

**Reassessing the social benefits of lifelong learning in light of the COVID pandemic**

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This editorial focuses on what is widely regarded as a beneficial aspect of adult education, that is, increased opportunities for socialising, and how they may have been reduced by the general move to online learning in response to the COVID pandemic. Whilst some scholars have previously highlighted the potential negative social aspects of adults engaging with lifelong learning on relationships with those closest to them (e.g. Waller *et al.*, 2011), adult education has generally been seen as a source of significant benefit for participants in a variety of arenas. The classic model from Tinto (1975) regarding adult student drop-out cited social integration with fellow course members – or lack thereof – as a major influence on the likelihood of someone completing a course of study. In addition to the personal benefits to learners from improved physical and particularly mental health and well-being, the economic benefits to individuals, society and the state usually outweigh the financial costs of educational provision (Schuller *et al.*, 2004). Other potential benefits for individuals include short term social ones in addition to the obvious longer-term enhanced employment prospects arising from the acquisition of further skills or qualifications, what is often referred to as ‘enhanced employability’ within the dominant neoliberal discourse of policy makers.

However, social benefits do not necessarily arise from all forms of study, particularly when the learner’s engagement with the educational process is remote, or online. We highlighted the anticipated growth of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) in an editorial seven years ago (Holford *et al.*, 2014), with MOOCs then widely hyped as an accessible and democratic form of post-compulsory education, albeit without such obvious social benefits from personal contact for participants. Whilst MOOCs have not proliferated to the extent that their proponents had anticipated (Luik *et al.*, 2020), the number and breadth of MOOCs offered by ‘not for profit’ and ‘for profit’ sectors of adult education alike have both expanded. We can speculate that the lack of interpersonal contact experienced by those studying through this technology turns some people against the idea of remote online learning (Goopio and Cheung, 2021), despite its obvious advantages regarding access for geographically dispersed cohorts of learners, and the environmental and other savings in terms of the resources (including time) required for travel to a site of study. Enhanced access and reduced environmental impact also lie behind the decisions of some academic conference organisers to move to online conferences for the foreseeable future, leaving many in the education community wondering whether we will ever return to the default ‘face-to-face’ conferences we enjoyed prior to the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the recent shift across much of the developed world in particular to online ‘delivery’ of many traditionally face-to-face taught courses as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic (James and Thériault, 2020; Waller *et al.* 2020) has emphasised to practitioners and participants alike the importance of the interpersonal aspects of adult learning. Milana *et al.* (2021: 114) write of the need to ‘...preserve the quality of people’s encounters...’ in the move to enforced online learning, including those valuable social benefits. This switch to online provision has been referred to variously as ‘crisis-response migration’ and ‘emergency

remote teaching' (Adedoyin and Soykan 2020), and 'pandemic pedagogies' with '...public education...forcibly decentralized into students' own homes...' (Williamson *et al.*, 2020, p.108). However, this clearly occurred in the context of the global health pandemic, where the social and personal implications of a sudden shift to remote learning were, understandably, not uppermost in the thoughts of those facilitating it.

Most readers of this journal will recognise the less 'humane' and generally non-personalised aspects of online teaching and learning, and consider it to lack the 'depth', 'colour' and 'texture' of traditional face-to-face experiences, for learners and educators alike. For many of us working in adult education it remains a poor substitute for actual classroom teaching. Anecdotally, many educators across all sectors talk of how 'empty' and relatively unfulfilling the experience of talking to a 'blank screen' can be. This is usually accompanied by a hope that those logged on to the session are attentive and engaged – very often students seem to have their own cameras and microphones both turned off. This may be for good reasons including concerns over potentially distracting background noise, feedback from computer sound systems or limited internet bandwidth, but may also mask a relative lack of engagement with the session – much harder to maintain if learner and educator are in the same physical space.

In a previous editorial on the impact of earlier stages of the COVID pandemic on the lifelong education sector (Waller *et al.*, 2020:245), we suggested that

*As educators we can contribute our skills and expertise to benefit our own academic communities, the education of our own students, and the wider public too; we have been doing so by moving classes online, meeting virtually rather than face-to-face, and organising new online programmes. However, the expectation that we can readily do so, and that we, our students and potential students will all enjoy access to the necessary resources (including time) to facilitate their full engagement ignores social and economic inequalities arising in part from the application of technology.*

As the pandemic took hold, the International Labour Organisation drew attention to the danger that COVID, and responses to it, will 'exacerbate the existing digital divide and widen inequalities for those who already face disadvantages in trying to access and engage in learning' (ILO 2020: 2). A recent overview of the impact of digital inequality on health outcomes during the COVID pandemic (Watts, 2020) highlighted the variation in access to the necessary digital resources across the world and, perhaps less obviously in some cases, within a given nation state. Politicians, media and other commentators have spoken at length in most if not all countries, particularly developed ones, about the inequality of access to the necessary digital resources for school children to continue with their education during the pandemic. The same is true of the lifelong education sector worldwide, perhaps more so, since government priorities around the provision of education are often focussed on the compulsory schooling sector. In addition to the more obvious disparity between high income and low-income nations (an estimated 46% of the world's 'non-internet connected' population live in the latter), Watts (2020) also identified inequalities regarding access to digital resources within a range of given nation states. He highlighted a 2020 survey of internet usage statistics suggesting that 70% of Vietnamese people enjoyed internet access, but just 33% of those in Myanmar. Likewise in Africa, 61% of Nigerians did, but only 10% of Eritreans.

Even in a highly developed country such as the UK, home of the inventor of the internet Sir Tim Berners-Lee, an estimated 10% of adults do not use it. As Williamson *et al.*, (2020:109-110) suggested, '...there is significant variety in the ways that...people can access, navigate

and use the internet and other new technologies, with an important minority who are excluded entirely'. The authors also suggest that learners are excluded not only from their educational environments, but from their social networks too, and that the economically disadvantaged are likely to suffer more in both respects (Williamson *et al.*, 2020).

In another recent British study, Mikolai, Keenan and Kulu (2020) found that digital exclusion, including limited or no access to a computer and the internet, vary by type of household; but they also identified other dimensions of vulnerability that intersect, and also vary by household and region. Adult Learning Wales (AOC|ALW) has found reasons for individuals' being excluded from the digital world may include 'self-exclusion due to confidence issues, a lack of trust in digital technology, an absence of intrinsic motivation to change one's way of life, and financial constraints', and a recent report concluded that 'intersecting factors such as gender, race, age, and social class' also contribute to the likelihood of being digitally excluded (Jones *et al.*, 2021: 17).

Whilst there has always been differential access to classroom-based adult learning opportunities between and within given nations and regions, the evidence cited above illustrate that the same is true of access to online learning opportunities. However, let us put that to one side for now, and focus on those who can, and who are, accessing online learning. As a local government official responsible for adult education remarked:

'We've all moved online, but who says it's any good? It's much easier to be compliant and switch off [online]. We [teachers] can't tell as well as we can in a classroom, especially with vulnerable learners where teachers' skills are very important. How much learning is actually being lost?' (quoted in Jones *et al.*, 2021: 19)

As we write this editorial, 'lockdown' has been lifted in much of the world, meaning at least a partial return to face-to face learning in many countries. However, the spectre of returning to full 'lockdown' remains, for instance with current concerns regarding the so-called 'omicron variant' of the disease. Given the potential cost savings for providers of much online learning provision, we can probably assume it will be with us to a greater extent in the future than in pre-COVID times, albeit possibly in 'blended' or 'hybrid' forms of teaching. Therefore, the concerns we and many others have expressed regarding the 'digital divide' and its impact on access to adult learning provision remain.

We must as an academic community encourage further research into the social benefits of lifelong learning under the contemporary circumstances facing learners in different places and settings. In particular we need research on how the widely acknowledged benefits of learning in groups are maintained, sustained or diminished by a move to online learning and on to what extent within adult education online learning is likely to replace classroom provision. Meanwhile, the challenge for adult educators, and indeed those working in other education sectors, is to ensure adequate opportunities for social engagement under the online learning arrangements that many of us are now working with. If as lifelong educators we fail to meet this challenge, the impact on our learners – and for many of us, our own sense of value, purpose and enjoyment of the role we are privileged to fill – will be diminished as we move through the current pandemic and into a hopefully post-COVID future.

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