



Experiences in Digital Learning 2021-22

Webinar Series Booklet

This booklet discusses a series of four free webinars held between December 2021 and June 2022 and organised jointly by the Centre for Online and Distance Education (CODE) at the University of London, and the University of London in Paris (ULIP). CODE is the new name for the Centre for Distance Education, which added 'Online' to its name in 2022 as a response to the worldwide, pandemic-related shift to online learning.

This was the second webinar series to be given under the strapline of 'Experiences in Digital Learning': the first series, held during the academic year 2020-21, was co-organised by the CDE, ULIP and Goldsmiths, University of London. The aim of both series has been the same: to enable practitioners of open and digital education worldwide to discuss and learn from each other about the innovation and development in digital education during – and, hopefully, as we emerge from – the COVID-19 pandemic. These webinars, too, were well attended and each was followed by a lively discussion. A third series is being arranged for the next academic year, and this is due to start in October 2022.

A blog report of each webinar in the current series is available separately.

Executive Summary

Halfway through 2022 the Centre for Distance Education (CDE) at the University of London, which was founded in 2005, changed its name to CODE. That change – simply, the addition of the word 'online' – reflects the worldwide shift that was greatly accelerated although not begun by the Covid-19 pandemic. As that pandemic mainly ebbs, it is clear that changes to higher education are irreversible, but probably not as profound as the blue-sky thinkers of 2020 imagined.

Self-evidently, too, the nature of this change will differ from country to country. In the UK, we are facing an environment in which the Minister of State for Higher and Further Education, Michele Donelan (who later broke records by becoming Education Secretary for just two days) has been pressing for all but a return to 2019. Her view appears to be that anything other than the full face-to-face education experience would breach students' 'consumer rights'. The students themselves, however, disagree; surveys consistently show no enthusiasm for a return to 2019. Instead, we are rapidly moving towards a hybrid sector with a mix of face-to-face and online provision. This second EDL webinar series was planned to help practitioners, and by extension their students, get the best out of that hybrid environment. It featured 16 speakers and chairs from four countries; seven of the speakers, including the furthest-flung, Steven Warburton from New South Wales, Australia, were members of the newly expanded team of CODE Fellows. It was ably led by Linda Amrane-Cooper, head of the CDE, and Tim Gore OBE, CEO of the University of London in Paris, who each chaired one session.

Interestingly, there was much less focus on technologies *per se* in this series than in the previous one. Much of the technology discussed at length in the 2020-21 series now seems to be bedded in and almost ubiquitous in the higher education environment. The focus has switched to how it can be



used to provide the best experience to all our students, who are a diverse bunch; there are some who really prefer face-to-face tuition, others who prefer to work entirely online (or whose circumstances demand that they do) and others who prefer a mixture. A hybrid environment should ideally be able to cater for all these preferences. There was much discussion of solutions that go beyond hybrid to ‘hyflex’: in a hyflex course, students are able to choose whether to attend in person or online, or to vary their attendance from session to session, and they can expect to study the same materials and meet the same learning outcomes in each mode.

It is clear, however, that our infrastructure is not yet fit for its new, hybrid purpose. The majority of teaching spaces in most institutions are large, and there is also plenty of provision for individual study. Now, whole-class teaching may be on its way out and almost anywhere can become an individual study space, we will need more in-between spaces, for seminars, group work and discussions. We will need to think creatively about how we use time and space to help all our students learn and thrive, and we ourselves will need to be given the time and space to do that.

Nichola Gretton highlighted four ‘fundamental values’ inherent in the hyflex approach: learner choice, equivalence (between the face-to-face, online and mixed modes), content reuse and accessibility. The fundamental nature of these, however, is not unique to hyflex or even online education, particularly if ‘content reuse’ is widened into ‘open access’. This webinar series included two that were explicitly focused on ethical issues: student wellbeing and, more broadly still, academic freedom. I suggest that we, as educators, should bear in mind David Baume’s contention that we have an obligation as well as a right to express and critique ideas widely, but to do so with kindness.

The first webinar in the 2022-23 EDL series, in October 2022, will go back to the technology focus of the first series by exploring the current and future uses of virtual and extended reality systems in higher education.



Speakers and Chairs

- **Linda Amrane-Cooper**, Centre for Online and Distance Education and University of London, UK (Chair; May)
- **David Baume**, Centre for Online and Distance Education and independent consultant (December)
- **Jeremy Carrette**, University of Kent (December)
- **Tim Gore**, University of London in Paris (ULIP) (Chair; December)
- **Nichola Gretton**, University of Leicester and CODE (May)
- **Stylianos Hatzipanagos**, Centre for Online and Distance Education and independent consultant (Chair; March)
- **Shoshi Ish-Horowicz**, Queen Mary, University of London and CODE (June)
- **Edouard Morena**, ULIP (December)
- **Niilante Ogunsola-Ribeiro**, School of Advanced Studies, University of London (June)
- **Simon Parr**, School of Advanced Studies, University of London (June)
- **Simon Rofe**, Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy, University of London and CODE (Chair; June)
- **Clare Sansom**, Birkbeck, University of London and CODE (December)
- **Sam Smidt**, University College London and CODE (March)
- **Maylyn Tan**, Singapore Institute of Management Global Education, Singapore (June)
- **Anshima Varma**, ULIP (May)
- **Steven Warburton**, University of New England, New South Wales, Australia and CODE (March)



Webinar Highlights

December 2021: Academic Freedom in a Digitised World

- 'Freedom to express and critique are not only essential rights, but for us, as educators, they are obligations' – David Baume
- 'Universities cannot be entirely safe places intellectually: dangerous ideas should be able to roam freely' – David Baume
- 'There is a broad and fundamental challenge for academics working on climate change... to ensure that marginal voices are heard while remaining true to the science' – Edouard Morena
- 'Even the most passionate advocate of free speech will have a 'line in the sand'' – Clare Sansom
- 'We must be sensitive to others, no matter what we think of their points of view' – Clare Sansom
- 'The digital age has made truth precarious, so freedom is undermined' – Jeremy Carrette

March 2022: The Year Ahead for the Practitioner

- 'Students really value flexibility: they may be clamouring to get back onto campus, but this is less for the teaching than for the social interactions around it' – Sam Smidt
- 'Our places are not particularly suited to a hybrid way of working' – Sam Smidt
- 'Third space' practitioners, mid-way between the administrative and the academic, are well placed both to contribute to and to thrive in a hybrid environment' – Steve Warburton
- 'An over-emphasis on numbers and analytics can lead to students being thought of as little more than 'bums on seats' (even virtual ones) – Steve Warburton

May 2022: Hybrid Experience and Student Wellbeing

- 'It is hard to give [online] students a sense of belonging when the serendipitous aspects of student life, those important encounters outside formal sessions, are degraded or lost' – Nichola Gretton
- '... to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply begin' – bell hooks (1984), quoted by Nichola Gretton
- 'Many students who kept their cameras off... were prepared to change their minds when reminded of the importance of body language' – Nichola Gretton
- 'Students' preferences can be found at all points on the spectrum [from wholly face-to-face to wholly online]' – Anshima Varma
- 'Students whose principal learning style is auditory generally get on better online than those who prefer a more visual approach' – Anshima Varma



June 2022: The Hybrid Experience for the Practitioner

- ‘Students in each mode [in the room or online] should receive the same material and the same quality learning, although teaching methods might vary’ – Shoshi Ish-Horowicz’
- A majority of our students rated mixed-mode or hybrid teaching ‘excellent’ or ‘good’, and a similar majority wanted it to continue ‘indefinitely’ after the end of pandemic restrictions – Shoshi Ish-Horowicz
- ‘Delivering learning to distant and face-to-face students at the same time is a difficult balancing act (just as dancing on a fence might be)’ – Maylyn Tan
- ‘Microsoft’s Teams offers richer facilities for student support than the ubiquitous Zoom, but even that is not ideal – Maylyn Tan
- ‘It is important to think about, or even to visualise, the needs and concerns of each group [distant, on-campus and hybrid] when designing a course’ – Niilante Ogunsola-Ribeiro
- ‘Our new [postgraduate] students often feel as if they have stepped back in time’ – Simon Parr

Some Useful Links

- **Hyflex** (hybrid flexible teaching modality): <https://hyflex-learning.com/what-is-hyflex/>
- **Reconstructing Identities in Higher Education** (Celia Whitchurch, Taylor & Francis, 2012): <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203098301/reconstructing-identities-higher-education-celia-whitchurch>
- **Remo** (interactive virtual platform): <https://remo.co/>
- **Teaching to Transgress** (Bell hooks, Routledge, 1994): <https://www.routledge.com/Teaching-to-Transgress-Education-as-the-Practice-of-Freedom/hooks/p/book/9780415908085>
- **Student Wellbeing, University of Leicester**: <https://le.ac.uk/study/wellbeing>
- **E-learning, Queen Mary University of London**: <https://elearning.qmul.ac.uk/>
- **Padlet** (virtual bulletin boards): <https://padlet.com/>

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August 2022