

A reflection on the DL/TEL Fireside Chat

29 May 2021 / [Fiona MacNeill](#) / [accessibility](#)
[Link to live blog post](#)

On Tuesday May 11th, 2021 a two-way fireside chat took place between the University of Brighton Digital Learning team (DL) and the University of Sussex Technology Enhanced Learning Team (TEL). The chat was accessibility-focused to recognise Global Accessibility Awareness Day (GAAD, 20th May) and discussed a year of remote teaching and high intensity 'blends' due to the pandemic. We spent an hour collaboratively reflecting, reviewing, and sharing how the rapid move to online delivery had impacted us for better or worse. We also thought about what we had learned and what we would take forward into the future.

Fiona MacNeill, who served as the discussion moderator, offers a reflection on the event as well as a summary of themes and responses. The audience were able to add questions and comments to the meeting chat, unmute to ask verbal questions, and participate in selected questions using a Mural board (online collaboration board).

Origins

I approached Matthew Taylor (Learning Technologist, Sussex TEL) about the idea of running some collaborative events in the lead up to [Global Accessibility Awareness Day](#), 20 May. Matthew and colleague, Dan Axson (Academic Developer, Sussex TEL) suggested a discursive format over a lunchtime as a means to share best practice between the two universities. The event grew organically from there and we mutually decided on a fireside chat, a structured yet also informal discussion with a moderator (Cicakova, 2019). Matthew, Dan and I used a collaborative document to devise questions for the event. This was so that the teams could prepare ahead of time and ensure that slides could be used to clearly delineate the sections of discussion. Tucker MacNeill (Learning Technologist, Brighton DL) provided the event publicity image. Jill Shacklock (Information Officer, Brighton DL) advised on advertising copy for the Eventbrite page and assisted with publicity. A truly collaborative venture!



Publicity image by Tucker MacNeill (based on public domain images)

Accessibility

Based on my own experiences at online discursive events sometimes I find them a bit disorientating. I often lose my place in the discussion especially when the questions are read out and are not also displayed onscreen. We wanted to provide the questions as visual punctuation to give the discussion clear headings, keeping it on track. We also wanted to allow the audience to refer to the questions independently. To support this during the session we collaboratively created a Google Slide deck, and the slides were shared via the chat as a link and were shared onscreen to introduce each question. After introducing each question, the screen share was ended so that we could see the group and the speakers could interact more easily. This approach was directly inspired by AbilityNet's presentations. Specifically the question and answer session, [HE/Public Sector webinar: How Cardiff Metropolitan University meets accessibility targets](#) between Annie Horn (Cardiff Met) and Alistair McNaught (2021).

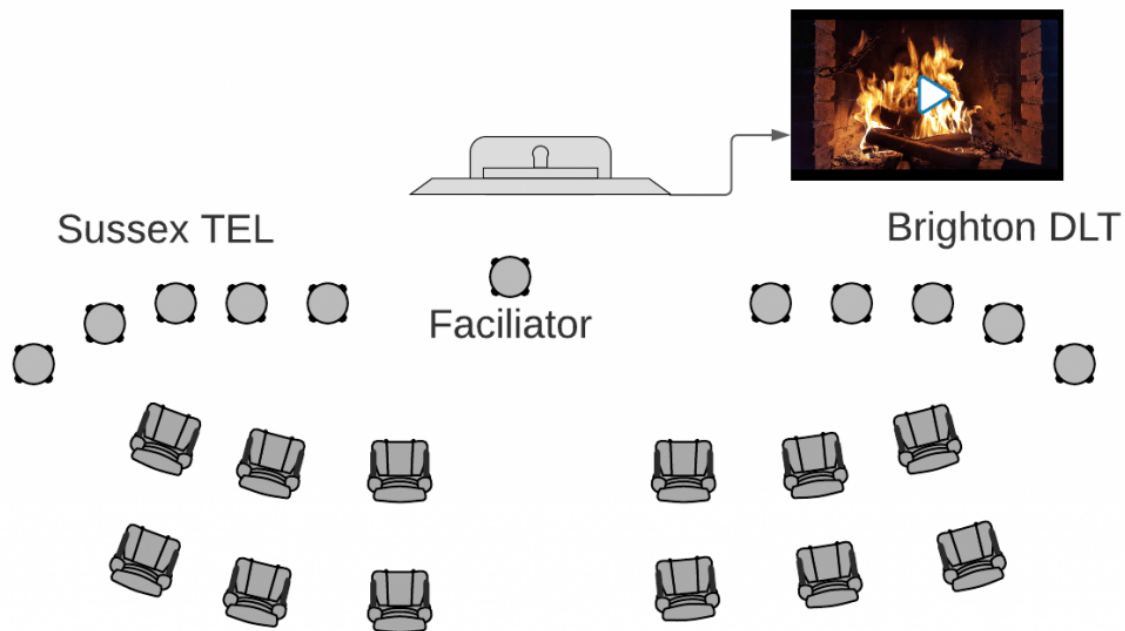
Onboarding

Matthew prepared slides outlining the interaction and accessibility tools available in the webinar tool, Zoom (provided by the University of Sussex). As the event moderator, I presented these slides at the beginning of the session and explained how the session would work, including the interactive and collaborative aspects. I also explained alternative options for answering the two questions where the mural board was used and asked for verbal feedback during those sections as well. I openly acknowledged the accessibility limitations with collaborative tools such as Mural and therefore it was important to clearly provide alternative options. Automated captions and a transcript were also provided for attendees.

- [Access the session slides](#)

- [Access a view-only template version of the Mural board used during the session](#) (without participant's comments).

We used a floor plan diagram to contextualise the online meeting space. I created this in [Lucidchart \(diagram software\)](#) and it was inspired by Dave White's [excellent blog post on Spatial Collaboration](#) (White, 2021). These elements essentially orientated or onboarded our audience to help people feel comfortable in the online space, just as we would aim to do in a real-life space.



As this was a fantasy meeting space, I decided to upgrade the audience chairs. I chose bar stools for the DL and TEL teams, to keep us on our toes.

Questions

The questions were split into three sections: *at the beginning of the pandemic; getting on with it; feeding forwards*. Essentially a *before, during, and after* structure. Members from the DL team and the TEL team were present and took turns answering the questions. Some team members preferred to share their thoughts via the chat which was equally valuable. As moderator I went through and read out some of the highlights during each question.

At the beginning of the pandemic

Question 1: How prepared were you for the teaching and learning needs of the pandemic?

- A central theme of rapid change management emerged during this question.
- Specific points related to institutional preparedness in relation to the individual preparedness of support/professional staff, academic staff, and students.

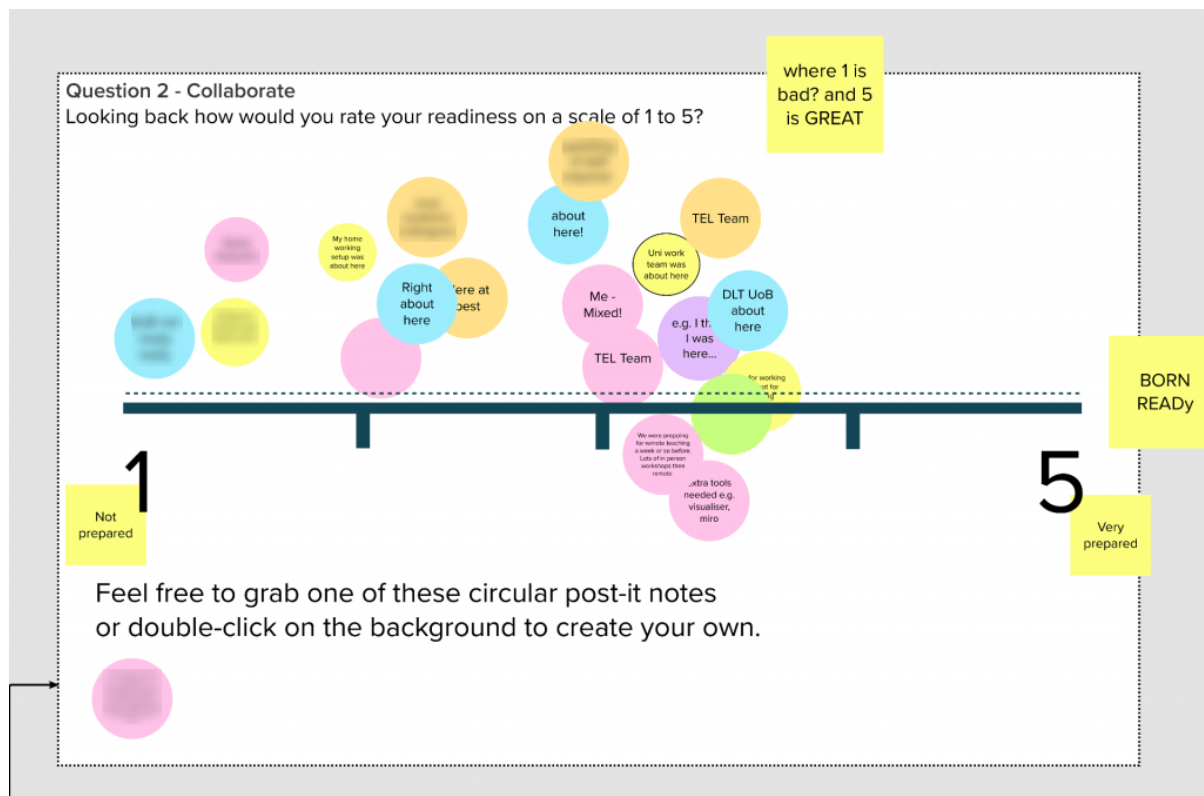
- There was a necessity to rapidly learn technologies* which up to that point had only been piloted.
- Training, development, and support had to be responsive, so usual planning and staged delivery had to change to continuous delivery. Small updates and changes in practice all the time.
- There were a lot of issues with outdated equipment in use for home working. This made it very hard to support and therefore multiple options had to be prepared for required tasks (e.g., lecture recording and options available in Microsoft Teams).
- There was a distinction between preparedness in terms of professional skills, so technology savvy folks felt okay on that, and preparedness in on a personal level. On the personal level, it was hard to be a steadfast tech-person when we were on the same emotional rollercoaster as everyone else.
- A specific issue highlighted was accessibility and online remote assessments. Where rapid adjustments and arrangements for online remote assessments, to replace in-person models were a challenge to fulfil. Sometimes a digital like-for-like replacement, for example a pre-recorded video submission to replace an in-person presentation introduced new challenges due to differing access to technology, individuals' digital capabilities, and constraints related to digital inequality.

*To provide a personal example, I had never run a screensharing session via Microsoft Teams and had to teach a session on that very topic having only 15mins to prepare.

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Question 2: Looking back how would you rate your readiness on a scale of 1 to 5?

During this question we invited people to interact with the Mural board and tell us how ready they had felt on a Likert scale of 1 to 5; 1 being unprepared to 5 being very prepared.



Someone was very enthusiastically 'Born Ready' on the right next to 5 on the scale – this gave us all a giggle.

- Some folks were surprised that home-based broadband infrastructure help up as well as did. Also, that tools such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom were able to handle the immediate and huge, scale-up of user numbers as smoothly as they did.
- Digital capabilities were noted as a challenge, both for students and staff. Those who were more confident already fared better when it came to adapting to new delivery methods. This did in many ways widen the existing skills gap and for some the gap was due to digital inequality and living circumstances rather than being related to knowledge.
- Pre-existing issues with the accessibility of content and resources became more apparent. The multimodal nature of in-person teaching can fill gaps, but when digital content becomes the only resource any issues with accessibility are magnified.
- There were issues related to captions and ensuring that they were accurate. Internal debates around whether inaccurate captions should not be turned on and the counterpoint to that, inaccurate captions are better than no captions.
- *Ready-ish* was the word used quite a bit! While most of the support materials and content was available it was the need to collate it in a context-relevant way and also at-speed which presented a challenge for both teams.

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Question 3: What was the biggest accessibility challenge you faced?

- Different functions for different devices. So, for example academic staff were predominantly working on desktops and laptops, whereas students were working on a range of devices*. It was noted that it was particularly challenging to support Chromebooks which did not offer an equivalent experience in Microsoft Teams and lacked options to record video/audio for assessment purposes. iPads also presented some challenges for staff but had better equivalency when it came to the student experience of using Microsoft Teams for example.
- Remote assessments came up again particularly some friction which arose out of attempts to reproduce in-person assessments with the, supposed, digital equivalents. Also use of the incorrect tools to support that due to lack of experience, e.g., a Turnitin submission point provided for a video-based assessment (Turnitin does not support video content and playback). Also, the challenges of ensuring that the needs of students with learning support plans were met for all types of assessment.
- There was recognition that some academic staff did the best they could with what they had, but this was not always the best for accessibility. The difficulty was that once an approach had been chosen, it was then hard to persuade academic staff to adjust that practice.
- There was the odd technical kerfuffle, but generally things had worked.
- An accomplishment at Brighton was acquiring and implementing Panopto at-speed and just-in-time for September 2020.
- Getting buy-in for accessibility was especially hard, as it can be seen as 'yet, another thing' rather than fundamental to resource creation from the beginning.

*Matt Cornock provides an excellent commentary on this paradigm (Cornock, 2021; see also Dunn, 2021).

Different functions for different devices...challenging to support.

Getting on with it

Question 4: What happened to the 'blends' as a result of remote or hybridised delivery?

- Both universities had programmes working only online. Also, there were a number of programmes that were hybridised, some sessions online and some sessions in person. As the latter meant that double-planning was needed this was a mighty task for academic staff.
- There needed to be a mix of synchronous (live and together at the same time) and asynchronous (self-paced at any time) learning and this presented challenges in terms of digital capabilities and needing to rapidly acquire or refresh skills with digital tools.
- There was a sense that in certain cases academic staff provided too much asynchronous content and students felt a bit overwhelmed. Staff were also

unsure how much was too much when they were trying to be supportive and maintain interest. It was hard to get the blend right and it needed to be tweaked all the time.

- Students' expectations and circumstances also changed over the course of the pandemic which meant that adjustments were needed. There was some disconnect between staff expectations and student expectations, particularly during webinar-style sessions where the staff wanted to see students and, in some cases, students wanted to keep webcams off and mics muted. There are a range of reasons for this, in some cases related to living situation and privacy. It was an area where staff needed to try different approaches and position live sessions as discursive to accompany pre-recorded lecture content.
- A point was made that people experienced digital content in different ways, be that students or academic staff accessing our support content. There was less feedback than there would be in face-to-face sessions, there was a whole new notion of feeling the energy in the virtual room.
- For those who provide IT training, they noted that it was harder to facilitate hands-on activities due to differences in hardware and software, as well as the need to use Microsoft Teams or Zoom at the same time. Therefore, sessions needed to be shorter and were restricted to demonstration and Q&A (question and answer). We did try to get staff installing Panopto during training at Brighton. However due to older computers, differing platforms, older operating systems, and large attendance numbers (sometimes >100) we had to re-think and provide onscreen demonstrations instead.

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Question 5: What went well? Or well-ish?

- There was broad agreement that the increase in blending was a good thing and we hoped that this will continue after the return to in-person teaching.
- Templated modules in Canvas worked well at the University of Sussex.
- More staff got onboard with using the VLE in inventive and engaging ways. Whenever this happens, it is cherished by learning technology types!
- Both Brighton DL team and Sussex TEL team members took a moment to recognise that both teams had done a heck of a lot of work and had really triumphed in their domains.
- It was noted that there had been a change of narrative. Some of the things that we had been trying to encourage for months or years were suddenly picked-up overnight. The relative institutional skillsets expanded exponentially!
- Teaching with Microsoft Teams highlighted some of the issues with attention span during lectures as a format. Essentially halving the attention that you might have in-person (so around 7mins). This being highlighted is a good thing as more participatory lecturing styles may persist after the return to in-person teaching.

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Question 6: How do you think digital accessibility relates to wellness in the context of the pandemic?

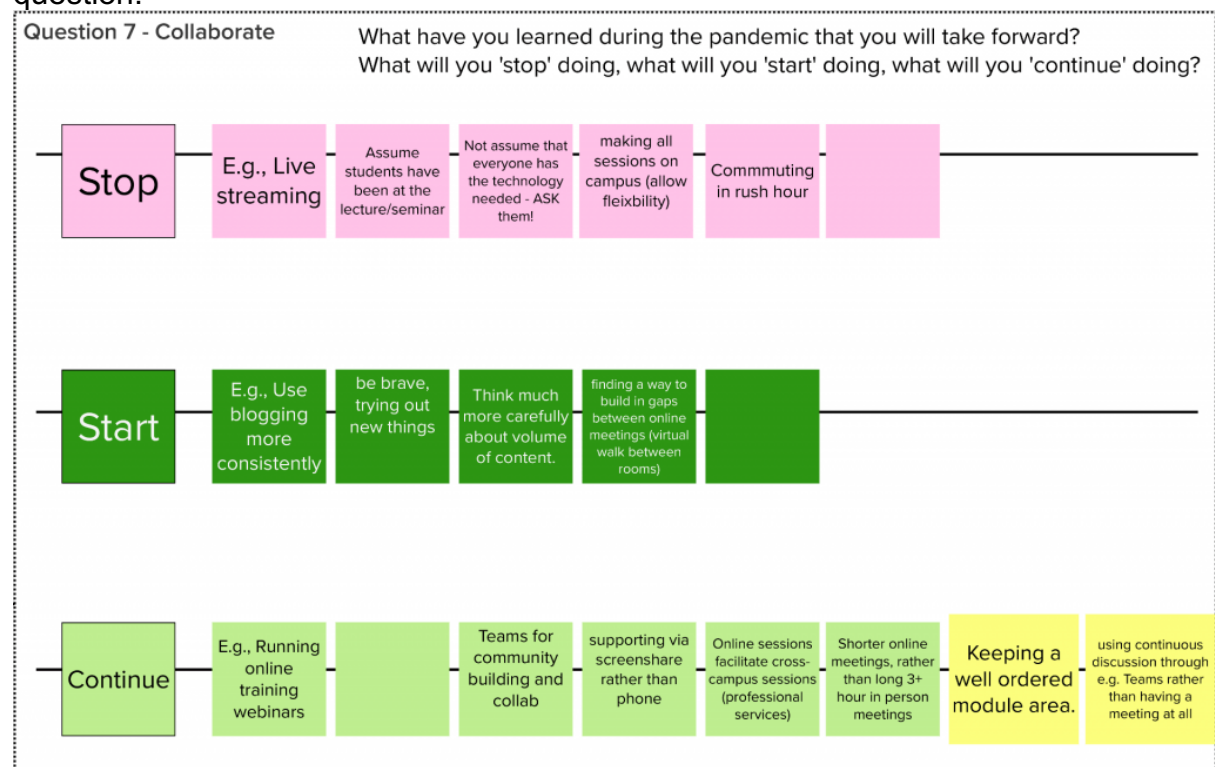
- There were some issues with too many communications channels to manage and the volume of questions that each team was receiving. Some had to discourage use of certain channels (e.g., direct messaging), some needed to implement temporary rules (e.g., level of urgency and referral routes) to deal with questions in a timely manner.
- A good point was made that any technology used in HE needed to be accessible, but also inclusive and affordable.

...any technology used in HE needed to be accessible, but also inclusive and affordable

Feeding forwards

Question 7: What have you learned during the pandemic that you will take forward?

We worked on a *stop, start, continue* Mural board to share our ideas for this question.



Stop

- Assuming that students have attended the lecture or seminar.
- Thinking that everyone has the technology that they need – ask them what they do have.
- Providing all sessions on campus and allow more flexibility.
- Commuting during rush hour (so I think perhaps what is meant here is more flexible working so that commuting during rush hour is not as necessary).

Start

- Being brave and trying out new things.
- Thinking much more carefully about the volume of learning content/resources.
- Finding ways to build in gaps between online meetings, e.g., virtual walk between rooms time (I absolutely love this suggestion).

Continue

- Using Microsoft Teams for community building and collaboration.
- Using screenshare technologies to support staff rather than over the phone. It is much easier to solve problems this way!
- Online sessions allow cross-campus opportunities for those who need training. Brighton has four campuses, so this has always had an impact on attendance in terms of travel time.
- Running shorter online meetings rather than 3+ hour in-person meetings.
- Keeping a well-ordered module area.
- Using continuous discussion via direct messaging and/or chat rather than having a meeting.

Question 8: Are there gaps that still need to be filled?

Always.

- Spaces for socialisation were a gap especially for new students. A lot of effort had to be put in by academic staff, student support staff, and students to create these spaces using online platforms. Pub-style quizzes using Microsoft Forms and new group-based [game tools like backyard.co](https://game.tools/like/backyard.co) emerged as options for social events.
- We noted a need to address and build awareness of ableist language and to continue working towards and supporting a more accessible future.

Summary

As moderator I offered a short summary of the answers to each question based on notes I had taken throughout. I provided the following quote as a final thought and thanked everyone for coming and taking part in such an excellent discussion.

“The main implication is that when leaders think about investing in technology, they should first think about investing in the people who can make that technology useful.”

Becky Frankiewicz and Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic (2020)

Reflection

I am an experienced moderator, so although it might not be everyone's cup of tea, I love multitasking to-the-extreme when fulfilling this role! So, I was running the slides, asking the questions, summarising the chat, adding links for those who arrived after the event had started, and writing handwritten notes at the same time. Matthew or Dan would have been ready to jump in had I lost internet connectivity, particularly as we all had the slides to-hand.

Although I kept things ticking along, I think there should have had one less question as we ran 4mins over. The approach with the slides was very successful and is definitely a practice that I will continue. While I was screensharing the slides I did have a brief issue with competing interface elements. Zoom was sitting over the Google slides fullscreen control and I couldn't leave full screen, so needed to app switch instead using keyboard shortcuts.

The event had a small turnout with the two teams attending and less than five academic staff members. I believe that this is okay, because the conversation provided the value, and this blog post summarises our reflection and learning from the event.

Something I might do differently is assign a dedicated note taker. I was able to capture many of the rich insights through my notes, but I am missing some of the nuance. We decided against recording the event as it can change the feel for presenters and attendees. We wanted open discussion and to be able to be honest about some of the challenges we had faced. It is important to provide space for discussion and reflection without the fear of making a mistake and having it recorded in perpetuity.

I would like to run more events like this in the future and would consider discussions with other colleagues working in overlapping services within the university as well. There are a lot of hidden processes in universities and in order to work together, we need to know how services work together.

References

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