

Making Online Learning Accessible

Summary of the 2nd EDuIT webinar on the future of performing arts education

Grahame Lockey

Takeaways:

- Don't seek to replicate online what you do in the classroom: online learning requires a different learning rhythm.
- Recognise that it is not necessary for teacher and students to interact in real time for learning to take place.
- Structure learning so that the students engage with it in their own time, at their own pace, when circumstances allow.
- Reserve synchronous learning for when it matters most.
- Don't over-structure or over-stuff a course with content and activities. Too much information can become an accessibility issue for students if they find it overwhelming or hard to navigate.
- See students as 'partners' in developing a course as it progresses, not just in term of giving feedback but in finding their own ways to achieve outcomes.

The second EDuIT webinar on the future of teaching and learning in the performing arts discusses the hurdles online learning creates *by virtue of being online* and gives practical tips on how to clear or get around them.

When teaching and learning moves online, one of the first barriers to learning is accessibility. The issue, put simply, is this. If all provision moves online, students need an internet connection in order to access it. But this may not be straightforward. Parents may be working from home and hogging the computer. A student may not be able to accomplish all tasks to an expected standard using their phone alone. The more siblings a student has studying remotely alongside them, the greater the demand for devices and bandwidth. But what if families share devices? What if they subscribe to a basic internet plan or live in buildings or areas with poor coverage? For performing arts students, accessibility issues may be compounded if they need to turn their home into a performance space. In the classroom or studio, everyone shares a common learning environment. How can we ensure our courses are structured in a way that recognises students might be working across an uneven range of home learning environments?

In this webinar, guests Brian Watkins, Stella Lau and Logan Belavijendran discuss ways of approaching online teaching and learning that make allowances for the fact that not everyone can sign in for a class at the time the teacher is giving it, or achieve at home what they could in a dedicated classroom, studio or workshop.

Brian, Stella and Logan are in agreement that any approach to online teaching that is responsive to accessibility considerations must begin with a shift in mindset. Logan suggests the primary shift involves thinking about lessons from a different perspective: not the teacher's, with a course to adapt, assessments to conduct, outcomes to achieve, but rather

the students' – working in what might be a small, shared family environment alive with distractions.

Teachers can put pressure on their students, as well as themselves, if they seek to replicate online what they do in the classroom. Such replication involves synchronous learning, where a class is present and engaged at the same time. But such highly immediate activities drain bandwidth and presuppose that all students can access the internet. Logan believes “you can create a sense of connection without necessarily having everyone online at the same time.” Rather than replicate the classroom experience, teachers can structure learning so that 80% of it is asynchronous, requiring low bandwidth. This involves activities that students can do individually when their home environment allows them to. Teachers should schedule online sessions with the whole class only when it is necessary or most valuable. When they do, lessons should be recorded so any students who cannot join don't miss out. By restricting synchronous sessions to, at most, 20% of the course, teachers are helpfully forced to prioritise how to make best use of the time when a class meets.

In some ways, this Pareto model is a paradigm shift. It asks a lot of teachers to mentally decouple the practice of teaching from the notion of contact hours. It might not be obvious to teachers how they can engage students *in absentia*, when the class is not interacting at the same time in a common space, especially when a teacher may feel that the further the lessons depart from regular classroom delivery the more the learning experience is compromised.

From another perspective, however, asynchronous learning is as old as homework and continues the long-established trend towards devolvement of teacher control begun in the move from teacher-centredness to student-centredness, creating the notion of teacher as facilitator, now widely expected in many learning situations. Logan's approach asks teachers to further relax control, now over students' attention in real time. Doing so minimises many of the home stresses caused by family members competing for time online. As host Louise Lee sums up: “Having more technology is not so much about having more control over your students but actually *giving* them more control, and giving students choice.”

The guest speakers also reaffirm a shift in mindset that presenters in the first webinar stressed: relinquish control over *appearing to be in control*. Instead, bring students in as co-designers. As Logan puts it: “I think one of the wonderful opportunities from this huge pivot is we all know we're doing something new very quickly. And I think it gives you a lot of permission to do things you may not have been able to do before like redesign content on the fly, bring students into your design, be open about the challenges that we are all facing. And I think that will give students a bit more confidence also. Sharing that you're not prepared but that you are working really hard isn't something I think that students will be dissatisfied with. I think they know this is reality. The unreal thing is saying I'm completely 100 percent ready and this curriculum is set in stone. That's not realistic.”

Instead, Logan advocates thinking of students as “partners in the learning journey, but also *your* learning journey, because we're all learning how to do this. So, bring them all on board as partners and I think that will give you a bit more freedom to reinvent how you are teaching and how they are learning”. Stella agrees, recommending students play an active role in a reflective cycle of course improvement: “We are constantly in a cycle of planning, delivering,

reflecting and adapting to this new kind of approach.” Stella believes involving the students in taking turns to lead a part of the class and reflecting together after each session on how the course is going builds a sense of community online. Student participation in ongoing reflection has seen the School of Dance recognise that home is not an ideal learning or performance environment and make concessions as to what, when and how students learn – to the point of structuring lessons around the rhythms of family life.

Ideally, one of the aims of ongoing improvement will be to declutter courses, making them simpler and more navigable. As host Robert Wells observes, even when students get online, if the course is text-heavy and hard to navigate that presents another barrier to learning, having a detrimental impact on “discoverability and engagement with content”. Logan is in accord: bombarding the students with information, over-structuring the course or putting tasks up every day will likely swamp them. If students are going to have the space to learn at their own pace, sufficient calendar time should be reserved for them to do so, otherwise the benefits of asynchronous learning are lost.

Giving students more flexibility and more say in how they learn online has several benefits beyond ensuring no student is disadvantaged if they have intermittent access to the materials. The guests have observed it leading to more self-discipline, better organisation, greater ownership, deeper engagement and a better sense of how one conducts oneself online. Brian feels students engage with his recorded lessons better than live lectures, particularly since they are learning in a second language and can review the content as often as they need. He also noticed that student contributions tend to be more varied. “In the classroom,” he explains, “there is an immediate discussion about how you would approach a task and you would probably find a lot of the class will do the same thing. Whereas if you are separated by distance, you are not in the same location, the interpretations could be many, which is fascinating, and a starting point for discussion.”

With the immediacy of face-to-face teaching hard to replicate online without running the risk of privileging some learners over others, the webinar proposes a number of practical suggestions for structuring learning in a way that does not take for granted a student’s ability to freely access the course. Paradoxically, by giving students more responsibility to do more by themselves, more flexibly, with less content, teachers might encourage greater engagement and better realisation of outcomes by not being present with learners most of the time.