

How can we reach more students using virtual technology while maintaining quality teaching?

Context of project

Matt Mullenweg, founder of *wordpress.com*, said 'technology is best when it brings people together' (Angel). This is the ethos behind the ESOL department at West Suffolk College whose experimentation with virtual learning has found new ways to maximise learning opportunities and improve student experiences.

For many ESOL students, face-to-face (FF) learning is impossible. These students are primary care-givers, have demanding work shifts and many have no access to transportation. Of course, the COVID pandemic, and other sicknesses are another barrier. Despite these limits, the ESOL department strives to provide quality English instruction to as many students as possible. One way to maximise learning opportunities is to teach hybrid classes with students attending FF and online in the same classroom.

Our intention is to:

- Maximise learning opportunities to all students.
- Provide a meaningful learning environment.
- Provide effective lessons that support our student's development.

This project seeks to assess our success in achieving these goals. I experimented with different approaches to hybrid learning while collecting feedback from students. Using surveys on Microsoft Forms, I recorded their views and collected their comments across a five-week period.

Actions taken during project

A class was set up in Haverhill. Nine students, who were to start the ESOL writing course, were united with a class of online students at the same level of ability. This online group was set up on Microsoft Teams and included students from Felixstowe, Stowmarket and Ipswich.

I worked the virtual classroom at the front of the class while the FF students sat in their usual seats. The FF students had paper copies of the class materials while the online students used digital copies I had emailed them. I shared my screen on Microsoft Teams so the online students could see me interact with the lesson materials. The FF students could also see my screen and their online classmates faces as my computer was projected on the wall behind me. The online students could see me and the rest of the class members through a webcam and speaker set up (see Fig. 1).

The scope for student access via Microsoft Teams is vast; if students have a phone or laptop and internet, they can be part of the lesson from anywhere in the world. The online students responded to this very well. On the feedback form, one commented it provided a good 'learning opportunity' despite being unable to attend FF. The FF students also seemed contented. One said 'I like going to class face to face, I don't like online courses.' They were concerned that the class would become wholly online but were relieved to know this was not the case.

I was concerned, however, that hybrid classes might limit the student's enjoyment and learning. The students were asked if hybrid classes made learning easier and the reactions were mixed (See Fig. 2). Two thirds of the students who disagreed were online students. The comments revealed that it was difficult for them to hear people talking at the back of the room.

Hybrid online and face to face made learning easier.

Strongly agree	2
Agree	4
Neutral	6
Disagree	3
Strongly disagree	0



One online student's feedback said, 'we are there to exchange information which is not easy for the people from the online group.' Another wrote 'I can hear very well my teacher but nothing else. That's very stressful.' Student collaboration is essential to the learning experience (Wilson). The students can feel isolated without peer communication despite the teacher's vigilant attention to their needs. The next week, I repositioned the seating plan so that FF students sat closer to the computer where the online students would hear them better. This seemed to improve the online students experience because I received no more comments about being unable to hear. In fact, after discussing the changes I made one student's feedback said 'online lessons and face to face is a really good solution'

'Online lessons and face to face is a really good solution.'
—Student feedback

To encourage communication between FF and online students, I aimed to use fun challenging activities that unite the students. I used a Kahoot quiz which was successful because both online and FF students could see each other's scores and compete together. One student, however, could not connect to the school WIFI so they teamed up with their neighbour. Though the Kahoot quiz was reasonably successful, it took a lot of time to make. I must experiment with more activities to encourage interaction between FF and online students.

Thankfully, most lesson activities can continue as normal. The computer speakers allow online students to read texts and everyone in the classroom can follow along. Partner work can also continue but online students can only collaborate with other online students. One solution to this problem would be to provide FF students with laptops to access the Microsoft Teams meeting.

Outcomes and impact of project

Overall, this venture into hybrid learning has been a success. We have clearly achieved our goal of reaching more students. It has been positive how many we have accommodated. On the most part, students have continued their learning without too much disruption. There are takeaways we must consider for the future. We must maximise interaction between online and FF students. Online and FF must be able to see and hear each other to feel involved and engage in mutual learning and more activities must be found to increase classroom collaboration.

Future actions as a result of project

This project has found essential factors for successful hybrid lessons. Classrooms must have a computer with good speakers, webcam and an overhead projector. Seating must be arranged so that online and FF students can see and hear each other. To further aid this, external microphones could be set up amongst the FF students to pick up their voices clearly. Departments should invest time to discovering more online activities that encourage interaction between the students. This could involve technology or simply voice or gesture-based games in which students could work together while seeing each other with the webcam and projector.

To conclude, the positives of hybrid teaching far outweigh the negatives. I look forward to continued experimentation and I encourage other teachers to embrace the chance to reach more students and accommodate their needs.

References

- Angel, L 'A Friend called Social-Tech,' Available at: [\(PDF\) "Technology is best when it brings people together" Matt Mullenweg, a Social | Leslie Angel - Academia.edu](#)
Wilson, L (2014) 'Practical Teaching' 2nd ed. Cengage:Andover, p421

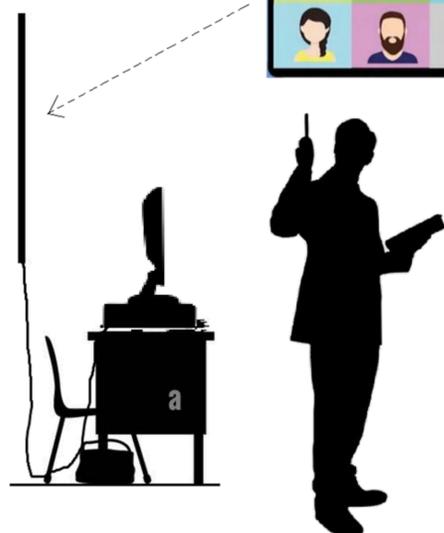


Fig. 1