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'Not as a temporary fluke but as standard': realising the affordances of hybrid and online teaching for inclusive and sustainable education

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Abstract

84.5% of disabled students (Disabled Students UK, 2022) reported that the continuation of online or distance learning and teaching options post-pandemic would be beneficial. While concerns about quality of experience, isolation, wellbeing, access to technology and poor pedagogy in online and hybrid interactions are legitimate and must form part of decision-making, so too must considerations about the affordances of these ways of working and teaching. Framed around inclusive practice, and flexibility and sustainability drivers to enhance belonging, community and collaboration, we argue there are imperatives for us to learn the hard lessons of the pandemic and to listen to the voices of those who benefitted from changes in how and where teaching and assessment happened, especially in terms of so called 'hybrid' teaching. Our argument is framed by reflections on our own institution's approach to hybrid teaching and working, the literature on experiences of remote learning during the pandemic, and – most centrally – the experiences and perspectives of students with disabilities.

Keywords: hybrid; HyFlex; online education; disability; inclusion; accessibility.

Introduction

According to Disabled Students UK, 84.5% of disabled students reported that the continuation of online or distance learning and teaching options post-pandemic would be beneficial (p.8, 2022). Attainment gaps narrowed between white and global majority students, students without and with disabilities, and in the female to male achievement gap in upper awards between 2018-19 and 2019-20 (Snelling, 2022). Additionally, in a large proportion of universities in the UK, fully online and hybrid meetings remain common, reflecting a culture shift in working practices that appears to represent a 'new normal'. Despite this, there are pressures on universities to eschew 'online tutoring' (Somerville, 2022; Turner, 2022). We believe that this lack of nuance in what both 'in-person' and 'online' teaching might entail risks a failure to realise the ongoing benefits of the 'unexpected silver lining' that Universities UK report is a consequence of the rapid and unprecedented shift online of 2020 (Snelling, 2022).

In this article, we draw on our roles supporting academic development and digital accessibility in a large research-intensive university to focus on one aspect of the possible digital future of higher education (HE). We argue that an inclusive, sustainable and flexible provision should actively consider the affordances of what we are calling 'hybrid teaching', by respecting the value of all learning interactions. The comprehensive and timely MIT report (2022) on the lessons they learned in Covid-19 sees positivity in teaching and assessment outcomes that were both 'scripted' and 'unscripted':

> The creativity and ingenuity brought out over the past year by the necessity of finding ways to engage with students and support group interactions, thinking anew about what works and why, when we could not just teach the way we always have, is sure to bear fruit in the long term. (MIT, 2022, p.4).

Background

Despite some limited interest and experimentation prior to the pandemic with 'Hybrid Flexible' or 'HyFlex' teaching (both terms relating to simultaneous in-person and online attendance

options), in which choice was a key feature of both design and, crucially, a flexible ethos (Beatty, 2019), it was rarely used (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2021). That is until the post-lockdown, but still in-Covid-19 period, when it evolved as an approach to cope with ongoing infections, lockdowns overseas and travel restrictions. As it evolved in multiple ways across the world, several terms emerged in addition to HyFlex: 'blended synchronous', 'mixed/ dual mode', 'multimodal' 'concurrent teaching'. Most common appears to have been 'hybrid' teaching, perhaps to distinguish an emergency and reactive approach from a fully planned, by-design approach.

Indeed, our own institution adopted the term 'Basic Hybrid' to emphasise the anticipated limitations and as an expectation management strategy for both staff and students. We equipped over 300 rooms with 'basic hybrid' teaching capabilities. At its most basic, this was little more than improved in-room audio and an ability to live stream. Most rooms, however, had two-way audio/video using either *Zoom* or *Microsoft Teams* as the principal interface, and upgrades focusing on adding this software to existing lectern set-ups with camera and microphone installations were prioritised. Opportunities to improve the experience for staff and all students using new technologies such as multiple screens, ceiling mounted omni-directional microphones and telepresence robots were a dream but are very much within the realms of possibility looking ahead. Training materials and workshops emphasised the constraints and pushed the necessity for support in the form of an additional online or in-room assistant or 'co-pilot' (Compton, 2021). Whilst many colleagues adopted this approach, others preferred to separate teaching to in-person and online cohorts, and others focused on asynchronous supplementary material for those unable to attend in-person. Hybrid may have proved at times incredibly vexing for staff, but in addition to successes in enabling ongoing connection and contact for institutional meetings, it was simultaneously an invaluable lifeline, potentially offering greater control, agency and empowerment to disabled students in particular (Disabled Students' Commission, 2021).

Inclusion, access and accessibility

In HE we manage and control information, with research, dissemination, teaching and assessment just some of our information exchange channels. We are obligated by law (The Equality Act 2010 and The Public Sector Bodies [Websites and Mobile Applications] Accessibility Regulations 2018) but more, we hope, by building shared values as a sector, to enable easier access to that information and to develop frameworks for producing and sharing it. This means, for example, that resources are not only produced and checked with accessibility in mind, but that learning experiences and assessments which utilise new technologies to extend the reach of our education will do so in such a way as to ensure that no-one is left behind.

Information and systems that are accessible may be driven by legal compliance, but improvements in access, availability and information retrieval also help better adaptation to future ways of teaching and learning. These principles reach into how (and where) teaching happens. Progress made during the pandemic offers an opportunity to produce a proactive and more inclusive legacy, where information exchange is smoothed by ever-improving technical solutions (Hector, 2020). Yet, while many in HE continue to embrace hybridity and remote access for aspects of business such as conferences and meetings, there are tendencies to forget some of the successes in terms of teaching and assessing. In our view, we should aim to create more of an information 'Swiss Army Knife' for the accessibility, usability, and business advantages this would bring.

A clear commitment to inclusive design says a lot about the organisations we represent, has great potential for students both with and without disabilities, and represents how we want all our staff and students across intersections to be fully involved:

> There is growing recognition of the issues and challenges of intersectionality and the multiple factors that influence students, including different equality characteristics, and issues relating to social class or other widening-access considerations. Each of these can, and does, combine with issues of disability (Williams et al., 2019, p.4).

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While recognising the many challenges that face UK HE in the post-pandemic era, Disabled Students UK's (2022) report highlights the importance of retaining positive advancements made as a result of the pandemic and the pivot to online and hybrid delivery. Despite protective legislation, disabled students have historically been marginalised in academic settings, and the report argues that in some ways this continued during the pandemic: only 23% of the disabled students surveyed received the disability support that they required during this time. In other ways, however, accessibility has taken leaps forward. A few institution-wide changes, such as routine recordings of lectures, have given enormous benefits to disabled students as well as to other groups.

The lived experience of inaccessible learning is perhaps best witnessed by a disabled student, where many of the things that would have enabled them to keep up with their MA studies were delivered almost overnight as the pandemic unfolded:

> I chose to study part time due to my health condition, but because of scheduling I [spent] three days a week on campus. This included some really long days . . . forcing me to spend days recovering afterwards.

> I asked . . . to access one of my lectures via recordings for my health. . . . It took many months before recordings were . . . approved, and by that time the module had finished, and forcing myself to go onto campus so often had exhausted me to the point of worsening my condition. I had no choice but to leave the degree.

> A couple of months later the pandemic hit and suddenly everyone was accessing their education online. . . . I hope that in the future the disabled community will look back at my experience of improved access to education not as a temporary fluke but as standard. ('Daisy').[1]

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[1] Personal correspondence from student, shared with permission.

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Hybrid teaching options

Fully online and hybrid teaching are unquestionably challenging without investment in infrastructure, training and human resources, but experiences such as Daisy's should prompt us to open a dialogue about what we are able to offer and how we might better reflect the ongoing reality of real-world hybridity. In our discussions with colleagues about hybrid teaching experiences, we found that those who had successfully adopted hybrid approaches argued that it offered possibilities for effective collaboration, problem-based learning and critical thinking. Recommendations for hybrid learning in the literature suggest that educators exploit opportunities to open dialogue with students about their learning via different media and encourage students to make informed decisions about the pros and cons of different modalities (Detyna et al., 2021). When scaffolded with conversations that engage students with the rationale of this approach, these activities can be transformative for student learning. It might promote future-facing thinking, greater self-awareness, the ability to deal with uncertainty – all competencies defined under an Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) agenda as 'empower[ing] individuals to reflect on their own actions, taking into account their current and future social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts' (Advance HE, 2021).

Belonging, community and collaboration

Increasingly, 'belonging' is being discussed alongside questions of equity, diversity and inclusion in HE (Capper and McVitty, 2022; West, 2022), a consequence of the experiences of studying and working during Covid-19 and associated with students' self-assessed mental health (Jackson, 2022). Even pre-pandemic, belonging was already being linked to student retention and success (Jackson, 2022). One common assumption is, of course, that a sense of belonging was lost during remote and hybrid learning and working, and that it is something that universities need to ensure students regain.

However, recent research into experiences of learning during the pandemic does not necessarily support that picture. Kohnke and Moorhouse (2021) explored students' perspectives of HyFlex teaching and found that, when technologies were well leveraged and

collaborative work was carefully scaffolded, there could be community, interaction and engagement between the learners:

> During collaborative activities, everyone seemed to have a presence. . . . This perception was something both in-class and online learners mentioned in the interviews: completing activities online made them 'feel as a group' and 'not separated'. (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2021, p.239).

Alongside the recommendation to think carefully about how tools that enable synchronous collaboration (such as document creation, post walls, polling and anonymous questioning) could best be utilised in hybrid settings, the authors propose pairing face-to-face and remote students when designing teaching and assessment activities, to strengthen belonging in dual-mode situations (Kohnke and Moorhouse, 2021).

In our own discussions about experiences of hybrid teaching, the social side of learning came through as a strong theme, centring on how community can be built, how space for informal conversations might need to be curated, and how positive lessons from Covid-19 around daily touch points, virtual common rooms and uses of chat channels must continue to feature in hybrid settings. We acknowledge how challenging this can be, but when well facilitated, hybrid spaces can contain not just one place in which an individual can belong, but multiple possibilities for this.

Conclusion

HE achieved something unprecedented and remarkable during the Covid-19 lockdowns. It may have been clunky, flawed, inconsistent, and not as good as planned and fully-resourced online education, but it showed that where there was a will, driven by an abled majority, there was a way. The immediate post-lockdown period demonstrated similarly that although beautifully resourced HyFlex rooms were generally out of financial and logistical scope, hybrid options could be enabled swiftly and relatively cheaply. We are therefore concerned that

current debates about modality and affordances of hybrid approaches lack nuance and are shutting out the voices of students, particularly those with disabilities.

Looked at more broadly, options for hybrid learning connect closely with existing ESD goals such as those defined in UNESCO's sustainable development goal four (United Nations, n.d.) centring accessibility, inclusivity and lifelong learning. ESD is defined by the QAA as, 'a lens that permits us to look critically at how the world is and to envision how it might be, and equips us to deliver that vision' (QAA, 2021).

Imperfections in these emergency responses are being trumpeted as final and winning arguments. We acknowledge the flaws and resourcing implications, but call on HE providers to review access, inclusion and sustainability policies and ask, 'why shouldn't flexibility in modality be a reasonable adjustment?' We should look positively at the possibilities of flexible modalities and commit to investing in spaces and programmes. Where HE is adapting to hybrid working, what is preventing us from being open to improving the experiences of staff and students through hybrid modalities for teaching? Even during the 'hybrid year' we learnt so much that improved how we interacted. However, none of these possibilities will be realised if we close down the debate with simplistic, ableist and one-sided arguments.

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