Taking the Pre-Sessional English courses entirely online during a global pandemic

Overview

In response to Covid-19, immediate action had to be taken to move the English Language Centre's courses online. We had less than one month to prepare for student induction. This involved redesigning the student experience, implementing widespread pedagogical changes, and, beyond the initial phase, reflecting on and improving our processes and product.

In this case study podcast, Gary, Katie & Seán discuss and reflect on the development and implementation processes. They are joined by Michelle & Aldona who give further insight from the management and teacher perspectives.

- **Gary Ellis** & **Seán Timon** are teachers and technology enhanced learning specialists at the ELC.
- **Katie Hudson** is a Pre-sessional EAP teacher & course developer.
- **Michelle Dwyer** is the ELC Director.
- **Aldona Norkus** is a Pre-sessional EAP teacher.

KH: Hello, I'm Katie Hudson.

GE: I'm Gary Ellis

ST: And I'm Seán Timon

And we're all English teachers at the ELC and while I've been teaching online and developing course materials, Gary and Seán have been our invaluable tech support for the last eight months.

What are we talking about today?

GE: Well, since March we've successfully delivered our PSE course entirely online in Microsoft Teams. We were just going to try and explain a little bit about how we got there and the successes we've had.

ST: We moved our entire course online with almost 400 students and around 35 teachers and we successfully got the students through assessment and to the required standard for entry onto their University courses.

Yes, and 25 of those were new teachers which we had to train in the summer.

GE: What was it that we were trying to deliver?

Well, the main aim of our PSE course is to help students develop the skills and strategies they need to cope with the academic reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

So it was a real challenge to provide students with the same standard of input. The communicated practice and assessment as what we were delivering in a face-to-face environment.

Alright, so where did it all start? Let's go back to March. It was March the 13th actually. And I remember this because I was in Australia and they closed the borders so I was stuck out there. Covid hit and I guess you knew it was going to have a greater impact on others than we'd imagined before.

So what were the first considerations and what were the first actions that you took?

GE: Well, I mean, at the time we were still in Abercromby Square in the office. And we realised that that was going to come to an end relatively quickly. So what we initially started doing was trying to collect everything that we were going to need to complete this project. All the materials we were going to need started scanning books, taking files off the shared drive, and then making sure everyone had access to everything they needed.

Sounds quite chaotic.

GE: It was and we had a lot of people on holiday. It was between stages at the time, so this is a time of traditionally a lot of people book their holidays. So we were working with a kind of reduced number of staff.

ST: We had an idea of what we needed to do to get started.

GE: Yes, I mean a lot of it was helped by the fact that we have pre-existing materials so we knew roughly what we're going to have to teach.

So when it became apparent that we were all going to be going home, it was a Friday and on the first day of what became a new project. We had a meeting with the Centre director, Michelle Dwyer and her question was really if we all have to go home can we get our course online and if so how are we going to do it? Could we deliver our online course? Which was in some way sort of

commensurate in quality and substance to what we had previously been doing face-to-face.

And it was an extremely positive response. There was a, you know, a limited amount of people in the room, but everybody there really gave a resounding yes as an answer.

People immediately started to sort of think about what roles they could use and such like

That's so important, isn't it? To initially react with positivity with a can-do attitude, even though it's such a daunting task and quite complex question, can we do it?

GE: Yes, I think it is really impressive because a lot of us had never really taught online before, or potentially used the platforms we are going to be using. So I think we really backed ourselves to succeed in this and it was really nice to see everyone pulled together to get this off the ground.

Yes, how did you feel? Seán, did you feel the same way?

ST: I did I came. I came into it slightly after Gary. I discussed the possibility with Michelle before I was formally asked to join the project. But by the time I arrived in the ELC, I could see that we'd already started to form ways of working on it. We were having meetings every day and they were really, really productive each day. When I came into the ELC right at the beginning, I felt like we were making clear progress - we had the problem defined and we had everybody looking at their part of it,

So was it Teams right from the beginning. Was it that platform that everybody chosen? You just went with it?

GE: No, no, not exactly. But you know, basically the year before Seán and I had been working a lot on the general English product in the English language Centre, and we've been through our contact with the CIE. We've been using PebblePad portfolio tool. Initially, we believe that we were only going to be putting four weeks of our materials online, because the test centres in China had been closed because of Covid.

And we thought that a lot of our summer students were going to be arriving late, so the idea was really just condensing our materials and move a certain portion of it online. But we didn't expect to be giving live classes online at that point, so we are thinking about using PebblePad.

But as it became apparent we were going fully online, we spoke to a lot of different staff members in the ELC, and we found that some people have been using Teams to communicate between themselves and one or two people had been experimenting using teams in class as well.

And it seemed to tick all the boxes. You know, it was going to let us deliver video classes live. It was going to let us give work to the students and it was going to store files considering we no longer had access to all our shared files on the on the shared drives.

So it's important at the beginning almost to have a checklist of the needs of your course. You know what you want the platform to do, or what you want to do in the platform,

GE: Exactly, right. Yes, yes, I mean on that first day I was kind of set on using PebblePad, but as we expanded in our discussions, it became clear that it wasn't quite fit for purpose, even though it's a great platform and the consensus was Teams was going to be much more suited to our needs. I think

what we learn about Teams overtime through some very feverish initial research was that, everything ties together in it. So students could be allocated work which would come through Microsoft Word or Excel or PowerPoint and the documentation was always going to work for all of our students because everything was through the Microsoft product, so that that really gave us confidence that we were going to be able to minimise tech problems when we were working with literally hundreds of students in different locations around the world.

Now, what about the people working on the initial developments? So you said there was a small group of you, but what did you have to allocate roles to people? Or we just working as one big team?

GE: So I don't know if you remember Seán, I mean at the start of this what we had to do was really break up all of our materials into different modules or groups and start to work with people who were freshly starting to work at home and they were editing materials quite deeply and using Microsoft Word in a way that they might not have used it before. Do you remember any challenges or problems with this?

ST: I remember the very initial stages of looking through the materials that we had already and thinking about trying to simplify the adaptation system so that we could define a group of people who were going to look at these materials and try to make it as clear as possible what they were going to need to do so that they wouldn't need to look at each document with fresh eyes, they would have a clear process of adapting tasks, and if I remember correctly in the beginning we were looking at four different types of tasks to make things simple for the students to complete. And we ended up slimming that down even further. Do you remember that Gary

GE: I do! And I think it was-, what was the real benefit of teams at the time was this was a relatively new and quite intimidating process for some people. And what was great about it is that we had we had a different type of access to what we have had in the office. We were able to speak to people on a one to one basis and give him a little bit of tech support and help with the technical side of things without having to say, you know, walk into their office and try and do the same thing if we were in Abercromby square.

I think that really helped and pretty soon everyone was up to speed and although the first week productivity was a little slow and there was a bit more of a diagnostic kind of feel to it after that, things started to pick up and it became apparent that this was, in all likelihood going to going to work right?

ST: Yes definitely. I mean like you said when things picked up a bit and we could sit we could see very easily and quickly that people had become confident and people understood what their what their task actually was.

We had small training sessions with people who said look, these materials have lots of different types of tasks that are maybe only suitable or more suitable for face-to-face teaching. We think we've got a system of breaking these tasks down so that there are going to be able to be presented effectively online.

We did that and then I remember being able to just click into a folder and see very quickly that teachers had started to populate these folders with work that was finished or work that was ready for final review quite rapidly and that whole process within Teams was really smooth.

You know you could take a colleague, get in a call, show them what they needed to do on screen share and then just check progress simply by clicking into a folder is quite powerful

And that's I guess where these meetings come into it as well. Seán, you said that there were daily meetings? And I guess these had to be established before everyone went home so that everyone was in touch constantly.

ST: One thing I think we are still getting better at, but one thing that's always clearly been really important is effective and clear communication. You can't work on a project like this, with everybody isolated off at home, without clear communication principles and those meetings every day felt very effective to me.

It felt like every day our goals and our progress indicators were clearly defined. I found them really helpful.

Yes, I guess keeping people in touch with each other is important for people's mental health as well. For the team spirit and to sort of emulate a little bit the in-office communication and relationships as well as knowing where you are with the project and progressing right?

GE: Definitely, yes. I think a big part of that as well as before we had to go home we managed to get a training session organized by Tony Dalton and he was able to take people through all of those basic bits of communication that people were going to have to do online. So when it came to the point where we were having work related meetings, everyone was already up to speed. We weren't wasting much time with people failing to sort of get connected or understand how to perform the basic functions on Teams and we hit the ground running because we'd had that initial training while we were still in Abercromby Square.

So right at the beginning, what can we say with the main factors that led to a successful transition online?

ST: We definitely had great support. Gary, Gary just mentioned part of Tony Dalton's contribution. He did a lot of the really early organization of Teams. He supported us with the training session that Gary mentioned.

GE: And he moved a lot, whatever was possible to move on to the SharePoint site so we could have access to our files. He managed to get as much of that done before we had to go home, so although a lot of people took stuff that they thought they were going to need from the drives, we did have a something approaching a mirror of our file system available to us in Teams as well.

ST: I guess I'm coming back to the point about the meetings that we have in each day. I really felt like our director Michelle struck a really, really good balance between letting us get on with things but also keeping us focused and bringing us together. Would you, would you guys agree?

GE: Completely yes, I think I think the one of the best things that happened at the start was that Michelle canvassed for opinion on what people wanted to do, and she let people play to their strengths a lot.

And right from the off, we had a really good division of responsibility and I think everyone was working on stuff that really suited their skill set and it let us start to move in the right direction really quickly.

Should we hear what she has to say about her experience in this initial phase?

GE: Yes, I spoke to her yesterday about. We were casting our minds back to the initial part of this process, so let's have a listen to that.

GE: Alright, I'm here with Michelle Dwyer, Michelle. What are your memories of the initial stages of moving the pre-sessional course online?

Michelle Dwyer: Well, if you remember, we made the decision to start working from home before the rest of the University. This was because we were already in a holiday period in the English language Centre and so there was no reason for us to stay on campus if we didn't have to. And some of the staff were getting rather nervous about staying on campus.

What I thought we'd do is talk about it and talk about whether we thought as a group, it was possible to be able to put everything online and start working from home and to be working from home while we were putting everything online.

So what we did was we got together. We talked about it. We decided it would be a good idea to aim for going home in a couple of days' time and to do as much of the planning as we could in those two days - with a view to being able to then actually do the work of getting everything online between then and the beginning of our next term, which was about two and a half to three weeks away.

GE: And how did you gauge the general feeling amongst the staff at this time?

MD: I think they were very relieved that we were thinking about their safety and about them being able to go home and work from home. I think they were excited to have a new challenge and to feel like they would be learning some new skills and doing something a little bit different and I think everyone was really up for it. Everybody really got stuck in and was giving opinions. Everyone was incredibly positive.

GE: Now we had over 20 new teachers for the summer stage. How confident were you that they were able to successfully integrate with the new course on the platform?

MD: I was confident that they would integrate. I knew that they would have a good induction. That they would learn the basics and that Teams was an extremely user-friendly environment for them to be teaching through - a good platform.

And I also knew that with things like virtual staff rooms, team leaders to give them advice and also obviously, yourself and Seán were still around to give that support where necessary, I felt that they did have the support that they needed in the training that they needed to be able to do what they had to do without too much stress.

KH: Okay, so let's talk about the delivery of the modules. So what was going on in the ELC while I was down under?

ST: Well by that point the campus was closed. We were all working from home. We'd made quite a lot of progress on developing the materials. At that point, I don't think we'd finished redeveloping all of the materials, but we were certainly far enough in front so that we could be confident that we could start the course and we could get everything done ahead of time.

And I couldn't go to any of the meetings because of the time difference, so I was really out of the loop and when I started teaching really, it seemed that Teams just appeared fully formed. Everything had already been uploaded and designed on it, so how did you guys do it?

GE: But there was a very steep learning curve for us at the start. None of us had really used Teams before. This all kicked off, so we spent the first couple of

weeks really learning everything we could as quickly as possible and one of the big advances for us was the discovery about assignments. Assignments really suited the materials that we had. So the materials were presented as Word documents and we found that if we could edit them to reflect the online nature of the course, we could then assign them out to all of our students and this could cut out a lot of the stress in the admin for the teachers, because there would be no sending or emailing. Everything was live and shared between them, so that was really great.

We got a lot of help at the start of the process, we had spoken to Ben McGrae and I'd worked with Ben and Scott Farrow from CIE over the last year. Seán and I had had a lot of contact with them about our use of PebblePad and they made us aware of their Champions Community and put us in touch with Monica and Tunde at the CIE.

So that really gave us some open lines of communication and when we were thinking about implementing large parts of our course, we could always run it by them and make sure we weren't barking up the wrong tree.

Right. So the setup of the course that you designed in the beginning was a bit different to how we're building our modules now, can you tell us about that?

GE: Yes, sure. At the start of the at the start of the 20-week course we had a relatively small cohort of students-, we had between 80 and 90 students and they were all doing the same work. So we thought what would be easier from the start so we could keep a little bit more control over it, be able to invigilate it a little bit was to have everybody in the same Team all having the same assignments. We could take a lot of the work away from the teachers by doing all of this ourselves so we have one team and private channels, one for each

group combined with an induction session for teachers and one for students. We found that we could get this up and running with minimum fuss.

While this was going on, we were still really learning their most effective ways to communicate inside Teams and at the start of this, we'd set up a chat with all of the teachers for them to discuss issues related to the course. We found pretty quickly that this was getting unwieldy. It was generating a huge amount of messages, but then they weren't threaded.

So we decided to implement a channel and we found that in doing this we could streamline the communication. So suddenly discussions became threaded. Everything became a lot more efficient, a lot clearer for the teachers. So when they were participating in important discussions related to setting up the course or the management of the students, they were easily able to find each other's topics of conversation that had been started.

ST: Definitely. We implemented things over the summer where we could see that rather than causing stress for people by having disparate information all over the place, and communication practices that weren't as effective as they could be. Instead, teachers were giving us feedback that they were really, really benefiting from connecting with each other and connecting with the resources that we were giving them.

GE: Yes, we got some really great feedback from the teachers right from the off, they were very open and honest about what they needed, and I think our job really was to let them do the teaching and to take as many of the obstacles that were related to the technology out of their way.

So we set up drop-in sessions, we had weekly Teams training and we would organise those based on staff feedback. They would tell us what they needed.

We would put sessions together for them and we found that we had almost 100% attendance to these sessions, so people showed that they were really interested in getting better at this and learning how to do it right from the off, which is fantastic to see and we tried to get around.

The teachers especially could-, you know we would always would be phoning everyone almost every week and "I'm just checking in" and trying to get an overview and the clearest picture we could about what was going on the course at the time.

It was still really, really new to us, and although we had a huge workload, I think it was really important for us to set that time aside to speak to everybody and really sort of try to understand their experience.

ST: That was something that you implemented right from the Gary. Remember, even when we were really, really busy, I remember having conversations with you really early on where you said it's so important that we get round and we speak to everybody and we make sure we know how everybody feels, and I think that allowed us to avoid big problems. Yes, we were listening to people all the time so we could see problems before they became something unmanageable.

GE: Definitely. I mean, ironically, I think one of the people that was most difficult to speak to was you Katie. I mean you were you were working with a really large time difference. So how was it for you and what about your experience teaching?

Well, yes, I just want to touch on what you guys have said because really, the cognitive load on the teaching staff was really significant. I mean we had no

time to research and learn about Teams and develop new online teaching skills. I mean, we're straight into teaching, so it was all new.

So having that kind of Teams training and the one to one support available to us, it was invaluable. So although we knew what we wanted from our students and we knew the learning outcomes of the course and we knew what we wanted our students to achieve, the journey to providing a successful learning environment and to achieving those aims was so difficult with so many tech considerations at the same time and you know, being the best teacher that you can be in an online learning environment. And we had to keep adapting how we teach and also using the new tools that we were taught.

GE: Yes, definitely. I mean what we were, what from our perspective what we were trying to do is reduce this cognitive load on the teachers especially and on the students. And then one of the ways we were really trying to do that is to standardise the instructions in all of the materials. So we were trying to have consistent elements across all of the different documents and classes and lessons, so the students could recognise it, the teachers could recognise it and certain things that seem relatively simple became quite important.

Some of our lessons are relatively long documents, up to 20 pages, and this, you know, online environment presents certain challenges for the teacher when they're displaying this to the students. So we found things as simple as adding links into documents to let teachers jump between different parts of the document quickly without having to scroll around and discover the materials that they were looking for were really important.

With this kind of work, a lot of the innovation comes from just thinking outside the box a little bit. One of the most important developments that we've come

across, and I think one of the things we did very, very early into the process was workout how we could institute some form of breakout room.

So what we what we realised we could do was use meetings in the calendar to provide some rudimentary form of breakout rooms. So we found that we would have a main class meeting, but we could also set up concurrent class meetings which the students could then join when instructed by the teacher.

So as far back as early May we had some form of breakout room for teachers to use, which is the first of what is now three incarnations of breakout rooms. I think this was what gave teachers the feeling that they were doing something more similar to a face-to-face class, because obviously in the classroom you can institute group work very easily. This was a bit of a phase shift for teaching and we suddenly found that engagement went up. Students who were previously not happy to speak in the larger class meeting, which could be up to 15 students, became a bit more engaged because they were happy to speak in these smaller groups. So this this was a real benefit to the course.

Yes, that that's really important consideration. Gary, that much needed spoken communication that our international students need to practice their language as well as discuss and learn about the skills they need for their academic English.

While I was in Australia, I was in the same time zone as my students and I was setting up the meetings that you speak about and I was in the breakout rooms with them at the beginning and jumping between them to sort of get them on task and make sure they knew what they were doing and also provide error correction and all of the things that you do in these kind of speaking activities.

But when I move back to England, of course the time difference then jumped to like 11 hours. But because I got my students into the habit of meeting every day at midday, they just continued doing it. So for the rest of the course they just instigated this on their own, so I set up the meetings in their calendar. They recorded them so I could watch them later, but it was really, really wonderful to see that the students really enjoyed that. That level of autonomy and also getting together in those in those breakout rooms for speaking practice.

ST: That's fantastic.

GE: So remember around this time, the major concern we had was the sheer volume of work that we were asking people to get through and I think we really had to find a way to cut that down. Seán, do you remember how we went about this as well?

ST: I remember that we never stopped looking at that because in the early stages we knew we needed to do a couple of different things at the same time. We needed to cut the materials down where possible and also streamline them for online delivery.

The second part was relatively simple. We were able to classify the tasks and provide spaces for the students to write their work and then obviously it would be easy for the teachers to give good feedback. With looking at streamlining the materials down, that was something that we looked at again and again and again, so we did the initial phase of that right at the beginning with the materials that we got ready for the start of the course, and then once the course started, obviously very quickly students and teachers were working on these materials and so that generated a lot of feedback for us and it became clear that we really needed to look again at how we balanced the learning

outcomes and the need to make sure that the students made the progress that they needed with the fact that delivering this amount of material online wasn't really effective.

So we went back to it. We looked at we-, we talked to the people who had designed the materials and we looked for any and all opportunities. Recycle texts where possible. So that instead of doing a task where they were looking at-, where the students were looking at more than one reading text, if it was possible to get them to look at something that they've already seen and were familiar with and therefore save them a bit of time, then we looked at doing that.

But I remember all the way through the course when people were available, we were taking people back onto the materials to look at them and to try and streamline them down. And I think we made some progress on it. Obviously, it's a big challenge,

GE: It was. It was a big challenge, but I think we actually got really, really great feedback from the teachers and the students saying, well, what kind of emotional benefit it provided. You know, working online is a difficult thing to do and not many people are particularly familiar with it. And this course is a very intense course. Some very severe demands on teachers' and students' time and I think it was really important for us to cut that down, as best we could. And I think everybody benefitted from it.

The cognitive load on the students with this asynchronous aspect to this course was really stressful as well for them, and I think some of the things that you guys initiated during that stage is now being taken into material design at the moment. So what we've seen that is really important is sort of the layout organisation of tasks within a document is really important. To

reduce those tasks down to something manageable, but also something visually manageable. So labelling tasks very, very clearly. Having space between the tasks in the document. All of these things contribute to reducing the stress of looking at documents online and becoming overwhelmed with the amount of text. And it's something that we're doing now when we're using notebook and we're using assignments and Teams to design the new courses.

ST: Absolutely. Katie and one thing I've mentioned a couple of times throughout this podcast is kind of standardising the tasks. So one thing that we thought would be a really good idea, to reduce distress for the students, is to make it so that we only had-, we took all these different types of tasks that have been in the face-to-face classes. We boiled them down so I think in the end-, we had just three types of tasks: students could be taking notes, they could be answering a kind of straightforward quiz inside the document, or they could be writing an extended answer, and that was it.

All the work that the students would be doing outside of class would fall into one of those three categories, and the instructions were therefore really, really standardised. The students were able to familiarise themselves with the types of tasks that they would be doing, and they got trained really, really quickly to be able to be able to do that.

Yes, that's a great point, Seán. It's that habit building and we spoke about that before that. You know, building new habits for a new environment.

It seems obvious now, but at the time we didn't realise the challenges of instruction, concept-checking, it would impact so much unlike class time. So providing those very, very clear instructions inside the materials but also sort of concept-checking in the classroom as well.

It just needs to be much, much clearer. You just never know if students' videos are off. For example, how many students are engaged? Are they on task? And so finding out, you know, if the students know what they're doing? That is paramount.

ST: I think that's a really massive point Katie, even as teachers and people who are supporting the platform. How do we-, how do we think about online learning? Is it completely different from face-to-face? Are there things that we can take from our face-to-face practice that inform online learning? Well, yes for sure, but it is still such a unique environment for the students and we need to respect that and support it.

GE: Yes, definitely. I mean, I think the correction was a really big problem in some ways because we found that with these long lessons online, we weren't getting through them at the sort of pace we would face-to-face. So we ended up having to include a lot of answers to the tasks in in the document. I think certain students-, to a high percentage. maybe of students, higher than we'd like, would refer to the answers when asked a question by the teacher. They could just refer to the answers and give the correct answer.

How did you find that Katie, as a teacher?

I mean, that's really demotivating, isn't it? It's in a classroom environment where you want dynamism and you and you want student engagement and you want original answers on communication, real communication. If it becomes simply referring to a correct answer that's already been given to you, or because of the nature of the classes we were doing, which were predominantly flipped, it meant that with the answers, I guess it could engender laziness in some students to just refer directly to the answers without thinking for themselves and critically engaging with it with the

materials. So that's something that we don't do now. We don't provide answers in the materials.

GE: Yes, I think the time demands on the teachers was so huge that if you're doing bits of marking online, whereas in the past you may have been correcting by hand on a piece of paper, suddenly if you're trying to implement your correction code via comment bubbles in Word, some teachers were finding this took a significant extra amount of time compared to what they have been doing in a face-to-face environment.

So all of these things had to be built into the materials for producing subsequently, and I feel that we've done our best to listen and adapt like this, but these are big challenges and some of them don't have perfect solutions.

ST: We're in the process of trying to kind of collate all these challenges on the student-side as well as for the teachers. We're trying to build some kind of principles and expectations and conventions for online learning. Should we talk a bit more about that?

Yes, I think one of the biggest challenges was and still is: To what extent do we sort of demand the use of cameras in the classroom? Of course, the teacher will always put their camera on and they can see the benefit to this, but the students not necessarily. And you know, we recognise that there are many reasons why. It's an unusual situation. It's understandable that they would be reticent to turn them on. There might be cultural issues, but it does make a big difference to the classroom dynamics. It makes a difference to the building of relationships, and it certainly makes a difference to engagement and the teacher feeling confident that you know what they're doing in the classroom is working, and the students are reacting well to what they're doing.

There are some things that we've learned along the way, and now we can take some approaches in the classroom to encourage it, breakdown some barriers. We can play around with the backgrounds in Teams. We can have dedicated moments where the video must be on, while other moments can be more private with students working independently.

So rather than just making a blanket demand to have the cameras on, you can kind of work that into your classroom management because it is exhausting. It's exhausting to know that people are constantly looking at you and it's exhausting to have to, you know, make sure you're presentable the whole time for a 2-hour classes is quite exhausting, but these are new habits and they are habits that we're trying to instil and build into the online classroom.

GE: Yes, definitely. I think we have to respect their privacy to a degree, but these are language classes and we do need to exploit that style of communication, that visual communication is a really important part of it. Certain students do have an increased level of anxiety and stress with the camera, but we can manage that I think, and certain other students do have competing obligations. They might be caring for family members. They might have their own children and some of the time they do feel like they have to keep the camera off, but I think, well, okay. Just as Katie was saying about categorising activities and having parts of the class where cameras are off and parts where they are required to be on is a really great idea and I think we should be using that in the future

ST: For sure.

Now another challenge really was the moving of assessment online. Do you remember how that was approached?

GE: We were lucky in that at the start of the process we had an Assessment Working Group, so we had a team of people working on the assessments, but we did have a lot to think about. We were trying to provide listening assessments online, so we needed to guarantee that the students that weren't able to share that content and pass it around to people who've been taking the test later on in the same day. And we also needed them to submit video presentations, individual video presentations, which was something we'd obviously never done before.

We were looking to get 80 people submitting a document to us or a video to us inside a day. Yet finding workarounds to do that was a really interesting challenge. What we realised was that we could set-up a form using the Microsoft Forms system and the students were able to record themselves on their mobile phones directly, upload it via the Microsoft Form.

So where this was great was it attached all their metadata so we knew who they were, what group they were in. We got the University email address and it was really easy for us to check off just in case anyone hadn't done it.

We found the production of a few small videos to help them get through this form, which was extremely simple, only two questions, including the upload, we managed to get and process all the videos by the close of play on the same day they were submitted. So that was that was a big win, I think near the start of this.

And there was also some live marking as well of presentations, wasn't there?

GE: So we had some individual presentations at the end of the course. We had two teachers who had a chat set-up for them. So they had a chat together. They would be in the meeting with the five students who were all presenting,

and they had their marking scheme in front of them set-up inside Microsoft Forms, which they could just check off the marks, and then afterwards we could use the Excel generated by the form to compare the marks and work out if there were any great discrepancies. Anything that maybe the coordinator or the team leader would have to look at.

We found that this kind of more data-driven way of doing it really let us optimise it when we had huge amounts of students to mark in a very small amount of time. Like towards the end of the course where we're up to nearly 400 students. We had to get everything ready in a very tight time-frame because results would have to be passed to the Exam Board who would have to make decisions about whether or not students passed the course.

So yes, using tact to mitigate this and to keep teachers away from complicated spreadsheets and things like that was a really big boon at the end of the course I think.

ST: Was that something that we did based on feedback from teacher, Gary? Because I feel like we did turn that around really, really quickly and I'm just wondering what the impetus to that was?

GE: Yes, earlier in the stage there had been like a practice assessment where they went through the same process, but they used a spreadsheet. We found with such a volume of teachers and especially a lot of people who maybe weren't quite as used to our systems as we have a lot of temporary staff over the summer, it was too dangerous if somebody made a mistake, it could affect the entire sheet. If operations were made incorrectly, it could have messed up filters for people, and things could get quite unusable quite quickly.

So we found by compartmentalising it and using the tech that was available to us in Forms we could get around this and we did get a lot of good feedback from teachers. It saved them a lot of time and it really reduced any chance of error.

ST: I remember during that period we figured out that solution of using the Form. We knew how it was going to work between the first marking and the second marking and getting the results recorded and then when it actually came time for it to happen. That was a nervous couple of days. But we went through without a hitch really, didn't we?

GE: Yes, it was surprising really. We were sat there on the day waiting by the phone, waiting for all sorts of disastrous calls and not one came. It all went off without a hitch, which is little bit nerve wracking at the time, but it yes, obviously it was a positive thing.

Yes, now another thing that we had problems with then and we still have to consider this now, is anti-cheating measures. So during online assessments, you talk about listening assessments and the kind of tools that are available to students to help them understand audio which are increasingly impressive. What kind of issues did you have then and you know what kind of things did you implement to deal with that?

GE: We worked with the Assessment Working Group on this and we found that we could mitigate it through careful timetabling and the use of many different recordings. So we would have seven different recordings. Each recording would be played to a group of students who were listening to at the same time, so they could never pass on the topic or details of the content of the assessment to people who are going to be doing it later in the day.

We obliged the students to have their cameras on and then it becomes quite obvious quite quickly if they're reading from the screen at that time. Live captions in teams were not quite as good as they are now, so that's something we have to think about in the future now they've got so good. But at the time, no, teachers were able to pretty confidently workout if they were reading any captions and again through timetabling, we could pretty much guarantee that they weren't able to pass answers to anyone else.

Yes, and while you know we can take measures to try and mitigate this. There's always going to be some students that will find new ways to get around it. So I mean one of the things that we're doing now is relying heavily on informing students of rules, having declarations that they have to sign. Which means that they can be held accountable if they if they are caught.

ST: This is something that we that we maintain focus on and we take very, very seriously. We're trying to establish expectations for the students were trying to create processes that make it hard, that make the assessment as secure as possible and it's something that we like to simply take really, really, seriously.

So I think what we're what we've become much better at is designing materials that include in-class collaboration. So that's collaboration inside Notebook, for example, collaboration in PowerPoint, collaboration in Word documents. And this means that students can work together in class time, in real-time, and we're able to monitor what they're doing and see the students work it in real-time, and that's something we experimented with during the 20 weeks, but it's something that we're getting much better at.

Also using Notebook. That's been a big experiment in the last three months, we're continuously learning how to operate a better in Notebook. I think

there might be another case study that focuses on that specifically because it's an interesting area, and we've learned a lot from it.

But it's been great that we've had a lot of time to dedicate to development. It's meant that we can really look at our materials and design them specifically online for the next stage rather than being that kind of rolling trying to update materials whilst we're teaching and reacting to feedback in the moment. You know, we're able to now learn from what we have done and design things that are very specifically dedicated to what we want to do with them.

There are certain things that we have done, that moving forward, if we return to face-to-face or hybrid teaching, would stay online, I think. We made an e-portfolio module that would stay online and we're trialling that next stage so this is all exciting stuff.

I think moving online has really sort of drawn attention to some practices and some habits that needed changing anyway. I mean, the amount of paper being printed was criminal really and we were always looking at how to be more environmental and cut back on things like that. And I think implementing asynchronous and online materials can push us in that direction.

ST: Well, it's not going anywhere. Online learning is definitely here to stay. I think if we believe in it. If we believe that it has a value and the students seem to really like it. I mean, we've had feedback from students where, even if given the choice, in the current situation with Covid, even if given the choice, they would prefer to study online, they're clearly getting something out of it.

Yes, we've got some feedback videos actually from our students here in this case study file so it was phenomenal. I think nobody expected feedback to be that good over the summer period, but it was great that it was.

ST: There are still some new things that were that we're looking at integrating new apps that we've been able to access through teams. Things like Flipgrid. We're looking at improving student engagement and participation using slightly innovative methods hopefully. But yes, keep people are getting really, really comfortable with the basics. really great things happening from the teacher team.

GE: And also using the Insights app as well. So keep an eye on what's going on in our courses and working out if any action needs taking with any individual students or even with an entire course. We get a lot more information about engagement, communication, the use of the assignments, and this is all data that would be very hard to monitor if you're in a face-to-face environment, but it's something we have like literally at the click of a button there.

And how are you taking the training aspect forward then?

GE: A lot of the basic parts of Teams and in the teaching of it is now quite well covered by the teachers, but we're looking to make the team as self-sufficient as possible come April when we finish this contract.

So we devised a plan where we're producing very short guides like 2, 3, 4-minute guides on each of the important functions of the administration of Teams and with the teaching of Teams.

So teachers will be able to refer to that and hopefully will get everyone up to a level where they can all manage every aspect of Teams themselves.

Yes, I think it's exciting to be able to have time to experiment with the tools on the platform now compared to the initial stages, teachers have become more open to this kind of experimentation in class. They seem to be enjoying new experiences despite things going wrong, which that, you know, they occasionally do.

Tech breakdowns, you know, are frequent, but we've learned how to sort of work around them and adapt a methodology in the classroom to deal with students dropping out or videos or audio and you know you can use chat. You can use Microsoft Word documents as shared documents to allow students to contribute if their microphones don't work or there's always ways that you can work around the problems, and I think the teachers now are more comfortable with that level of risk and what is progress and innovation without some risk, right? I think we're all learning more about taking risks in the classroom, how enjoyable it can be when those risks pay off.

GE: Yes, absolutely, absolutely. And also now we have a little more time on our hands, we can look at the ways we're working inside of Teams as well. We can look at if there are ways we can communicate better. If there are ways on apps we can use to make ourselves more productive, reduce maybe certain amounts of time that we end up spending in meetings which isn't strictly necessary.

We started using the planning apps and also the lists app and the calendars in SharePoint to sort of take a bit of a burden off the meetings, free up time for more useful discussion rather than just the dispensation of information and using polls as well if we can. If we can get an overview of people's opinions

before we arrive at the meeting, we can really sort of use that time in the meetings to greater effect.

Okay, so let's now hear from one of the teachers who's been with us from day one. This is Aldona Norkus.

Hi Aldona!

Aldona Norkus: Hi Katie.

So let's have a bit of a chat about our experience over the last eight months.

AK: Okay!

Initially we were all a bit unfamiliar with the tech involved in the online classroom, but we've all made incredible progress. Have you made any interesting discoveries that you could share?

AK: Well, it's been a very interesting eight or nine months. And as you say, it was all very unfamiliar. And I suppose some of the things that you can pick up is that being online is quite a static environment compared to being in the classroom.

So when you're in the classroom, you're constantly moving, you know, sort of engaging students with body language, which has been bit harder online, but you could probably try and get students to be a bit more involved by you standing up away from the camera, looking directly at the camera rather than looking at the screen itself. And trying to engage students with more eye contact and moving your hands and sort of making it clearer to the camera that you're using your hands and your body standing away, coming closer again, it may be more dramatic effect and again getting students to do the same thing.

So again, when students had to do things like presentations earlier on in the year, I found that by getting them to stand up and move away from the camera, they actually performed better than sitting down because it was more real. And it was more natural to be doing that for them.

And so that kind of-, yes, that movement and that body language has been a big change. It's quite hard teaching without body language.

I think that's a really good tip, isn't it? For movement. And it relaxes you as a teacher as well - if you can use a bit more of your body.

AN: Yes as well. Sitting away from the screen is actually, you know, they can still see you, but actually it takes the pressure off your eyes as well. Which has been, I think, one of the hardest things all the way through is that your eyes get really tired by looking at the screen constantly. So again, if you physically move away from it, you start to look around a little bit more, move around. It also reduces that pressure too, and so we can think about things like we talk about lighting. Again, it's about creating that atmosphere within the classroom. Quite easy to do in the classroom. Hard to do online.

So you know, using different backgrounds, for example, to build rapport with students. So what I found is that we have maybe a background of the day I got this idea from a guy called Nik Peachey who did a webinar on teaching online and he's been teaching online for a long time. And yes, it's quite fun. You get the students to maybe take it in turns to choose the background and then all of the students put the same background on so when it's a miserable day outside in England, in the rain and the grey, one of the students puts the beach on so we can all go to the beach and it kind of lightens the mood. It makes people smile. So that's, you know, something to consider. And again, it's sort of a way of building rapport between students.

Thinking about the lighting, making sure that people are not being blacked out by having the light focusing in the wrong direction. And that's the same for students as well as the teachers, because we want to see each other's facial features. We want to see smiles. We want to see the eyebrows going up and down, because, again, that communicates just as much in some ways as speaking to one another.

Yes, the nonverbal cues are so important in communication aren't they. Building relationships and allowing students to see facial expressions and all those things contribute to a much better level of communication?

AN: Yes, and I think that's one thing that we've learned that we should maybe allow, but a lot more time at the beginning of the course for students to get to know each other. And that time should be built into that course because when they are in a physical classroom, when the teacher leaves the room, they can sit and chat together and get to know each other. They can't do that online because there can only be one person talking at a time, unless they're going to breakout rooms, which is then being managed.

So that sort of spontaneous socialisation doesn't happen naturally in the same way as it would normally. So yes, we need to sort of spend more time and find ways of building those relationships and like I say, giving it more time because that is really important. The sooner students can feel comfortable with each other, the more likely they are to ask each other for help. If they don't understand something or maybe have more confidence to ask the teacher as well as a group if they don't understand something. So I think we haven't always focused enough on that aspect of online learning.

Yes, I think things are arising out there constantly and it's good to hear though that we're thinking about how to solve these problems and trying different things in the classroom. To notice and solve these issues.

Alright, so there have been challenges, but what would you say were the unexpected benefits to teaching online learning?

AN: There are a few benefits from teaching online in terms of practicality. So for example, we can record our lessons, which is useful especially for us teaching English as a foreign language, or pre-sessional, because the students can go away and listen again - which is useful on many levels. Not only is it the content that they can review, but they can also use it as listening practice. Also again by recording things if they lose connectivity again, they can also review that element, or if they're traveling between places they don't necessarily need to be absent because they can go back and study the information that had been presented.

So recordings are great, really good for the seminar work as well when students can see each other and see who's dominant and who's not turn-taking or who's just allowing people to talk over them. So students can watch themselves in that respect and learn about their own interaction skills so that that's interesting.

Other things which are good is that, I mean, we work online, obviously when we're in the physical environment on the campus, but by being able to work from home online, I think sometimes we can be more efficient, especially when marking because there's no distractions around and that's nice. I do like that element of it.

The chat function is good. That kind of helps students. I think it forces students to write and share ideas which sometimes, when again when we're in the physical classroom, students might just write on a notebook and then refuse to share that with you. But when it's in a chat, they feel that kind of peer pressure to produce something they are also developing their keyboard skills, which for most of our students who come from backgrounds and languages with different alphabets and different writing systems - that's incredibly useful and wouldn't necessarily happen when we're in the physical face-to-face classroom.

One student actually told me something at the end of one of the stages that he'd really enjoyed the pre-sessional and would highly recommend it because he said it wasn't just about the English. It wasn't just about the content for the pre-sessional. It wasn't just about making friends with students around the world, but he said he felt now far better equipped to go into the modern work world of Zoom meetings, breakout rooms and conferences and have the confidence to speak online which, you know, a few weeks earlier he said he would never have done.

So wow, yes, I hadn't considered that. Actually I mean the world is online and a considerable amount of the tasks that we have to do in our workplace are online and the students are going to have to go back to their own lives after their academic careers are and function perhaps in English in an online environment. So this is developing their digital fluency on a professional level. Like you said, their confidence, their autonomy and not just as students, but, you know, as confident independent people in the workplace. Very interesting.

AN: Yes, you know. One thing I would say is probably it's less tiring than being in a face-to-face classroom in some respects, because when you in the face-to-face classroom again, it's very physical. You're moving constantly, you know, so you don't have that. You're just sitting. You know, although it, there's a disadvantage at sitting at a screen. There is also that you're not exhausted at the end of the day, in the same way that you would be.

Brilliant. Okay, well, it's great talking to you, and thank you very much.

AN: Thank you.