**Pithy positive examples from the post-pandemic\* pivot**

*\*I think most of us agree that we are still in the midst of the pandemic, rather than post-, but I rather like the alliteration.*

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In a post to the SEDA and NTF Jiscmail lists I invited colleagues to tell me briefly about their experiences of the best positive outcomes to come out of our sudden shift to online teaching and assessment in the last two years. I was delighted and overwhelmed by the range and richness of the responses.

These included **real benefits for students** like the ones I noticed in my consultancy work at this time (including the experiences that some disadvantaged students are reporting about being better able to manage study, family life and caring responsibilities when they can study virtually without all the time and expense of travelling to the university). Next, we are seeing a range of benefits **in terms of student support** as we’ve seen changes in perceived approachability of staff, leading to a different quality of interactions.

And in terms of different approaches to **assessment,** Kay Sambell and I have noticed in our virtual sessions that our efforts to persuade people away from excessive numbers of formal, unseen time-constrained exams towards more authentic assessment have been better received than ever before. (see our Covid Collection at <http://sally-brown.net/kay-sambell-and-sally-brown-covid-19-assessment-collection/> ).

Also noted were the benefits for those who run **CPD and staff development sessions**:

I’ve been doing a lot of online workshops and webinars and I’m sure I’m not alone in celebrating the fact that more people have been signing up for and attending online workshops in higher numbers than in previous less troubled times. It’s been easier to ‘attend’ conferences all over the world too, especially when they are free.

And perhaps for many of us the biggest shift is not only our comfortable usage of technologies, but also the new ways in which we see how they can be put to good use in the service of learning. I have struggled like everyone (including our students) with poor internet connectivity and having battles learning new ways of working (doing assessment panels on Zoom consultancy on Teams, a PhD viva in the Netherlands in Star Leaf, conference keynoting in Blackboard Collaborate to name but a few) but overall, many of us see all kinds of benefits notwithstanding the struggles.

Here then are some benefits that other have shared with me. I am really grateful to all contributing colleagues who have generously shared their examples with me.

1. **Benefits for student learning**
   1. **From NTF Julie Hulme, Keele University: Blended learning approaches**

One of the most positive 'post'-pandemic opportunities, in my experience, has been around providing flexibility for students. I've embraced a [blended learning approach](about:blank), with structured online 'asynchronous' activities to encourage independent study and deeper learning, alongside in-class teaching with lecture capture. The in-class sessions are highly interactive and promote active learning and engagement. Students are really positive about this! They now know how to use those long gaps between classes, when before they didn't know what or how to study. It's also a really inclusive approach. For students with [disabilities](about:blank), caring commitments, and other responsibilities, they can engage flexibly, at times when they have the energy and cognitive capacity. In particular, for students with [energy-limiting chronic illnesses](about:blank) and disabilities, such as chronic fatigue syndrome and multiple sclerosis, this has greatly improved their learning experiences, and reduced the 'guilt' of not always being able to attend. However, my students are really enjoying their in-class sessions, and find a lot of value in attending, so there's no risk of empty classrooms! Disabled students have been calling for this type of flexibility for years, and were told it wasn't possible, but having learned new technical skills, I can confirm it is possible, and I'm not looking back!

**1.2 From Louise Robson, Sheffield University: more active sessions**

Before the pandemic I had used some flipped activities, traditional lectures and a small number of active learning sessions in my modules. During the temporary online pivot I ended up delivering all my lectures as asynchronous flipped captures, and developed and delivered more active learning sessions online. As I transitioned back into class, I have been able to design my module to keep all of the additional active learning, delivering some lectures in class but maximising the use of my flipped lecture recordings. The pandemic accelerated my implementation of active learning, and given that 93% of my students tell me they value the active learning sessions for their learning, this has had a huge positive impact on the student experience.

**1.3 From retired NTF Lindsay Marshall, formerly of Newcastle University: Using video vignettes**

There are two key things I would take forward from changes in practice for the pandemic. First, using short videos to cover topics that would have been parts of a longer in person lecture really provides a great resource for students, both allowing them to engage more easily with individual topics they did not grasp straight away and for later revision, whether for exams or for coursework support.

Second, helping students debug tough problems with their computer programs over Zoom using screen sharing and taking over control of their computer turns out to be an extremely effective and efficient way of working with them – it’s much easier than trying to work directly with their machine as you are using your own keyboard and mouse. Sometimes there are problems that need you to just try things rather than trying to get the students themselves to enter code changes. It’s easier for you and it allows the student to see what you are doing much more easily than looking over your shoulder.

* 1. **From Dr Rosemary Pearce, Nottingham Trent University: making curriculum changes more efficiently**

One positive result of all the upheaval and extra work we experienced is that some teaching staff were driven to make changes to laborious or time-consuming learning and teaching processes that were long in need of re-thinking, especially in areas such as assessment or marking. There's just never a good or easy time to make such big changes but, with no other option but to redesign, many colleagues now have something that works better for them and the students that they've chosen to retain. I think this ties in with discussions we’ve been having about digital confidence; lots of colleagues have become digital innovators regardless of how they might characterise their relationship with technology. Hopefully, having recently tried out those new ideas – whether successful, unsuccessful, or something in between – makes it easier to take those leaps in future.

* 1. **From NTF James Derounian and Angie Hurren, Society of Local Council Clerks/ De Montfort University**

My students are (63) mature, part-timers, who 'normally' study local governance by *blended*learning. Since 2020 they have studied fully via *distance*learning (over the internet), via VLE, Zoom, e-mail and phone support. In 2021 research by myself and one of the final year students, we discovered a host of positives self-reported by level 4, 5 and 6s: there was a total of 67 responses; of which 41 (61%) were positive; and 26 (39%) negative points.

The **top ten positives** of full-blown distance learning, according to student respondents, were:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Increased knowledge  **21 replies** | Improved self-confidence **9** | Learning new skills **8** | Meeting new people (virtually) **6** |
| Online learning/ convenience **5** | Flexibility **4** | Enabling deep reflection **4** | Relevant/ practical topics **4** |
| Tutor support **4** | Support from employer |  |  |

In terms of future teaching, a clear mandate emerged for blended delivery (face-to-face and online) – 80% (35 respondents); with 18% (8) preferring (continuing) full online contact. In particular, most want 'the best of both worlds' – simultaneous face-to-face and virtual delivery, so that those who are able, can receive in-person teaching, whilst those constrained (that is by child/elder care, employment commitments etc.) can access simultaneous virtual delivery, from home/ work.

Participants rated various forms of distance teaching: virtual study days; online induction; assignment briefings; session recordings; telephone tutorials; online tutorials; by e-mail; guest speakers; peer support and WhatsApp. A significant majority of respondents rated most forms of this teaching ‘very helpful’ or ‘helpful’.

1. **Benefits in terms of student support**

**2.1 From NTF Neil Gordon, Hull University: online support**

The switch to online support for supervisees (project or personal) has seemed to work well. These are often somewhat shorter meetings that formal lectures, and students sometimes have little of concern. So, whilst they would not typically have bothered with the effort of coming all the way to my office to see me, they are much happier in general to drop into an online meeting. They seem to especially prefer typing or occasionally using their microphone – though they seem less willing to switch on their cameras! Possibly for the best, as many who have used cameras end up with close ups of their foreheads, or too much detail of their nasal cavities [that’s equally true of colleagues!].

**2.2 From NTF Kirsten Hardie, of the Arts University Bournemouth: better focus**

One-to-one tutorials have become more focused; better attended; students better prepared and they keep to allocated time exquisitely – there appears to be more respect for time. Also in terms of *listening*, there has been a significant change/development across the pandemic in many contexts, both personally and professionally. For students, it appears that their listening has become more acute in their learning; things are listened to more readily – and notably digested and understood more readily in many cases.

**2.3 From Lisa Wakefield, De Montfort University: the chat function**

One of the best things to have come from the instant switch to online and the continued decision within my university to retain a hyflex approach is the use of the chat function within sessions. The ability to use chat function and icons within teams, zoom collaborate etc has created a way to communicate with large numbers of students in a manner they are most comfortable with. It’s also created an opportunity communicate with individual students or small groups of students during a session without drawing attention to the “check in” and this is something I’d like to take back into the classroom (when we get there!). It’s allowed us to build relationships and a method of given an easy way to confirm technical understanding and undertake pastoral “check ins” with students on their terms.

**2.4 From NTF Sue Smith, Leeds Beckett University: online appointments**

One thing that has surprised me, is that students seem to really like online appointments with their Academic Advisors ("personal tutors" in some universities) . It works both ways - Academic Advisors don't have to book rooms, find a quiet space and can fit in a lot more one to one (or group) appointments so it's a much use of their time.

Students don't have to leave their home to attend the appointments and staff can be responsive by setting up a Teams or Skype link quickly, if there is a pressing need. Resources can be shared online. Content from our progress/ results systems can be shared through the screen which means that students get to see exactly what the staff see. Quick links to follow-up appointments like study skills and wellbeing services can be sent immediately in the conversation panel and then the students can then take the initiative to seek support and move forward.

**2.5 From Russell Crawford, Falmouth University: the right tool for the job**

During the height of the pandemic, we (Falmouth University) mobilised our thoughts towards the new intake of students and how to make the most of a socially distanced but inclusive induction processes, spanning a week plus surrounding “events” that were almost exclusively digital. It worked, to a degree, and when things improved this year (2021), we opted to try to do more in-person induction activities whilst retaining the useful bits from the digital only version, thinking our learners would get the best of both worlds and engage accordingly. Turns out, when an in-person activity is possible, the appetite for a digital “event” wanes down the priority list to the point that some digital bits were simply not engaged with at all (despite being extremely useful). Indeed, even when you point them at these digital bits, some steadfastly refuse to engage, instead relying on the in-person social interactions to “catch them up”. What we learned from this is: *If it`s going to be digital post-pandemic, then it has to have a reason why it`s digital other than the fact is saves someone else time!* Pretty much a “*right tool for the right job*” type situation, which is a lesson we learned very well and now we are using digital to enhance the social induction side of the new/returning student experience and leaning into the in-person for other aspects….an approach we bear in mind when planning our blended learning activities, where the old Jurassic Park quote comes to mind “*so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn`t stop to think if they should*”. Blended learning in 16 words!

**2.6 From Louise Robson, Sheffield University: Support for students with disabilities**

I have been a champion of the value of lecture capture to support student learning and inclusivity since 2015. Recordings provide an opportunity for students to revisit the session, to consolidate their knowledge and understanding. It also gives students who could not make the session an opportunity to catch up, and not fall behind. However, if you have an active learning session then those who could not attend (e.g. due to illness, caring responsibilities or concerns as they are extremely clinically vulnerable) are missing out on the learning experience. To support these students, I have been live streaming my classes (a new feature for this year), and I have had up to 40 students attending my classes remotely. They have not only been able to listen to me, but as I use an online polling platform they have been able to actively participate in class, even though they are not physically in the classroom. Students tell me they really value this approach as it provides flexibility and is really inclusive.

**2.7 From Louise Robson, Sheffield University: Replicating the online chatbox in class**

During the pandemic we used a range of platforms to deliver sessions online. These invariably had a chat box, where students could type questions live in class, and ask questions they certainly did. As I transitioned back into the classroom this year I recognised the value of students being able to ask questions this way. I know from student surveys that there is often an “inner barrier” to putting a hand up in class to ask a question. Having seen the positive impact of the chatbox, I decided to trial a new question tool in my classes. Students can ask questions on an anonymous basis, and I can go through these in the class, or offline if we run out of time. 79% of students have said it is helpful to be able to post questions. 97% of students have said that posting questions and me going through answers is helpful for their learning.

**2.8 From NTF Kirsten Hardie, University of the Arts, Bournemouth: Intimacy of tutorials**

Students often appear more willing to open up, using the tailored space of the one-to-one context without interruptions that can so often happen in the open classroom/studio.

**2.9 From NTF Alison Voice, Leeds University: fostering belonging**

Recorded material has afforded flexibility for learners to study when/where it suits them. This has reduced the emphasis on ‘attendance in the room’ to focus more on ‘engagement’, thus levelling up for students who have health, caring, financial or travel issues. The reduction in face-to-face activities challenged us to think deeply about how to foster ‘belonging’ and build ‘learning communities’ to create a truly inclusive environment; a fundamental pre-requisite for effective learning.

1. **Benefits in terms of assessment**

**3.1 From NTF Neil Gordon, Hull University: greater flexibility**

The switch to online assessments has also been appreciated by the students – being able to do them in a more flexible way. Although that has caused more work from a marking perspective where I’ve used question banks – you can’t get into the same routine of spotting common mistakes when they all have unique sets of questions.

**3.2 From Louise Robson, Sheffield University: Open Book exams**

Before the pandemic I was already using open book exams in some of my final year modules. I had already recognised the value in terms of these being a test of application of knowledge and understanding (and not a memory test). The way most universities work, you need a significant lead in time to make any changes in a module. However, during the pandemic we had to move all assessments online, and there was an accelerated process for approval of changes. This has allowed me to quickly get approval to move all of my assessments into an open book format. This (for me) makes my approach to assessments more inclusive and authentic.

**3.3 From Alison Voice at Leeds University: Authentic assessment**

A world pandemic has allowed (forced) the whole education community to move faster than ever to embrace new ideas. And the exciting thing is that many of the new ways are so much better than before. Remote assessment has encouraged us to re-evaluate our learning outcomes. It has inspired many more authentic assessment activities, building confidence to move away from previous methods (which had been held onto for so long purely because ‘that’s what we have always done in our discipline’).

1. **Benefits in terms of CPD/Staff Development sessions**

**4.1 From NTF Helen King, University of West of England: deeper engagement**

I had planned an on-campus, one day event on ‘the Characteristics of Expertise for Teaching in Higher Education’ for October 2020; expecting a maximum of 30 people probably mostly from the Bristol area / Southwest region. Due to Covid we went online. We had a one-day online symposium, followed by a week of asynchronous engagement with videos from the symposium and additional ones from people who weren’t available to attend. We finished up with a one hour summary panel event a week later. Our lovely admin team were super-creative and developed a SharePoint site for the videos and asynchronous chat. It went really well and attracted over 500 registrants from over 20 countries. I’m now publishing a Routledge/SEDA book with contributions from 36 authors who presented at the event.

Various opportunities for international activities have included my SEDA CPD triad conversation with a colleague in Thailand, and a catch-up with someone at the University of Queensland that led to me offered an Honorary Associate Professorship there. Our virtual

Academic Board was chaired by the VC. My cat chooses the only few minutes in the whole of the 3 hours meeting when my web cam is on to walk across the keyboard and turn to face me with his tail in air, pointing is rear straight at the web cam!

**4.2 From Virna Rossi, Ravensbourne University, London: shift of balance towards more online sessions**

The PGCert used to be blended but more on-site than online pre-covid (roughly 60% online and 40% on-site), now it is entirely online with *optional* on-site classes, roughly 90% online and 10% on-site. This has had massive benefits of the type you mention, with many staff saying that the format made it possible for them to enrol, learn and complete. It's also had big benefits for me, for the same reasons. Management agree that this is a more supportive delivery mode and can more easily be switched to online only in case of future lockdowns. So, it will stay like this for the foreseeable future.

**4.3 From Jade Kimberley, of Kaplan Education: better engagement and team communication**

Our weekly programme has seen a big increase in engagement since we moved it online in March 2020, particularly as we record all sessions so staff can watch them ‘on catch up’ if they can’t make the live session. Also I’d like to contribute something though on team communication and how virtual communication has encouraged a wider sharing of ideas and good practice. At work, we often bump into colleagues and share an activity we’ve used in class, and this sharing often stays within that conversation. In online ‘chat’ groups (e.g. MS Teams), the absence of those moments has seen tutors share these ideas with the whole teaching team – sometimes to report back on things have gone well, or to seek consolation or advice when they haven’t. Not only does this help to build a sense of community and support online, it also means some fantastic ideas have been shared among a wider group, leading to further adaptation and experimentation. In some cases, tutors have gone on to lead CPD sessions on an idea or technique they have shared, boosting their confidence and building on their professional development. The challenge now as we slowly return to face-to-face delivery is how to keep this virtual sharing going!

**4.4 From Ruth Windsheffel, City University: self-development**

I’ve always been really reluctant to re-watch myself teaching (in recordings). This isn’t an unusual phobia, I suspect, but it meant that I never felt comfortable choosing to watch recordings of myself despite it being recommended as a really good way of reflecting on and improving your teaching. Well, the experience of teaching and supporting learning over the pandemic has not only increased my technical expertise in terms of producing video content but has also lessened my discomfort when watching myself on screen (I have had to do it to edit ‘lecture captures’, etc.). I have definitely learned from doing it. Not only has it shown me that when in the moment I think I’m handling a challenging situation in the classroom ineffectively (e.g. sounding defensive or flustered), I actually come across as quite calm and collected, which has boosted my confidence no end! It has also revealed that I do some things or say some things that I had no idea I did or said when teaching. They aren’t awful things but they provide grist to the mill of continuous professional development.

1. **Improvements in the use of technologies**

**5.1 From NTF Kirsten Hardie, Bournemouth Arts University: Miro and Zoom**

[Students particularly benefited from] the liberating use of Miro! This has transformed student engagement and their work – sharing openly; making explicit their thinking by mapping out and structuring ideas and research through visual presentations on Miro boards. Sharing in an open space that students readily fill with fun and enthusiasm – it’s a natural blank canvas for undergraduate Graphic Design students that I teach. It’s enabled me to do so much more in a space compared with the traditional studio/classroom.

This also applies to Zoom! – the breakout rooms facility has enabled students who otherwise would not choose to meet – to meet. The random allocation of rooms enables students to meet with each other with confidence that they have a designated space and time that is for them only.

Students are utilising wider and different online resources – this has powered students’ research in very different ways and energised and advised their communication skills too it appears. Additionally, our guest speakers can readily beam in via Zoom from all over the world – wonderful new networks forged with professionals who share, talk and delight in meeting with students so readily online

**5.2 From Rachel Bancroft, Head of the Learning and Teaching Support Unit in the School of Arts and Humanities), Nottingham Trent University: new approaches**

Whilst the pandemic period has brought with it a lot of challenges, there is an enduring conversation about some approaches which were forced by the pandemic but are being retained and developed still. Prolific guest speakers who might previously have been out of reach for a campus visit are joining sessions via video both on and off campus. Newly discovered digital tools for group work are enriching collaboration and making it easier and more visible. Videos for learning are available for repeated views at any time, allowing revision and revisiting of concepts that might not have been fully understood during a live session. Even if it was just 'one good thing', everyone seems to have found something new to carry with them. Sharing these triumphs, large or small, has enriched the practice of others and offered a chance to reflect on how far we've come.

**5.3 From Alison Voice, Leeds University: prompting engagement**

The use of new technologies has opened up more channels of communication. Rather than just in-person and email as means to talk to students, we now have video meetings at the drop of a hat. This allows a faster response to student queries and a more caring environment to discuss sensitive issues.

* 1. **From Michelle Morgan, University of East London: a caveat**

The developments and benefits of the pandemic on learning, teaching and assessments in HE have been immense and a long time coming. However, as we move forward and welcome new students into university study, we must not make the assumption that although many may be ‘socially digitally’ experienced that this equates to being ‘learning digitally’ experienced. As a result, it will be essential to identify any experience gaps on entry to study and effectively bridge them.

I’m sure readers of this post will have plenty to add to these great examples! As James Derounian’s students argue, we need to keep the best of both worlds as we move forward through and beyond this grim experience. Let’s keep the conversation going!

**Sally Brown, December 2021**