

Inclusive Online Practices

By Clare Sansom, CDE Fellow

The fourth in a popular series of monthly webinars jointly organised by the Centre for Distance Education, Goldsmith's College in London and the University of London Institute in Paris throughout the 2020-21 academic year was held on 4 March 2021. It took the important theme of inclusive practices. How do we design our online spaces so all learners can access them?

Linda Amrane-Cooper, head of the CDE and chair of the session, introduced it by saying that the topic offered many questions but no fixed answers, and that the webinar would provide an opportunity for all participants to dig into the questions in depth. She then introduced the three expert panellists: **Virna Rossi** from Ravensbourne University in London, **Maha Bali** from the American University of Cairo, Egypt, and **El Spaeth** from the University of Glasgow.

Virna Rossi, who leads a Postgraduate Certificate course at Ravensbourne University, set her talk in the context of a year of both 'pandemic pedagogy' and, for many of us, 'pandemic fatigue'. Students and educators are being pulled in all directions, but in order to provide the best experience for all students as we emerge from the pandemic, we will need to keep accessibility at the forefront of our learning design. In view of this, the metaphor she offered us was perhaps a surprising one: the rear-view mirror. This is like a third eye looking behind, and we can progress forwards much more safely and with more confidence if we know what lies behind.

A driver has not one but three rear-view mirrors, one at the front and one at each side. These became a metaphor for three Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, which act as lenses through which we view teaching and learning. Each principle is based on one of three primary networks in our brains and leads to a set of guidelines for increasing flexibility in learning and so – hopefully – for engaging all learners.

- The principle of **representation** is based on the **recognition learning network** and determines the '*what*' of learning. It leads to questions about the variety of input material provided and the choices available to students: is it, for example, possible to learn the same material through text or video?
- The principle of **action and expression** is based on the **strategic learning network** and determines the '*how*' of learning. It leads to questions about assessment design and whether students can choose how their work is assessed.
- The principle of **engagement** is based on the **affective learning network** and determines the '*why*' of learning: how, in an online (or, in years to come, hybrid) environment do we engage our students and make them keep on wanting to learn?

Each of these three mirrors provides a different perspective through which to assess our courses, together with the over-arching criteria of the need to offer students variety, flexibility and choice. It is instructive but difficult to apply such a perspective while teaching a course, but much easier to do so at the course end. She ended her talk with a case study in which students on a postgraduate certificate in education, who were themselves teachers, had used a 'collaborative mind mapping' tool, [Ketso](#), to highlight each of the three UDL principles. The results they came up with can be viewed on a [padlet](#).

This was followed by a lively discussion, including practical examples of how the basic principle of using past experience to inform future practice might help students with different physical

disabilities. Giving students plenty of opportunities to talk about their experiences and taking this high-quality feedback seriously was considered to be particularly important here.

Maha Bali, Associate Professor of Practice at the Center for Learning and Teaching, American University in Cairo and co-founder of Virtually Connecting and Equity Unbound, introduced her talk with a question: What does equity in dialogue look like? Equity means that all participants will have access to the spaces where the dialogue will take place: so, if it is an online space, they will need a fast, reliable connection and the right software; they will feel comfortable in that space; and they will have some power to influence what goes on there. The second point, about comfort, is also one about culture: for example, some students may feel that they are unable to participate in discussion because their culture places a high value on not interrupting. Questions about, for example, how an online room is set up, who is allowed to speak when and which features are automatically enabled are concerned with power.

Maha cited the American philosopher Nancy Fraser who described three 'dimensions' of social justice as economic, cultural and political. Some interventions that were designed to promote justice may end up doing the reverse. Simply giving everyone the resources to reach the same goal may not be sufficient; if students, metaphorically, need oranges it is not sufficient to give them equal access to apples. She quoted Desmond Tutu as saying "*I am not interested in picking up crumbs of compassion thrown from the table of someone who considers himself my master. I want the full menu of rights*". In offering students the opportunity of creating their own 'menu', we, as educators, will – or at least should – be offering *intentionally equitable hospitality*: if we intend to be hospitable to all students, we will need to pay attention to the inequities faced by each one. Not all inequities, like not all disabilities, are visible.

Shirley Chisholm, who was the first black woman to be elected to the US House of Representatives, once said '*If they don't give you a seat at table, bring a folding chair*'. Maha ended her presentation with an exercise. She showed the audience images of social spaces – a formal dinner, a group of chairs by a lake, a 'dinner table' on the floor, a campfire and others – and asked her audience which of these we would feel comfortable pulling a folding chair up to. It is our task to make all students feel welcome in all our learning spaces.

The third talk, by **El Spaeth**, senior academic and digital development adviser at the University of Glasgow, followed immediately after Maha's and focused on the important issue of neurodiversity. This 'catch-all' phrase refers to people diagnosed with an enormous variety of neurological conditions, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia and Tourette's syndrome. Neurodiversity implies that their brains are not 'worse' (or even 'better') than typical brains, just different. Almost any student cohort is almost bound to include at least one 'neurodivergent' student, yet we all tend to design our teaching with an imagined student in mind and that student will be neurotypical. 'Non-imagined' students, including neurodivergent ones, are likely to be disadvantaged.

The changes that the pandemic has forced on our teaching have given us the chance of improving the experiences of some, although not all, of our neurodivergent students. Communication with students has tended to become clearer and more explicit, and when things are changing rapidly fewer assumptions can be made. These changes have clear benefits for students on the autistic spectrum. Furthermore, many neurodivergent students benefit from the self-pacing and self-regulation that online learning allows. Students who find eye contact difficult often relate well to

online content, and it is not always noticeable if a student appears not to be paying attention. Neurodivergent students often act as if they are distracted – they may fidget, move around or eat during sessions – but they may still be learning well. Finally, captioning can be helpful to neurodivergent students as well as those who are hearing impaired.

These examples echo Virna’s comments about student diversity and about accessibility as a process. Working with neurodivergent students will remind us that there is no ‘best’ way to learn; ideally, we will be supporting all our students to learn in the way that suits them best in an environment that is welcoming and safe.

The session ended with a lively and extensive discussion that picked up these points about student difference, and about accessible practice working for everyone and not only for those with a clinical diagnosis. Designing sessions that are reassuring for students with anxiety disorders will help those suffering from common, everyday anxiety and fonts and colours that dyslexic students find easier to read will be clear and pleasant for neurotypical ones. As we emerge slowly from the pandemic and begin to think about reintroducing some face-to-face teaching, we should take care not to lose sight of those changes that neurodiverse and other disadvantaged students have found helpful.

The next webinar in this series will take place after the Easter break, on 6 May 2021, and will discuss institutional responses to the COVID crisis and the innovations that have been driven by the shift online.

■ *Dr Clare Sansom, 30 March 2021*