2024, Vol. 7, No. 1. ISSN: 2463-3453

ATLAANZ Journal
ASSOCIATION OF TERTIARY LEARNING ADVISORS OF AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

Pivoting away from the online/offline learning binary: Reflections from an intensive academic literacies course

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Abstract

We share our experiences of developing and teaching a hybrid online-offline, intensive academic literacies course for first year undergraduate students. We position hybrid learning as valuable; however, we discuss the necessity of appropriately adapting online formats to enhance student access, engagement and resilience. In sharing what we did and what we learnt, we highlight what may be transferable for other practitioners.

Keywords: online learning, academic literacies, flexible learning, reflective practice

This article explores our experiences of developing and teaching a hybrid online/offline version of an intensive academic literacies course for first year students at a regional New Zealand university. In sharing what we did and what we learnt, we highlight what may be transferable for other practitioners. Following years of pandemic lockdowns, which forced online learning to happen quickly and reactively, we wish to position online learning as a valuable option which does not need to be separate from on-campus learning.

Sheridan, B., Gurney, L., & Richardson, A. (2024). Pivoting away from the online/offline learning binary: Reflections from an intensive academic literacies course. *ATLAANZ Journal 7*(1), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.26473/ATLAANZ.2024/003

We reflect on what we learnt from our experiences that may be of value to other tertiary educators working with hybrid learning, particularly for those working with students new to tertiary study. We also discuss the necessity to adapt online formats of courses to enhance student access, engagement, and resilience, particularly for diverse and geographically dispersed student populations. Overall, our reflections emphasise the value of looking past the online/offline dichotomy of learning, as we move out of the reactiveness of the past few years and as tertiary education pedagogy continues to develop. This article uses task tracking data of student engagement for the course from a report composed about the course and includes graphs from that report with permission.

The shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the slow and contentious return to normality, have accentuated the tension between online and offline pedagogies. There is an understandable desire to return to the pre-COVID reality of predominantly on-campus learning on the part of many university stakeholders. There is also an awareness that such a 'turning back of the clock' seems unrealistic, as online learning (however defined) precedes the pandemic and is definitively here to stay. However, a binary understanding of online versus offline education is not a helpful way to approach the new realities of tertiary education. It is also clear that, when courses that were designed to teach on-campus shift to online, the use of eLearning technologies and practices need to be applied carefully.

Who We Are

We are based at the University of Waikato, in the central North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. Founded in 1964, the University has approximately 10,500 full-time equivalent students (Times Higher Education, 2023). Approximately 20% of students identify as Māori (Figure.NZ, 2024a; Figure.NZ, 2024b), and close to a quarter of the student body are international students (Times Higher Education, 2023). The university is also strongly connected to local Māori iwi (tribes); the larger campus sits on local iwi land, and iwi representatives act in partnership with the University Council (University of Waikato, 2023). This close relationship drives the University's concern with providing equitable access to educational opportunities and meaningful student support.

As a regional university, the University of Waikato has a large population of residential students, many of whom come from the surrounding regional towns. These local students are diverse in terms of socio-economic indicators, including lower median income and levels of educational attainment, and higher population growth and unemployment than the national average (Stats NZ Tatauranga Aotearoa, 2018).

In 2020, a series of national and regional lockdowns due to COVID-19 meant the University had to rapidly shift to an online delivery mode for all classes. However, access to the internet is uneven across Aotearoa New Zealand, with Māori, Pasifika, those living in social housing and those living in larger country towns less likely to have internet access (Grimes & White, 2019). These groups are well-represented in our region, meaning the University must service a dispersed student body with poor public transport links, limited on-campus accommodation, and a digital divide. Various international studies which examine the impacts of COVID-19 education policies have also highlighted these obstacles (Abou-Khalil et al., 2021; García-Alberti et al., 2021; Lassoued et al., 2020). This context informed our course redesign.

eLearning and Academic Literacies

The first consideration when approaching the online/offline learning binary is that eLearning and online learning are broad terms which are often used without being fully defined. They encompass a range of pedagogical approaches which utilise internet-based tools to various degrees. eLearning can involve fully online delivery modes, in which students interact with teachers and peers entirely through online technological interfaces, or it can involve a blended delivery or hybrid approach in which there are elements of online and face-to-face (F2F) delivery (Ahel & Lingenau, 2020). Blended modalities can also involve a range of intersections between any number of online delivery technologies and modes of F2F instruction, perhaps the most common being the flipped-classroom methodology where students engage with online content in their own time (e.g., via online lectures or readings) and come together for F2F discussion (Buil-Fabrega et al., 2019). A primary characteristic of such hybrid approaches is that they straddle the online/offline divide, and thus offer an approach not constrained by binary oppositions between F2F and online pedagogies.

The constraints of time and locality can be addressed through the flexibility offered by eLearning, which offers access to wide range of resources as well as information and can still promote a collaborative learning environment (Coman et al., 2020). However, the temporal nature of any online learning technology or activity must also be considered; online learning can involve both synchronous and asynchronous technologies and activities – for example, timetabled learning activities like videoconferencing classes, as well as content which students can access in their own time. Synchronous online learning activities, while mirroring in some ways the F2F teaching and learning experience, do not offer students or teaching staff the same temporal flexibility as asynchronous approaches, which has long been an important aspect of online learning.

However, a structural limitation to online learning is the digital divide, which concerns inadequate internet infrastructure, costs and technical problems (Coman et al., 2020; Simonova et al., 2023). This is particularly the case with lower socio-economic status and rural students in limited access regions, as is the case at this institution.

Videos, which are a popular option for sharing material asynchronously, can be highly effective educational tools. Video-based learning can improve learning outcomes, facilitate student engagement, and assist with the professional development of teachers (Scagnoli et al., 2019; Weng et al., 2023). Crucial aspects of developing effective educational and instructional videos, identified by Coman et al. (2020), include effective digital infrastructure and internet access to avoid interruptions, and user-friendly tools to assist students with understanding content. The importance of variety and reliability in resources, mitigating isolation by forming communities online, and utilising alternative methods like debates and experiential learning were also noted (Coman et al., 2020). They also emphasise providing ways to keep both staff and students informed regarding policies, as well as encouraging cooperation between institutions. The advice presented by Coman et al. (2020) informs strategies for constructing online learning spaces and producing instructional videos. The use of videoconferences can be a vital part of learning, taking the place of in-person interactions, while enabling teachers to set group tasks and encourage the use of collaborative teaching tools (Coman et al., 2020; Janbani & Osmani, 2023).

Student engagement when learning online can be affected by various factors. For instance, synchronous teaching through video conferencing is effective for developing a sense of belonging and fostering meaningful interactions (O'Reilly & García-Castro, 2022).

Additionally, student engagement can be enhanced through interactive videos or, in the case of WRITE100, activities based on video content (O'Reilly & García-Castro, 2022; Scagnoli et al., 2019). Therefore, a mixture of both video-based learning and videoconferencing, with approaches such as providing interactivity related to the content, can manage cognitive engagement (O'Reilly & García-Castro, 2022) while balancing the videos with other course materials (Scagnoli et al., 2019). These overall points are supported by the findings in a study during COVID-19 restrictions by Abou-Khalil et al. (2021) where participants responded that video recordings and interaction with instructors are effective strategies for online student engagement.

Design of the Course

Our course develops students' academic literacy skills across four targeted modules. The modules address academic communication through key language structures, functions, research and referencing skills, and common text types in higher education. The course design is grounded in the academic literacies model, which positions communication as embedded within disciplinary communities of practice (see Lea & Street, 2006; Maldoni, 2017). We aim to socialise students into the norms and expectations of academic communication at the tertiary level, equipping them with tools to ease their transition, while avoiding framing academic language as context-free, universal, or static. We encourage students to see themselves as beginner members of their disciplinary communities, and to develop their awareness of the ways in which their disciplinary communities communicate, establish their identities, present and defend knowledge, and see the world. Within academic language learning approaches, this stance is most aligned with the embedded approach, which sees academic literacy skills most effectively taught within discipline-specific study (see Maldoni, 2018; Wingate, 2018). However, as the course is offered to students studying across disciplines, the embedded aspect is accommodated through both teaching students explicitly about differences in disciplinary practices – developing their metaknowledge and awareness of communication within communities of practice – and allowing students to tailor their assessment work within their disciplines of study. For instance, students can select assignment topics based on their subject area and choose either an essay or report in their final written assignment. This pragmatic choice allows us to offer the course to all students who are new to university study, while avoiding a 'bolt-on' approach (Wingate, 2006) which

abstracts academic communication from context and treats it as one-size-fits-all. The teaching materials explicitly frame academic communication as varied, embedded, and dynamic, and we encourage students to notice differences in the ways in which texts are structured and shaped across the courses they take. There are also benefits to addressing basic aspects of formal English, such as sentence structure and paragraphing, which students can transfer across areas of study.

While this course is taught as a full-trimester offering (12 weeks), it is also offered as a four-week intensive course prior to the commencement of the academic year. It is this intensive version that we focus on in this article. The intensive version is part of a university-wide initiative to improve the transition of school leaver students entering their first year of university. The course is also taken by new students who have been out of formal education for some time – for instance, those who have spent time working and are returning to study after a gap of some years. The student cohort is ethnically diverse, spread across a range of undergraduate degree programs, from urban and rural backgrounds, as well as mixed socioeconomic status. While some students live locally, others come to campus for the four weeks of the course and stay on for the trimester, which commences one week after the course concludes.

Online-Offline Course Redesign

Administrative Organisation

The course has been run as part of the intensive program since 2019, and fully online iterations have been run during the academic year since the paper was created. However, 2023 was the first year offering an online option of the intensive course. This shift to online required changes to be made from the F2F lectures and workshops, with the first being the way the course was categorised administratively, and therefore how the course materials were hosted in the learning management system (Moodle). At our institution courses have traditionally been categorised as F2F or online (NET) papers, although hybrid delivery papers (referred to as FLEXI) are now recognised and increasingly common since the COVID disruptions. However, it has also been common practice to create different versions of the Moodle shell for each delivery mode, or to provide access to resources differently to students depending on how they are enrolled, with students being enrolled online into the relevant one

(F2F, NET or FLEXI) and thus not always having access to the teaching materials targeted at the other cohorts.

A particularly noteworthy aspect of this new FLEXI (blended delivery) version of the course was the administrative approach of enrolling all cohorts (F2F or FLEXI) in the one Moodle shell and allowing all students access to all learning materials. Thus, the F2F or on campus cohort was able to access the online materials at will, and vice versa. This was an attempt to allow flexibility for students throughout their engagement with the paper and was also part of a conscious effort to blur some of the default administrative boundaries which are often imposed between the cohorts at this institution.

Content Delivery

For this new hybrid version of the course, we considered delivery of the content predominantly through lecture videos to be potentially overwhelming for new students. By tailoring online resources for online study, we wished to emulate a level of interactivity similar to the F2F lectures, while producing content that could be accessed and engaged with asynchronously.

While an online option for the full-trimester course has been offered for several years, we decided to approach the intensive version differently, given the expected levels of time commitment and work expected of students within only four weeks. Students in the full-trimester course may be expected to spend a few hours a week watching the lecture and working through online activities, and asynchronicity is important to allow these students to access content whenever they are available. The intensive course, however, does not allow for the same level of flexibility in time commitment; students are expected to dedicate 4 to 6 hours each day to complete the course and keep up with assessment work, which is scaffolded into the daily classes. Students who complete the course on campus have daily workshops during which they prepare drafts of their assessment work and receive feedback from teaching staff. In order to mirror this, we decided to redesign the online course.

A live online orientation session for the online cohort was delivered to enable a clear first contact with students. This helped to set up the students with both a point of contact and an introduction to the material. The students were familiarised with the set-up of their classes

and the expectations for participating in the course. However, in anticipation of students being unable to attend the orientation session, moving into online study from on campus, or enrolling late, instructional videos were also hosted in Moodle. These videos orientated students around the online lecture and workshop materials.

Lectures were delivered using HTML5 Package (H5P) course presentations that were accessed from Moodle. The lectures were intentionally shorter than on campus lectures and consisted of typically four videos. These videos were intentionally kept short, usually three to five minutes long. There was a deliberate attempt to ensure variation in the persons delivering the lecture content, so five different members of staff spoke on topics ranging from types of academic writing, to referencing sources, to the basics of conducting research. These videos were recorded in Panopto and embedded in the presentation, interspersed with slides of readings, and three to five comprehension exercises.

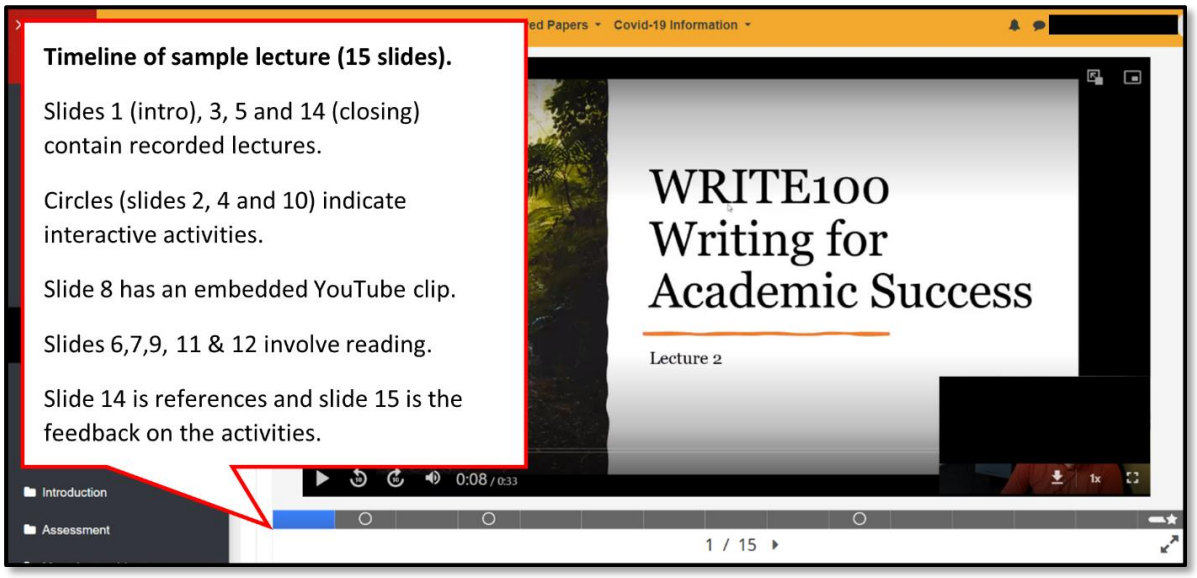

Figure 1 *Breakdown of lecture content* (Sheridan & Richardson, 2023)

The comprehension exercises would involve multiple choice questions, true/false questions, fill-in-the-blanks, or drag-and-drop activities. The activities themselves would repeat or clarify ideas or content expressed in the videos. The entire workload of a single lecture would take approximately 25 minutes. However, if a student required, they could rewatch videos, playing and pausing as needed. The display perspective of the videos could

also be altered to show the lecturer, slide display, or both. The combination of rewatching lectures and comprehension activities enabled students to achieve interactivity to clarify understanding and engagement with content, similar to on campus delivery.

Workshops

The course also involved student attendance of one-hour workshops following each lecture. These involved students either completing exercises to extend and develop ideas introduced in lectures or working on drafts of their own writing. The workshop content extending on the lectures was delivered via a social learning platform, Perusall, with the occasional use of Moodle Forums. Perusall activities involved students answering questions that had been posed by a lecturer. In the case of closed questions, students were unable to see responses until they had made a post. Whereas, open questions typically asked students to reflect on their own experiences, and students were able to see previous answers. Students also had the opportunity to post anonymously in case they were self-conscious of their answers. These Perusall engagements received instructor feedback at the end of each week because, due to the flexible nature of the course, students could engage with material at any time.

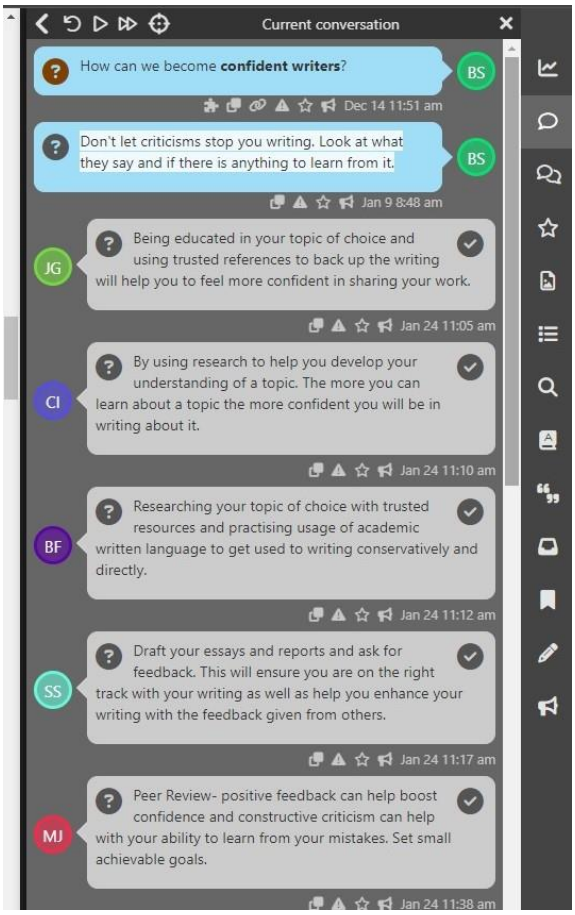

Figure 2 *Perusall activity in course* (Sheridan & Richardson, 2023)

Additionally, the workshop component of writing drafts and receiving feedback from an instructor was replicated through the use of a weekly ungraded assignment portal on Moodle. Students were encouraged to submit pieces to this portal, where they would be processed through Turnitin (but not added to the repository), and feedback could be provided. If a student wished to submit multiple pieces in a week, the Turnitin report would be downloaded as a PDF document and the first piece would be reverted to draft to be replaced by a new piece of writing. The PDF of the report would then be emailed to the student.

Such asynchronous teaching may not be a complete substitute for speaking to an instructor or lecturer directly, however. Therefore, a twice weekly Zoom session was also put in place to provide students with the opportunity for live conversation with teaching staff. Coman et al. (2020) note how videoconferencing can improve student comprehension when learning online, while Abou-Khalil et al. (2021) note the significance of both lecture recordings and teacher engagement together. For the duration of the course, these sessions

functioned similarly to office hours where students could drop in at any time during the session with questions or bring work for live feedback. The sessions also allowed students to clarify their understanding of content and in some cases get a different perspective on the content from the lecture (due to the varying presenters in the videos).

What We Learnt

While none of us are new to online learning and teaching, the hybrid course surprised us in a number of ways. Our learning can be summarised into the following points, elaborated in the paragraphs below:

- Hybridity and flexibility
- Autonomy and support
- Synchronicity

Students' participation in the online offering appeared to be influenced by various factors, including students shifting between online and on campus study over the four weeks. By the end of the first week, the online cohort comprised eighteen students. This cohort, like the on-campus cohort, was diverse. Additionally, students who found themselves unwell or moving location even in the first few days also opted to use the asynchronous module content.

The hybridity and flexibility we embedded into the course design – with the aim of ensuring that all students had access to online content, rather than splitting them into separate cohorts – became useful as we progressed through the course. For instance, the value of the online asynchronous content was also shown with the Cyclone Gabrielle event in February 2023. This tropical cyclone severely impacted the region, causing damage to homes and infrastructure (Tandon, 2023 March 14), and it prevented some students from travelling to campus due to road closures. These students were able to access the online content immediately, without making any adjustments to their enrolment, for as long as they needed. However, access to asynchronous content was not solely confined to adverse circumstances, which suggests that student engagement with the online content is more complex than being a matter of convenience. As an example of self-directed learning, on-campus students accessed online lecture material for revision purposes or clarifying points they might not have initially

understood in class. The flexible learning afforded by videos includes the ability to rewind and adjust video speed, and rewatch lecture content in a similar fashion noted by Abou-Khalil et al. (2021). Though there were 18 NET students, the following graph shows far more than just those 18 accessed the H5P course presentations.

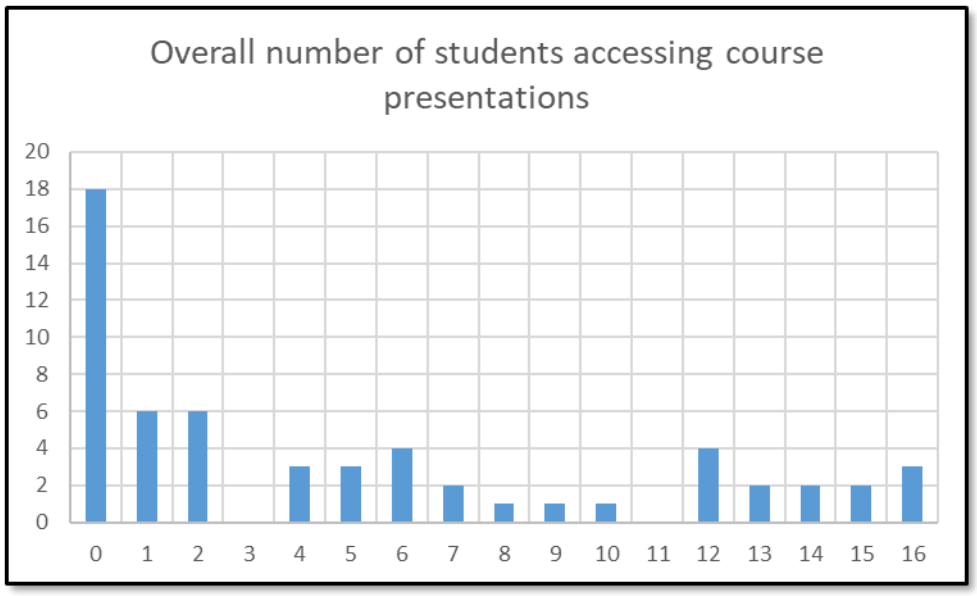

Figure 3 *Number of students accessing course presentations (x=number of presentations, y=number of students)* (Sheridan & Richardson, 2023)

Reflecting on the ways and reasons students accessed the online content, we underscore the importance of balancing student autonomy and support in hybrid learning. Literature suggests that autonomy-supportive teaching practices – which foster students' autonomy rather than controlling them – are connected to improved student engagement (Reeve et al., 2004). Allowing students the choice to access the online resources in a self-directed way may help foster independent reflection on their learning needs and help them to direct their learning more actively. Cheon et al. (2020) argue that the "integration of autonomy-supportive and structured teaching represents an ideal motivating style" (p. 10). This style informs the pragmatic need to provide clear structure, particular in courses such as ours, which was intensive and involved transitioning students into tertiary education (a context which was new to them).

Furthermore, while it was important to provide asynchronous content, it was necessary to have a level of synchronicity to foster connection with students, maintain the pace of the course, and provide a safety net. The orientation held at the beginning of the

course enabled students to build initial rapport with an instructor. This meant there was less potential for awkwardness in approaching the instructor for assistance or feedback. The twice-weekly online drop-in sessions were only used by a few online students; yet these students reflected that they found the support valuable, and it was important for the cohort to have this option available in case they needed it. The same can be said for the written feedback. There was almost no overlap between students submitting writing for written feedback and students attending drop-in sessions; by offering both services, we were able to support a wider variety of students. Staddon (2022) discusses the importance of offering 'safety nets' for students who may find online learning challenging – our drop-ins and opportunities for written feedback provide examples. Staddon (2022) encourages teachers to incorporate supportive steps, which might link learning materials with assessments, and to try to foster camaraderie and connection among students.

In terms of final outcomes for the course, there was no discernible difference between the achievement levels of the online and on-campus cohorts. While the cohorts were relatively small, this suggests to us that the online materials effectively facilitated student learning towards the course learning outcomes. This also suggests that an academic literacies approach, which aims to make connections between communication and academic communities of practice, can function online. For students, meeting their disciplinary teachers and peers can be a powerful initial step towards becoming part of such communities. Our experience indicates that these communities are distributed and that many students can access them virtually as well as in person. This may include accessing resources digitally, watching videos of experts online, and – at higher levels of study – engaging in online seminars and conferences with researchers and practitioners.

Conclusions and Future Considerations

Our experiences suggest that flexible content has great value in increasing accessibility, as well as student and institutional resilience in the face of events like pandemic lockdowns. Additional options for students to access and review material encourage student autonomy while offering support.

As a regional university, the online offering was undoubtedly convenient for learners who were not based close to campus. However, what we found in designing and teaching our

academic literacies course was that learners engaged across the online and offline materials for multiple reasons, some of which were unexpected. This included students moving across cities and regions, and others accessing online content during on-campus workshops to follow along with activities. This latter activity was noted by the logs in Perusall where students would access content in a live workshop to get an overview of the session, but did not interact with the online activities.

However, while hybrid learning has significant benefits, there is a need for adequate staffing. We would argue against framing online learning as a cost-saving measure, as this both diminishes its pedagogical potential and puts undue pressure on teachers to make the adaptation in what are often short timeframes and with few resources.

For other teachers who read this paper, we wish to underscore that aspects of our experience may not be transferable to contexts with less resourcing. We had staff who were experienced with online teaching and comfortable to deliver the online version of the course. We also had enough staff to cover the online and on-campus cohorts. Attempting to manage both cohorts simultaneously may not be feasible for a small teaching team or where one staff member is responsible for both. As we had dedicated teaching staff for both cohorts, with active levels of communication, we were able to adequately plan and deliver the course in a manageable way. Future research could examine how findings from this model might be applied in other higher education contexts and what can be implemented in more constrained conditions, such as smaller courses with less funding for teaching teams and for teams with less planning time available. Other areas with scope for greater attention include student responses to this model of learning, and how institutional buy-in for its implementation may be fostered.

Moving away from the discourse of online learning as a convenient option is key to more fully appreciating its benefits in a post-pandemic context. We agree with Staddon (2022) that there is a need to disentangle our approaches to online or hybrid learning from our reactive experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought together a host of pressures and stressors which are not typically representative of students' choices to engage in online learning. Rather than acting as a response to external influences, proactive engagement with online learning demonstrates multiple advantages in creating resilient and equitable approaches. We would encourage practitioners to treat online and F2F in a non-hierarchised manner; pivoting away from a binarised approach, considering the benefits of

each and how they may be implemented to address students' needs for flexibility and connectedness.

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