

Supporting the Student Voice and Students as Partners in a Blended Environment

Experiences in Digital Learning Webinar

The Experiences in Digital Learning webinars are a collaboration between the Centre for Online and Digital Education (CODE), based at the University of London, and ULIP, the University of London in Paris. These webinars have given educators an opportunity to explore the rapid advances in digital learning, teaching and assessment that have taken place since the pandemic forced almost all higher education online. During 2022-23, arguably the first 'post-COVID' academic year, this third series of webinars is considering the timely theme of blended learning: how face-to-face and online teaching mesh together.

The second of the 2022-23 webinars focused on our students, with two speakers presenting contrasting perspectives. Firstly, **Eddie Plaskitt**, the current President of the Student Union at ULIP, gave a personal and practical view of the student experience during and after COVID, and then **Donna Smith** from the Open University in the UK described a research project in partnership with the students in her department. It was chaired by CODE Director **Linda Amrane-Cooper**.

Linda first introduced **Eddie**, a third-year student of French and business at ULIP and who was Student Union education officer before taking on the role of President there. He had begun his studies in 2019-20 and so never experienced an academic year in the 'old normal': his cohort found lockdown in Paris particularly challenging because of extensive travel restrictions there. ULIP is a small institution with only a couple of hundred students and, under normal conditions, excellent staff-student relationships, but they almost universally found these difficult to establish without face-to-face interaction.

Like very many institutions, ULIP adopted a mix of in-person and online teaching late in the pandemic and is persevering with this: there has been no return to the teaching and learning experiences of 2019. Zoom and Teams are still very much part of the mix, and students use digital technology all the time, even in face-to-face classes. Eddie has noted that it can be harder to learn basic skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving if taught wholly online. Another experience common to students now experiencing face-to-face classes for the first time has been the pleasure of using physical books and the sets of papers known as 'readers' that are distributed at the start of each module. There are, of course, online equivalents of these, but they are not as easy to annotate or to study in groups.

Artificial intelligence, which can be thought of as the next disruption to higher education, is already playing a large part in language teaching. This is particularly apparent in teaching translation, as students who become professional translators will need to use it extensively in their day-to-day work. Eddie and his fellow language students are now expected to use AI-based tools in their work, both to engage with and critique automatic translations and to draft collaborative projects and presentations. This is a far more positive way of dealing with these developments than simply regarding them as a threat to academic integrity, but there are still problems. Eddie recognises that these tools, which were not developed with scholarship in mind, are poorly suited to rigorous work: hence the need for a constant critique.

Finally, Eddie turned to his experiences in the Students Union. His roles there have given him the opportunity to engage with staff as well as students in developing student support during and after

the pandemic, and he understands something of how students can be encouraged to stay engaged. Through all these experiences, he has learned much of the advantages – and the disadvantages – of the various software tools that can be employed to help students and staff.

Linda then introduced **Donna**, who is a senior lecturer in politics and Deputy Associate Dean for Teaching and Students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the Open University, UK; she is also a CODE Fellow. Her talk, entitled ‘Working with POLIS students as partners: opportunities and challenges’, described a piece of research she had conducted to demonstrate that collaboration between staff and students in the Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) at the OU can help build student community and support retention. This work, now published in the journal [Politics](#), analyses the effect of working with students as research partners in a still ongoing student engagement project in collaboration with the UK Parliament.

Donna explained that the value of student community as a concept is increasingly recognised in UK higher education, at least partly because of the importance placed on it by the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). This recognises explicitly that fostering student community is key to student outcomes (continuation and completion). It is generally understood that ‘student community’ can take many forms: it can be formal or informal, and, separately, it can be academic or more social. There are thus four different types of activity that, together, lead to the integration of students into an academic community:

- **Formal and academic**, such as a piece of assessed work
- **Informal and academic**, such as day-to-day interactions between students and staff
- **Formal and social**, such as organised extracurricular activities
- **Informal and social**, such as peer to peer socialising

In a [classic book on student retention](#), Vincent Tinto (1994) suggested that students need several of these activities to be integrated into a department or institution so they feel a ‘sense of belonging’. And one aspect of creating student community that has gained much traction in recent years is that of involving students in joint endeavours to shape teaching and learning at their institutions. The term ‘students as partners’ is most often used to refer to students working with staff but can also refer to student-student interactions. This type of work offers many advantages:

- Working in partnership with academics can have a positive effect on student motivation, confidence and achievement.
- Concrete results from projects including students can help to counter recent challenges concerning the perceived value of courses in politics and other social sciences.
- Improving student retention can increase the perceived monetary value of a course to the government or taxpayer.

As Donna used the term, it described situations where students work with academics and with each other to foster engaged student learning through, for example, developing new curricular or extra-curricular materials. In this, all participants are actively engaged and can benefit from the process.

Donna then presented a case study from her own department, ‘*Changemakers*’. This research project was co-designed with OU Politics students and set out to engage the general public in learning about political engagement. It was divided into two parts, running in autumn 2020 and autumn 2021 respectively. The first part was a social media exercise in which participants were invited to nominate an individual they admired who had changed society at any level (national to local) or inspired other

people to make such a change. The second part used the nominated 'changemakers' as examples in an online guide to making change. Two politics students each year were paid to work on the project, and all others invited to contribute as much or as little as they were able to. This public engagement project was separate from, but linked to, the undergraduate politics curriculum. They now intend to expand it in two ways: developing the Changemakers booklet into a short online course and researching the level of active citizenship and political engagement by young people in the UK and the impact of the project on the student community.

Donna explained further that the project had been designed to integrate students into the OU's politics department both academically and socially through working together on an extracurricular activity. One problem she identified is the asymmetry of students' experiences; although students were given equal opportunities to participate, the level to which they did so depended critically on their confidence and their resources, including that of time. Time was also seen as critical for levels of staff engagement. Overall, however, she concluded that the case study could have wider, national implications for curriculum design and student engagement in teaching undergraduate politics. In particular, she would be interested to find out how a similar project would work out in a more traditional campus-based setting.

Linda then chaired an extensive discussion, with questions posed to both speakers. She began by asking Donna what impact her project had had on her own work as an educator. Donna explained that the idea of students as partners had developed organically along with the project. It had been difficult to prioritise, and she could only find the time to develop it through the support of her department and particularly her colleagues. Later, Donna explained that they have increased the project's accessibility by developing a version of the guide in Welsh, and are working on one in Gaelic.

One participant asked Eddie for more examples of how digital technology can aid the teaching and learning of French. He cited one hybrid exercise in which he and colleagues were asked to prepare a 'Dragon's Den' type presentation in French, and another where he prepared a CV in French for discussion at a mock interview. These had worked because they offered authentic (or near authentic) 'real world' experiences. Another asked him if he could recommend an AI platform for students to use. Not surprisingly, his answer focused on the near universal ChatGPT, but this has the major disadvantage of being a general tool. It would be interested to see how a large language AI model could be specifically adapted to help students with research.

Both speakers also mentioned AI in response to a question on developing digital literacy. Today's students can expect to use it explicitly or implicitly throughout their careers, but we are still 'playing catch-up' as we don't know yet how the technology will develop. It is, however, far too negative and simplistic to think of it just in terms plagiarism. Students need to use it, but must be taught to do so effectively and responsibly.

In ending the session, Linda promised that the challenges that the rapid development of AI poses to higher education would be addressed in future webinars. The next in this series, however, will focus on scholarship and research in education and will take place in June.