When I signed up for the GEE I was excited at the prospect of partnering with creative and insightful peers from around the world, but also cognisant that it would involve significant commitment and workload. Both came true, and I write this at the end of a challenging but delightful experience.

Upon receiving the initial email I set out to contact my team and unite them (and spare our email inboxes) by setting up a group in the online collaboration tool Slack. My first email reaching out with the details resulted in an interesting lesson on the wonders and oddities of time zones, as replies and sign-ups dribbled in as the sun twirled around the earth. Lesson one: when collaborating across time zones, plan for work to be done at atypical hours.

Soon enough, we had all eight of us signed in to the same system. Or so I thought. While some of the team got straight in to the threads of discussion, others remained silent, or absent. Thankfully those already contributing supported a culture of contribution, and joined in to encourage to missing members to share their insights. With time, it turned out that one member lived in a state where their emails had been blocked, and another (my would-be co-leader in fact) had signed up to the competition but had neither submitted his bio nor posted a single word. But I write this now, tremendously proud of the team of six members who produced a document we can all be proud of, despite this initial setback. Lesson two: invest time and encouragement in those who contribute, rather than despairing over disappointing circumstances.

Two weeks can seem like a long time, but it flew by for this project. Given that this is a global competition I felt that it was important to make sure that everyone’s contributions and ideas were reflected in the process. We created a shared Google doc and began sharing our ideas with gusto, and commenting on others. At this point it turned out that my initial use of Slack was in fact slowing things down, as notifications seems to be going missing. Instead, we transitioned over to the chat app WhatsApp, at the suggestion of some in the team, and communication speed increased tremendously. Lesson three: embrace constructive suggestions. A team more comfortable and more involved can be more productive.

But with all our initial brainstorms firing away, the time ticked on. It was time to refine our suggestions, and this was where we had to take a more critical approach. This was particularly difficult given that all the proposals aimed to tackle real and meaningful social ills, problems that were undoubtedly pressing, heart-wrenching and important to solve. Again, for fairness, we slowly pruned away and combined ideas in our brainstorm, and gave people time to extend on those that remained. All this egalitarianism was excellent for group buy-in, but did expend precious time and energy. While I do not regret it for a second, it was a risk to spend so much time in that initial stage, and in future I would recommend brainstorming a little more quickly to have more time for the final project. Lesson four: collaboration is key, but sometimes you need to make hard choices and move on.
My team continued to impress me as we soldiered on, fleshing out and expanding our concept. The most important thing was to keep building on the gems of wisdom. Here, questions were an important tool to overcome any communication barriers. Asking for clarification at times helped not only to dig deeper into the insightful thoughts that each member was contributing, but also to ensure that we all understood what we were doing, and could explain it clearly in the report. Lesson five: never be afraid to ask polite questions.

The last few days became crunch-time, especially given that many of us also had exams and other commitments to attend to simultaneously. But despite that, everyone chipped in their own little bit, and after spending the final afternoon toiling in front of a screen I was delighted to piece together the final copy of our collective achievement. It had been far more important to encourage people to contribute what and when they could, rather than to chastise them when they could not. Lesson six: projects should be enjoyable, and hard-times are when it is most important not to lose sight of compassion.

Perhaps most importantly for me, as this journal ends, the journey does not. Because as I check back into the chat for what could have been the end, there are messages waiting where members are eager to keep in touch with one another after the competition concludes. I certainly am too. And so through travail and triumph, I am proud to have been a member of team 112, and am excited to hear what the future holds for every participating member.