future strategies for raising the quality of authentic (socially constructive) creative collaboration involve ensuring we have enough time to mindfully explore the areas of mobile social media, creative collaboration and mobile artistry with the students prior to beginning the central project. We've resolved to design this teaching together (in our Hangouts) so that all the students in every country would be exposed to more or less the same material. The course work could involve showing and deconstructing curated examples of strong, innovative mobile artistry, then giving them in-class exercises involving creative provocations prior to co-creating internationally. This, we feel, might nurture more original, imaginative work.

As regards delivery methods, we feel that it would be valuable if we lecturers, all of whom have different foci to our work, could teach the entire international cohort for one class each, much as the students will do with one another in the specialisation-specific mobile tutorials discussed above.

The crew roles on the major global project might reflect some of those specialisations. But then again, now that everyone has learned the basics of one another's' crafts, perhaps some people would like to swap roles.

The basic responsibilities on a 4-person international team might look like this:

- 4 people (all) write story together
  - plan story so that some is shot in each country
- all 4 shoot footage
- 1 person sound design (or 2 collaborating)
- 1 person edits (or 2 collaborating)
- 1 person titles (or 2 collaborating)
- 1 person is storyteller (or 2 collaborating) on the team's journal blog

## 4 PLATFORMS FOR COLLABORATION

### 4.1 Report

The central information source was a Wordpress blog [<http://elvss2013.wordpress.com/>], used to explain how the project works, to define its parameters, to provide links out to the other project-supporting platforms and to provide information updates as they occurred.

Each Group was required to create a Google Drive Document page as a central place for collaborative discussion. Additionally, each Team was required to maintain a WordPress blog, to journal their project participation, embed their final edited contributions and to lodge their VLOG reflections on the entire experience. Groups were also required to have regular Google+ Hangouts to collaborate on their video. This was the ideal forum for discussions around how to interpret their one-word provocation, what would be shot, by whom and in what country, and how they would assemble it.

As we lecturers had collaboratively created and maintained both ELVSS 12 and ELVSS 13 through many long discussions using Google+ Hangouts, we also directed the students to do the same. Groups were required to hold regular team hangouts - recorded, using "Hangouts on Air" – to collaborate on planning their team's video. This was the ideal forum for discussions around how to interpret their one-word provocation: what would be shot, by whom and in what country, and how they would assemble it. Additionally, we advised them to try for deeper, more abstract discussions about meaning, overall creative direction of their piece, as well as pinpointing specifics such as colour palette, featured textures, movement, types of framing, etc.

## 4.2 Discussion

Some ELVSS 13 participants gave Google Docs a half-hearted try as a collaborative tool, then migrated swiftly to Facebook. Others just started Facebook groups immediately, not even dipping their toes into G-Docs. Their preferences, they explained, were rooted in their familiarity with Facebook as well as the push notifications (missing from G-Drive Documents) whenever someone posts.

There were a few reasons why we feel Google Drive is a more appropriate tool for this type of collaboration, not the least of which is the transparency. As a collaborative educational project, student conversations should be visible to all involved. A G-Doc is a central "place" that enables both synchronous and asynchronous discussions, and one that contains no other distracting content. It can be used synchronously, for instance, for live remote collaborative creative brainstorming sessions, where ideas can be quickly added by anyone anywhere to a "thinking" document. For lecturers, the ability to see the revision history is helpful to monitor student involvement for assessment purposes.

But FB was their collaborative platform of choice, which raises the question of prescription vs. self-determination in the choice of creative platform. How important is it actually that students comply with our choice of collaborative tool if their choice is working well for them? Is the onus not on us to move over to Facebook, merely requiring them to add us to their groups? What is the appropriate amount of control for us to exercise in the management of a student-centered collaboration such as this? This gravitation to the familiar reinforces Selwyn's observations that, in fact, "young people's engagements with digital technologies are varied and often unspectacular" [6].

Organising their Hangouts was another challenge for the students. With New Zealand and Europe half a day apart (and a six-hour gap from Colombia), the time difference proved a major stumbling block for them. As a result, Hangout uptake was not what it could have been. For us, the lecturers, Hangouts have been the heart of our collaborative endeavor in planning ELVSS each year. But most of the students found scheduling sessions for late at night or very early in the morning (particularly the latter) quite daunting. These perceived obstacles outweighed for them the benefits that videoconferencing can bring to a remote collaboration. In future, it might help the students to reframe Hangouts if they become more personally connected to their international teammates earlier in the project (as is mentioned above)

## 5 CONTENT

### 5.1 Report

In both 2012 and 2013, the content of the internationally collaborative mobile movies was predetermined by the group of lecturers who planned and delivered ELVSS.

In ELVSS 12, students were directed to create pieces around the theme of *environmental sustainability*. A great opportunity, it was reasoned, to address a global issue globally. They were also asked to choose a film *genre* in which to frame their story.

For ELVSS 13, there were also two content guidelines the students needed to adhere to.

1. Duration: The outcome of each Team's piece had to be of a particular duration in order to adhere to the specific length of each "State of Being" act. The different Teams dealt this with in two different ways:

- Some Teams decided just to shoot a bunch of stuff within their component teams, and then one brave Team member would singlehandedly cut it all together;
- Others followed a system developed by our Colombian lecturer, Felipe Cardona. Nicknamed "The Cardona Method", this system simply took the total deliverable segment duration (e.g. 504 seconds) and divided it by the number of people having to supply video for it (e.g. 12). The resulting amount of time (42 seconds) was the amount each participant needed to supply.

2. Provocations: Each act of "State of Being" had a one-word title. They were: 1-Love; 2-Dance; 3-Science; 4-Jazz; 5-Sex; 6-Drugs; 7-Death; 8-Truth.

The Teams, comprised of their component Groups, were challenged (by their Lecturers) with abstractly spinning these provocations into imagery which addressed these words - in however obtuse a fashion they desired.

## 5.2 Discussion

Except for a few standout examples, the creative edge was left wanting to be sharpened quite a bit in both iterations. It's our observation that the students never fully connected to the provocations in either 2012 or 2013.

For example, while we were careful to explain to our students that it was best not to interpret *State of Being's* one-word prompts literally, they were hard-pressed to create the visual poetry we'd hoped they would. So, "Love" contained images of couples; "Science" showed test tubes; "Death" contained images of cemeteries, etc.

As stated above, due to conflicting academic schedules that provided an insufficient window for teaching and learning the supporting concepts, we lacked the time to focus on creative risk-taking and the courage to make oblique visual choices. When given new types of content guidelines, in an idiom that is also new, students will glom on to the specifics of the guidelines as if to a lifeline. There's just too much newness at once; we've found that we need to scaffold the new items. There remains the tension, though, "between the need for scaffolding and frameworks and the removal of constraints that temper creativity and authenticity" [6]. Finding that balance is sort of the holy grail in the ELVSS quest.

Looking at the overall quality of the 2013 outcome, we've arrived collectively (in the lecturer debrief) at this realization: In prior situations (which we've each experienced in our own teaching), when students are given cameras and told to just go out and shoot anything they want to, the footage that comes back has a much freer, more adventurous and creatively edgy feel to it than the material they return when they're asked to conform to a more specific content brief.

So we've resolved to refrain from prescribing any content parameters. Instead, we will allow the participants to determine their own by asking those who wish to offer ideas (about story or technique, style or method) to put them forward. All participants will then vote on which of these they choose to be involved with, thereby choosing which team they join (with the only limitation being team size - perhaps one member from each country). In this way, they will be travelling on their own journey to their very own destination.

## 6 WORKFLOW

### 6.1 Report

We purchased a 100GB Dropbox account and organised it in folders by Team/Group, so that the students would have a place to store all their raw footage, uploaded directly from their mobiles. The plan was that they would then download their selected takes from Dropbox and upload them to YouTube Editor. The projects all sat on the ELVSS2013 YouTube Channel, to which all participants had the login details. An editor chosen from each Group would edit the Group's piece in YouTube

Editor. Then someone chosen from each Team would assemble the videos made by the three Groups in that Team to produce the final video for that act of “State of Being”.

## 6.2 Discussion

There was an approximately 75% uptake of this method. Most of the students uploaded raw footage to the ELVSS Dropbox, and many of them utilised the collaborative aspect of YouTube Editor. A few students chose to bring the footage into their local NLE, such as Avid, Premiere or FCP, and cut them there. In the end, 8 of the 13 Unitec students (most of whom are motion picture Editing students) made final cuts of each of the State of Being acts, packaging the material contributed by each team. This was submitted to the State of Being video curators (one of the lecturers plus one creative contributor to the opera), who then took the material and heavily filtered it to give it a consistent, abstract look. The State of Being curators reported to the opera itself, and were responsible for adapting the material from the students to most appropriately fit the opera’s creative requirements.

Our intention with Dropbox and YouTube Editor was to provide the participants with a post-production superstructure within which they could create. But upon reflection, we surmised that the students might have been more keen to participate in the post workflow had these spaces been their own.

The students, most of whom are very plugged-in, internet-and-app-savvy digital citizens, still had a hard time wrapping their heads around this Web 2 workflow. The utter newness of the whole project itself - from mobile phone moviemaking and using Hangouts to collaborating with co-makers across the globe - involved a bit of a framing shift for some towards moviemaking in the first place. And then being asked to store their raw footage on someone else’s Dropbox and YouTube, it’s been suggested, might have been a step that not everyone wanted to take.

In future versions, we will still offer the YouTube Editor option for collaborative editing, unless something better comes along (we looked seriously at WeVideo, but the resolution limitations and the pricing structure caused us to turn away). And we may just ask the students to supply their own Dropbox (if they feel they need it).

## 7 SUMMARY

In their reflections, many of the students very much appreciated having had the opportunity to participate in this global mobile movie project. They would loved, however, to have had the opportunity to get to know their international collaborators a bit more - and to have been able to do a bit of project work with their own classmates as well. Additionally, they would have liked a bit more time at the beginning to ensure they were familiar with both the hardware and the collaborative platforms.

This feedback directly confirmed our suspicions about the apparent disconnectedness of many, and provides a clear road toward course improvement for 2014.

From the rich insights gained from ELVSS 2013, the following comprises our marching orders for next year. We hope this combo of tools and strategies deepens the functionality of the ELVSS project:

- Strive for an even distribution of participants between localities;
- Ensure that each international team is smaller;
- Rather than prescribe the content, let the participants decide what they want to make a movie about;
- Design simpler parameters for the project
  - no pre-set programme durations to conform to
  - only one level of team [no Groups and also Teams; too confusing];
- Celebrate differences between specialisation frames of reference and let that determine type of contribution;
- Each local class do one small project together whereby they teach other students the basics of their specialisations (peer learning);
- Align curricula so all ELVSS lecturers can teach each other’s classes about mobile aesthetics, artistry and possibilities offered by the tools;
- Perhaps incorporate FB in our palette of mobile social media;
- More student ownership of workflow

Remote collaboration transcends space and time by enabling people to work together both synchronously and asynchronously. There are many tools and methods available today to connect the planet, and more being developed all the time. When employed together in a strategic blend, these connection tools can work together to form an application suite well suited to serve the specific needs of the project at hand.

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