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'Beyond the crisis': accepting and adapting to the virtual academic skills workshop

Laura Key

Leeds Beckett University, UK

Presentation abstract

This lightning talk examined the journey taken to re-create and co-construct the Academic Skills Workshop Programme on offer at Leeds Beckett University, an interactive and inclusive online classroom adapted due to the impact of Covid-19. A 'learning on the go' and 'trial and error' approach involving continuous evaluation was adopted for the creation of the programme, which was informed by staff and student feedback. The approach helped move this new and varied programme beyond the crisis point of Covid-19 towards a more robust online presence for future purpose. Key considerations helping to shape the programme included creating a sense of community and belonging online, co-creating a curriculum that addressed student feedback and needs, and responding to student wellbeing as well as academic skills development. This resulted in the redevelopment of an entire workshop programme, offered to students via BB Collaborate. Sixteen workshops were rewritten as one-hour interactive webinars, asynchronous materials and resources were provided for 24/7 availability, and a central sign-up service was offered via the institute's MyHub interface. Already established principles in online learning were taken into account during the development process (Anderson, 2008; Nguyen, 2015).

These adaptations saw a twofold increase in student participation during 2020-2021 (1,107 students, 53%) compared to 2018-2019 (410 students, 20%) and 2019-2020 (562 students, 27%). Learnings and successes from this project ranged from being adaptable and available, and offering different formats for learning where webinars were a feature, to seeing online learning as normal. Challenges that continue to be pondered are the value of face-to-face classrooms vs online, creating more 'on-demand' learning resources, blog posts, podcasts, and study modules available 24/7 for self-directed learning.

The presentation hoped to share our experience as a team, but also to offer an opportunity to hear about broader thoughts and experiences relating to academic skills webinar delivery at HE institutions since the Covid-19 pandemic began.

Community response

The systematic process of redesigning the team's Open Programme workshops with a view to online delivery clearly acknowledges that the differences between in-person LD workshops, on the one hand, and webinars on the other, go beyond the 'surface' element of delivery space, and into more complex distinctions related to pedagogical approaches, learning strategies and environments. This resonates with my own experience of coordinating a similar programme of workshops at my institution. Though initially we took an emergency response approach, pivoting to online delivery within weeks to ensure we continued to provide a service to our students, we had a similar experience of 'trial and error' with regards to almost every aspect of developing our virtual workshops – from session design and software options to accessibility and engagement. We were supported throughout the process by the incredibly positive response from our students, reflected not only in booking and attendance statistics (a sharp increase in 20/21 after the pivot to online delivery as compared to previous face-to-face delivery), but also in their feedback, which acknowledged our efforts despite inevitable failings. These examples, and others shared by colleagues, clearly demonstrate that in the context of the pandemic, LD practitioners were quick to respond to the challenge, take initiative in finding new ways to support students, and often provided examples of good practice at institutional level. While questions about the most appropriate and inclusive delivery mode/s continue to represent a key concern for LD practitioners and became a prominent theme of the conference, I feel these lessons in conjuring responsive, student-oriented pedagogical solutions will be equally important in the future.

The presenter's experience of shifting instruction online mirrored my own, despite it taking place in another sector, which suggests that the challenges may be common and lead to a shift in expectations and the development of a 'new normal'.

The big question is how do we take 'the good stuff' from the Covid-19 experience and make sure we use it effectively going forward? The ability to be flexible and adaptable for

all has been a great achievement. Similarly, we have had to be creative and put in an enormous amount of work. I have seen a wide range of 'adaptations' or 'lack of adaptations' when we were all thrown into the virtual world. At the initial stage, we were all operating in 'pilot mode'. The majority of educators had limited experience working completely remotely or delivering completely online. We all did the best we could initially. What has been interesting to see is how educators have continued to develop the virtual learning environment. We MUST consider what has worked well and we should not shy away from virtual delivery, taking away the learnings gained. This presentation truly reflected the best of a rapid adaptability to virtual delivery and a key desire to learn and develop further, using experiences gained.

Next steps and additional questions

What are the most appropriate and inclusive delivery modes in the post-pandemic world? What should the 'new normal' look like? What do we take with us from the crisis, and what do we want to leave behind? What are the necessary skills that LDs should develop that favour adaptability and flexibility for changing environments?

Author's reflection

The community response to this lightning talk was very thought-provoking, raising questions about academic skills delivery modes and the future of hybrid learning. It was clear that my presentation tapped into more general uncertainty in the sector about what we can take from the pandemic situation, and which elements of the crisis we might want to leave behind. The general consensus was that time and thought need to be put into the development of LD programmes that take the best elements of online learning forward – for example, flexibility, accessibility and transportability. Deidre Casey's (2020) work on the pandemic as providing resilience in the face of any potential future disruptions to face-to-face learning is an interesting read in this respect.

Concentrating specifically on LD workshops, it was useful to hear how colleagues from other institutions have experienced similar challenges and successes with online delivery and that the online workshop seems to be becoming a staple of LD programmes more

widely, even if face-to-face is still offered. This adds weight to LBU's commitment to keeping the workshops online in the first instance. Clearly, statistics, feedback and review processes all need to be embedded in the aim to deliver sessions that are not only academically valuable to the student body, but are also a useful addition (in terms of staff time and effort) to the institution in question. Another matter to be borne in mind is the risk of heightening digital inequalities with a move to online or hybrid learning (Belluigi et al., 2020), and any movement towards increased use of digital technologies must therefore be taken with caution and in conversation with students so that feasibility is considered.

Being part of the lightning talk session was enlightening, as there were clear synergies between the presentations – especially in terms of institutions being at something of a crossroads with decisions over the most suitable balance between face-to-face and online delivery. Upon reflection, it is probable that we need an entire calendar year under 'normal' (i.e. not restricted by pandemic regulations) circumstances before we can gain a more accurate picture of what LD teaching might look like in the longer term, both at my university and across the sector. What is certain is that both staff and programmes will need to develop a degree of flexibility to ensure that online and hybrid learning meets the requirements of students and HEIs alike – and this will necessitate further learning, which can be fostered successfully through continued inter-institutional collaboration.

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Author details

Laura Key has worked in HE for over a decade, holding roles at the Universities of Manchester and Liverpool and the University Centre at Bradford College, before joining the Library Academic Support Team at Leeds Beckett University in 2018. It was during her studies for a PhD in American Literature that Laura first became interested in teaching pedagogy, and she counts resource development as one of her strengths in her present role of Academic Skills Tutor. Laura's recent achievements include the co-development of the Leeds Beckett Essay X-ray tool (funded by the university's Centre for Teaching and Learning) and she is also an AdvanceHE Fellow (FHEA).