

Inclusive learning development practices: the consequences of flexibility and choice in the hybrid era

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic, and the move to online teaching and learning, has provided opportunities for the learning development (LD) community to find new and innovative pedagogical approaches to providing a more inclusive learning environment. Many of these opportunities are now being incorporated into a new hybrid era of teaching, which seeks to build the 'best of both worlds'. To embrace this new era of flexibility, hybrid learning and teaching strategies need to be developed rather than merely being a reaction to a global health emergency. Based on the experiences of two learning developers at different UK institutions, this paper reflects on the benefits and disadvantages of a hybrid mode of delivery of one-to-one tutorials, one of the cornerstones of LD provision. Within this paper we define hybrid teaching as a combination of online and physical environments (Gamage et al., 2022).

Keywords: hybrid teaching; learning development support; flexible teaching practices; inclusive practices.

Whilst in-person teaching has resumed after the pandemic restrictions ended, it is perhaps unrealistic to imagine life will return entirely to the pre-Covid world anytime soon. Therefore, we are likely to be entering a new era within higher education (HE), that of a hybrid teaching model. Such an approach provides a whole host of advantages, such as

the enhanced opportunities for personalisation and individualisation of hybrid teaching methods in HE (Khine et al., 2021), that learning developers (LDs) can embrace in their one-to-one support to create a more inclusive learning environment. This is especially relevant for LD tutorials. For example, if students pre-Covid had been hesitant in attending a face-to-face tutorial, a hybrid approach provides greater choice and efficiency in when and how students interact with LD support. Thus, a hybrid approach can help LD support transpose time and space (Khine et al., 2021). From a wider perspective, if one of the key roles of HE is to prepare students for the world of work, then, given the widespread adoption of remote working, this will inevitably impact on the HE environment (Miroshnikov, 2021). In other words, hybrid teaching and learning becomes the logical step within HE.

In our two institutions, tutorials last 50 minutes, but provision varied pre-Covid. In institution one, tutorials were offered face-to-face, with a few exceptions being made for virtual tutorials via Skype, and were predominately arranged through email. In institution two, tutorials were booked using an online form, and students had a choice between a face-to-face or a Skype appointment. In both institutions, tutorials would regularly be run back-to-back.

From our experiences, the new hybrid era has helped to build a more inclusive environment, which can positively impact on motivation, learning, and student engagement in HE (Linder, 2017). Firstly, students have been presented with a greater choice, enabling a more personalised approach, when interacting with our LD teams. In institution one this has meant that the faculty-based team now offers each student the opportunity to meet virtually or in person, where previously virtual tutorials were only offered in certain circumstances. Moreover, the team are exploring more innovative pedagogic approaches, a good example being the use of urban walks as a way of engaging with dissertation students (Psaros, 2022). Consequently, offering multiple modes of delivery can help LD to be more accessible to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse range of students (Lin, 2008).

Whilst the inclusion of online tutorials has been of benefit, particularly in offering students a greater choice, it must also be noted that online support has a number of unique

disadvantages. A major group of issues relate to social inequality, such as access to reliable technology, to stable and strong internet connection, to suitable software, and to secure private learning spaces (Devkota, 2021; Curelaru et al., 2022). Indeed, Goudeau et al. (2021), suggest that there is a social class disparity. Moreover, the required hardware and software need to be regularly updated to be capable of performing the required tasks. On several occasions in institution two a lack of such updates prevented students from engaging with interactive online teaching strategies and in peer-learning techniques. Similarly, in both our institutions a lack of stable internet connection has often hindered online tutorials, with students sometimes unable to switch on their cameras, for example. Additionally, a major limitation of the online medium is the reduced non-verbal communication resulting in less efficient communication, potential frustration, and disruption to wellbeing monitoring during one-to-one LD tutorials (Delderfield et al., 2020). Moreover, geographical location, time zone, and varying weather patterns have a significant effect on human ability to invest cognitively and emotionally during an online LD tutorial. Furthermore, online learning during the height of the pandemic led to increased levels of stress and anxiety amongst students for a number of reasons including isolation, difficulties in using technology (Akpınar, 2021), and the loss of impromptu discussions that are part of informal face-to-face contact (Morrison et al., 2021).

A further challenge is that, based on our own experiences, online teaching and support is more physically tiring (Bryson and Andres, 2020) for students and staff. Therefore, LD teams should plan shorter periods for online support than face-to-face. The lack of requirement for physical movement between meetings in online spaces, for example, unlike in the in-person environment, could lead to having multiple meetings following on from each other, resulting in screen fatigue (Shoshan and Wehrt, 2021; De Oliveira Kubrusly Sobral et al., 2022; Lepp et al., 2022), eye strain (Ganne et al., 2021; Salinas-Toro et al., 2022), and increasing the chance of cardiovascular disease (Taylor, 2011) as well as other health-related challenges (Baker et al., 2018). In institution two this has led the LD team, who are centrally based, to have a pre-planned 30-minute screen break after each 50-minute one-on-one LD tutorial. Similarly, in institution one, rather than back-to-back tutorials, space has been built in for screen breaks. Furthermore, in a hybrid environment both students and staff should be able to engage seamlessly with teaching and learning activities in both online and campus-based media. Potentially, having a one-

to-one online LD tutorial, followed by campus-based teaching, and then another online interactive subject-related workshop, will be part of the new hybrid era. Thus, scheduling transition breaks will ensure gaps between online and face-to-face activities, and enable students and staff to have time to move effectively between the two media.

Flexibility of access to LD support and provision is another key feature of the new hybrid era that should be built in at the planning stage. In institution one, for example, the LD team has increased the number of ways in which students can book tutorials, adding an online booking system to existing email and face-to-face booking systems. This relates to a wider point around the need for LD teams to ensure equal access to online and campus-based support. This is particularly important in our own institutions given the lack of campus-based tutorials over the past two academic years, and the need to ensure that LD support is not perceived as solely an online activity.

Based on our experiences, the hybrid era can bring particular benefits in the delivery of LD one-on-one tutorials, such as greater choice in communication methods and increased flexibility for meeting with LD teams. By carefully planning hybrid LD support, practitioners can ensure that social inequality and health-related issues will be minimised, while effective communication is optimised. If this can be achieved, then LD tutorials can have a positive impact on the motivation, learning, and engagement in HE of an increasingly diverse student population.

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