

New to Virtual Teaching

A travel report from Dr Eleni Philippou, Faculty of English

With COVID-19 throwing the world into disarray, universities and schools across the UK and further abroad suddenly had to move to hybrid or online learning. In a matter of just a few weeks, I found myself in the same position as many of my colleagues, expected to think about how to teach students remotely – some of whom were living many time zones apart.

Thankfully, I was recently able to attend (online, of course!) a *New to Virtual Teaching* course offered by Advance HE – formerly Higher Education Academy (HEA) – a British professional membership scheme that promotes excellence in higher education. Advance HE offers expertise and resources to support the higher education community in order to enhance the quality and impact of learning and teaching. This two-week course explored effective learning plans for study in an online and hybrid environment. We collectively discussed the selection and use of assessment and feedback tools that support online learning. We also talked about the creative use of digital tools and ways to ethically enhance learning opportunities for all students.

The course acknowledged that there is a general negative perception that online teaching is inferior to face-to-face teaching. Certainly, complaints about online teaching range from minor and comic (students getting interrupted by their pets) to more major structural issues (questions of accessibility and digital poverty). The digital divide is a real and pressing problem, not simply as one between the developed and the developing worlds, but one that is prevalent even within the UK. There are students and learners who have problems both accessing a computer and having adequate bandwidth in their homes to join camera-heavy classes. With the digital divide presenting itself in terms of the scarcity of equipment, Wi-Fi, or skills, the course impressed upon the attendees that lecturers have to make a concerted effort to create inclusive learning environments, by thinking of their classes as a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous activities – live-streamed instruction vs work that can be done at any time.

As the *New to Virtual Learning* course progressed, it became apparent that online and hybrid teaching can be very effective in myriad ways. Information can be provided to students in a visual and digestible manner through different digital tools; students who lack confidence feel less shy speaking in the digital realm; and video recordings of lectures are excellent for revision. Moreover, guest lecturers from anywhere in the world can easily be invited to partake in a class – a great luxury!

After attending this course, I understood that online and hybrid teaching was here to stay, in some form or another. Students find aspects of this type of learning beneficial, and in a pre-pandemic world where students felt more in control of their university experience, many actively asked for at least parts of their courses to include an online element. A recent study by WonkHE and Pearson (2019) – ‘Students’ experiences of study during Covid-19 and hopes for future learning and teaching’ – showed that students hoped a number of online learning features would continue in the future: online access to support services such as wellbeing and careers; all core learning materials accessible via the virtual learning environment; and recorded lectures. Certainly, after this rude awakening into the 21st century’s world of online teaching, lecturers, and students alike should take advantage of whatever resources and techniques can inform and enhance the learning experience!

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Biography

Dr Eleni Philippou is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Oxford Comparative Criticism and Translation (OCCT) research centre, based jointly at St Anne’s and The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities. She is also the Academic Mentor for Oxford’s recently-launched MSt for Comparative Literature and Critical Translation.