Educational (di)stances: reimagining ELT in hybrid learning-teaching environments

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Abstract
The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic abruptly forced educational institutions worldwide to turn to distance learning to keep the educational process going on. The need to use digital resources in the daily teaching and learning practice has inevitably obliged educators at large to think about education in new ways.
How can high quality learning, envisaged by the United Nations 2030 Agenda as the fourth Sustainable Development Goal, be ensured to students when working in a hybrid environment? What is the students' own perception of blended, hybrid and/or of totally online classes? Which contribution can the latest cognitive neuroscience research give to designing effective learning environments, both in-presence and remotely?
The teaching profession needs to be profoundly rethought and teachers, as professionals in the field of education, should focus not only on what their students learn, but also on how the learning process can be mediated and boosted, thus prioritizing the authentic nature of any educational institution.

Keywords: *academic teaching; learning; student engagement; curriculum design; hybrid classes*

1. Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020 resulted in school and university closures in a great number of countries, bringing along an abrupt implementation of distance learning in an attempt to keep the educational process going on. Since then, online classes have become part of the daily teaching-learning process at all educational levels, with their inevitable apparatus of limitations and benefits. Teachers, attempting to replicate learning experiences online, have been constantly challenged to meaningfully work with "blended" and/or "hybrid" classes[1] split between in-person and remote environments; the enforced use digital resources have unavoidably obliged them to think about education in new ways.

Educational technology adoption was thriving even before Covid-19, but the pandemic has naturally accelerated the shift to online education – a market that is expected to grow over the next few years. This move to online teaching in 2020 and, in many cases, to dual delivery teaching in 2021 has consequently provided opportunities to implement and assess innovative methods for student communication and engagement.

The newly created educational scenarios, however, arise some crucial questions: how can high quality learning, envisaged by the United Nations 2030 Agenda as the fourth Sustainable Development Goal, be ensured to students when working in an online environment? What is the students' own perception of blended, hybrid and/or of totally online classes? Which contribution can

[1] *Blended learning* focuses on the combination between offline and online learning, whereas *hybrid learning* is an educational model where some students attend class in-person, while others join the class virtually from home with educators teaching remote and in-person students at the same time. In hybrid learning models, asynchronous teaching methods can be used to supplement synchronous, face-to-face instruction (https://resources.owllabs.com/blog/hybrid-learning).

the latest cognitive neuroscience research give to designing effective learning environments, both in-presence and remotely?

The teaching profession needs to be profoundly rethought and teachers, as professionals in the field of education, should focus not only on what their students learn, but also on how the learning process can be mediated and boosted, thus prioritizing the authentic nature of any educational institution. In this regard, examining the online learning experiences of students over the past couple of years might turn out to be instrumental in informing post-Covid teaching practices.

After considering some of the latest trends in educational pedagogy, this study examines synchronous and asynchronous strategies deployed in some undergraduate English classes at an Italian university, from March 2020 to present. The implementation of specific learning activities was assessed through feedback from students by means of voluntary surveys, fundamental in shedding light on the success of the techniques and approaches adopted in improving student engagement and subject management. The surveys proved that several of the engagement methods adopted actually enhanced the students' learning experience, while others were less effective. In the light of the enforced distance and of a dramatic shift in subject delivery during a global pandemic, having a connection to students and reliable sources of information turned out to be essential and profitable to student learning and to teaching alike.

2. Recent trends in pedagogical assumptions

2.1 The Conversational Framework

What does it take to learn in contexts of formal education? To design for any type of learning – be it face to face, online, blended or hybrid – it is useful to carefully consider the main theories about how students learn. Despite great cultural and technological changes, these theories have not changed (behaviorism and constructivism being still two key theories of learning) and therefore represent a fundamental starting point for any teacher.

Diana Laurillard, professor of Learning with Digital technology at the UCL Institute of Education, has been developing theories and research on learning and teaching over a few decades (Laurillard 2002, 2008, 2010, 2012), culminating in an interesting pedagogic theory called the "Conversational Framework". Its development begins with the assumption that "academic knowledge consists in descriptions of the world, and therefore comes to be known through a discursive interaction between teacher and student" (Laurillard 1993: 81).

Blending the main theories of teaching and learning developed over the last hundred years or so (among others, Bransford, Dewey, Hattie, Marton, Papert, Piaget, Seely Brown, Senge, Vygotsky), the Conversational Framework focuses on high quality learning and represents the teaching-learning process as a series of "iterative exchanges": between a learner and a teacher; between a learner and their peers; at two levels of concepts and practices. (Fig.1)

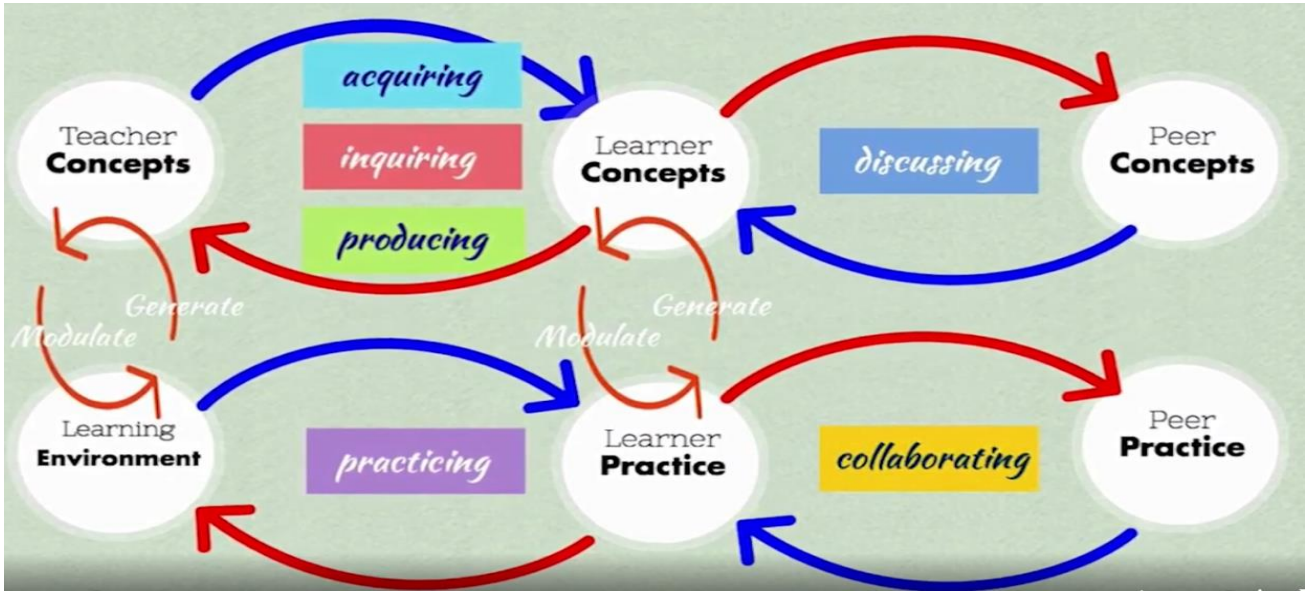

Fig. 1. The Conversational Framework

The Conversational Framework is meant to help teachers think about teaching and learning from the student's point of view, pursuing the ultimate goal of designing educational environments capable to help students learn, in both school/campus and online learning contexts. The starting point is the learner and the idea that learning is an activity developing both concepts and practices (Fig.1). These two elements support each other: the concepts developed through learning generate actions; the feedback a learner receives on these actions is useful to modify and improve new actions, so as to receive better feedback. The learner can get help from the teacher on the one hand, and from other learners on the other hand. Every interaction represents an opportunity to develop concepts and practices.

The Conversational Framework encompasses six main types of learning activities: *acquisition*; *inquiry*; *discussion*; *practice*; *collaboration*; *production* (Laurillard 2012: 98). Learning can come through *acquisition*, when, for example, the learner is listening to the teacher, watching a video, reading a book or a website; it is very common in education and creates the opportunity for the learner to develop concepts. If the learner finds up something using various resources (i.e. asking questions to the teacher, going to the library or surfing the Internet), learning happens through *inquiry*, which represents a more active process being more in the control of the learner. *Discussion*, instead, takes place through listening and responding, articulating and arguing, which are all opportunities for concepts to develop. When the teacher sets up a learning environment focusing on a task, the learner has to generate an action, interpret the feedback and then use it in a second attempt to get nearer the goal: this is learning through *practice*. If students have to work together on a project to produce a shared output, learning comes through *collaboration*, which is different from discussion, in so far as they have to negotiate ideas and practices to get the best feedback they can, until they agree. Finally, when students are producing something for the teacher to evaluate, this is learning through *production*.

Laurillard (1993, 2002) further claims that the teaching-learning process develops through four different interconnected phases and that different educational media can be analyzed (and used) in terms of these dimensions: 1) the representation of the object by the teacher; 2) the learning environment designed by the teacher; 3) the students' concepts; 4) the specific actions of the students (connected with learning tasks given by the teacher). In particular, the pedagogic strategy deployed in higher education should consider different forms of communication and associated mental activities: *discussion, adaptation, interaction, reflection* (Laurillard 1983: 82).

The message of this theory is that ideally, when designing a learning session, the teacher uses several types of learning to keep the cycles of development going. The best possible learning

experiences are those combining all six learning types, in so far as a rich mix of learning activities is likely to be the most effective. It is obviously the teacher's responsibility to try and encourage all of them.

2.2 Student–Centred Learning and Teaching (SCLT)

Another concept, widely used in the teaching and learning literature, is that of student–centred learning and teaching (SCLT) (Klemenčič 2015, 2017, 2018; MacHemer and Crawford 2007); in particular, student-centred learning is often linked with other terms, such as "flexible learning" (Taylor 2000), "experiential learning" (Burnard, 1999), "self-directed learning" (Knowles 1975:18), which has led to confusion in its implementation.

Although the movement away from teacher-centered toward student-centered learning and teaching in higher education has intensified in recent decades, and in spite of its widespread use in literature and policy documents, SCLT remains poorly defined, under-researched and often misinterpreted, Sabine Hoidn and Manja Klemenčič (2020) warn. A few years earlier, the same concern had been put forward by Lea et al. (2003) when they observed that, despite widespread use of the term, one of the issues with student-centred learning is the fact that "many institutions or educators claim to be putting student-centred learning into practice, but in reality they are not" (2003:322).

The concept of SCLT, based on a shift away from teaching to an emphasis on learning, has been credited as early as 1905 to Hayward and to Dewey in 1956; it was also associated with Piaget's work and, more recently, with Malcolm Knowles' (O'Neill, McMahon 2005:30). Some features of this approach, according to the existing literature, include the concept of the student's choice or control in their learning and an emphasis on the student actively "doing", even negotiating key decisions about learning (see, for instance, the new concept of "co-creation" of course content at Melbourne and Harvard universities in 2021). In this paradigm shift, the teacher becomes just a facilitator, an expert guide, and a resource person (Brandes, Ginnis 1986).

Although beneficial in many aspects, student-centred learning is not without some criticism, mostly directed at: its focus on the individual learner that, if taken to its extreme, may not consider the needs of the whole class and the importance of the social context of learning; the difficulties in its implementation, specifically for the resources needed, the belief system of the students and staff alike, tending to underestimate such an approach, and the students' lack of familiarity with the term (O'Neill, McMahon 2005:36).

2.3 Neurosciences and Learning: The Universal Design for Learning

The aim of educational institutions in the 21st century does not simply rely on content mastery or the use of new technologies, but it mainly consists in mastering one's own learning process. Education at large should help students become "expert" students aware of how they can learn best and ready to apply this awareness in the light of a lifelong learning process.

Research work carried out over the last decades in the field of cognitive neuroscience has inspired the creation of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL). In the 1990s, Meyer, Rose, and their colleagues at CAST[2] introduced it as a framework to improve teaching and learning, integrating what is known about the learning brain with the design of learning environments capable to support all types of learners. The guidelines of UDL can help educators design lessons, learning units or whole curricula (learning and teaching goals, methods, materials and assessment) in order to reduce obstacles faced by students when learning.

[2] CAST is a nonprofit education research and development organization located near Boston, USA. Recently, in 2021, they have launched a new project, called *Center for Innovation, Design, and Digital Learning* (CIDDL) to "teach preservice educators to use educational technology for more inclusive instruction" (https://www.cast.org/our-work/projects/ciddl-digital-network-innovative-practices-education, last access 03/08/2021).

The dominant feature of the nervous system is variability: each brain is unique in its complexity and interconnectedness that are shaped and influenced by genetics and interactions with the environment. In formal learning environments, like schools and universities, individual variability is the norm; this means that the curricula designed for an "average" class do not take into consideration the real variability of students and might fail to offer fair and equal learning opportunities. The UDL, instead, bearing in mind inclusive teaching, aims to overcome the idea of a strict and only method of teaching suited to all students; it suggests flexibility in goals, methods, materials and assessment allowing educators to accommodate different learning needs since the very start. An active design of flexible pathways toward learning goals supports learners by building on prior strengths and connections. Frequent, formative feedback and opportunities for active learning further create and strengthen the connections within our brains. Another key concept in education is the plasticity of the brain, as it helps recognize that learning is a constant growth process constructed over time (Meyers, Rose, Gordon 2014).

Gardner (1983, 2011) stresses fairly similar concepts when, on the basis of research in several disciplines, including the study of how human capacities are represented in the brain, he claims that everyone has a number of relatively independent mental faculties, which can be termed "multiple intelligences". To present, he has estimated human beings having at least eight distinct intelligences (spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, linguistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, logical-mathematical, naturalistic). Gardner (2013a), however, warns against the dangerous association often made between the concept of multiple intelligences and that of learning styles: the intelligences constitute the human intellectual toolkit, while a learning style is a hypothesis of how an individual can approach the range of materials.

The two main educational implications of the theory of multiple intelligences are: individualization - also termed "personalization": when teaching, mentoring or nurturing we should consider that each human being has a unique intelligence toolkit), and pluralization – ideas, concepts, theories, skills should be taught in several different ways to reach as many students as possible (Gardner 2013b). Both concepts seem to be consistent with the teaching and learning approaches mentioned so far.

On the basis of these premises, it could be overwhelming for educators to bear in mind variability while constantly planning for many learners. Nevertheless, according to UDL scholars, learner variability is predictable, and can be organized across three brain networks identified by the UDL framework: *affective*, *recognition*, and *strategic* (CAST 2018).

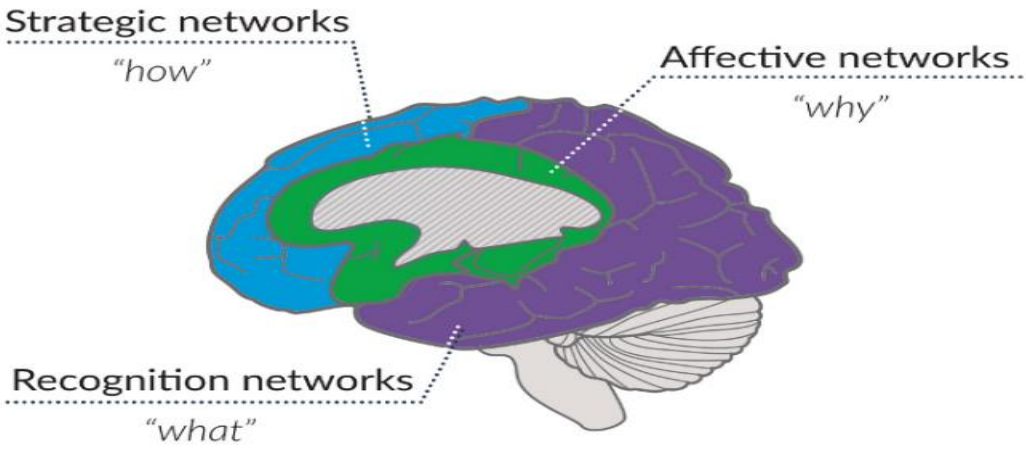

Fig. 2. Brain networks identified by the UDL framework

Three main principles, based on neurosciences research, actually underlie UDL (CAST 2018, 2019):

1. *representation* (the "what" of learning, which aligns with recognition networks): students differ in the way they perceive and comprehend information (e.g. because of a physical impairment, of language and/or cultural differences). This means there is no one way of representation that is optimal for every student; consequently, learning really happens when multiple means of representation are used, as they allow learners to make internal connections, just like it happens with concepts;
2. *action and expression* (the "how" of learning, which reconnects with strategic networks): students can show what they have learned in different ways within a learning environment; moreover, action and expression require a number of strategies, practice and organization, that all represent a further element of differentiation. Once again, there is no one means of action and expression that could be considered ideal for all students: consequently, providing them with various options for action and expression is fundamental;
3. *engagement* (the "why" of learning, which relates to affective networks): affectivity represents a crucial element in learning and can be influenced by many reasons (i.e. personal interest, previous knowledge, cultural or neurological factors, etc.). The affective domain is one of three domains in Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), with the other two being the cognitive and psychomotor. It includes the way we deal with things emotionally, such as feelings, values, appreciation, enthusiasms, motivations, and attitudes. Students differ greatly in terms of interest, self-regulation, effort and persistence; as there is no one ideal way to involve all of them, giving multiple options of engagement appears to be the real solution.

The UDL incorporates and supports a number of modern teaching approaches, such as cooperative learning, project-based learning, multisensorial learning, performance-based assessment, the theory of multiple intelligences by Gardner and so on. Teachers could include UDL in their curriculum design by using its principles, deploying a variety of materials (online resources, videos, podcasts, PowerPoint, e-books) and providing cognitive support to students (i.e. a final summary of the lecture/lesson; tutoring; scaffolding).[3]

3. Online learning & teaching: opportunities and challenges

While online learning and teaching provide educators with a wider range of technologies to design for learners, some crucial questions still remain: to what extent is it possible to adapt the existing approaches to the new digital teaching/learning scenarios? How can learning activities be best implemented so as to test, adapt, share and reuse them in a community of teachers? What is the optimal mix of blended and online methods to support the different types of learning? Clearly, as stated before, there is no such thing as the best mix, but as professionals in the field of educations, teachers can decide what is the best option for their students in their specific teaching-learning contexts.

To this aim, creating a teacher community to exchange and share ideas and to build on best practices in order to learn from each other, undoubtedly advances knowledge. In this regard, digital technology can effectively help teachers work together and build a collective knowledge of how to teach online. Intensifying their work over the last couple of years or so, publishing houses have offered many tools, free resources, online courses for professional development and similar support; a useful and free tool available to teachers and academics in the direction of curriculum design is the "Learning Designer" (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/learning-designer/).

[3] For further reading related to the pedagogical, neuroscientific and practical bases of UDL, see: Rose, Meyer, 2002, "Teaching Every Student in the Digital Age"; Rose, Meyer, Hitchcock (eds.), 2005, *The Universally Designed Classroom*, Harvard Education Press; Rose, Meyer (eds.), 2006, *A Practical Reader in Universal Design for Learning*, Harvard Education Press.

Developed by the London Institute of Education, UCL, it is a massive open online course (MOOC) that supports teachers and educators to implement three main tasks: visually design a sequence of blended and online teaching and learning activities; analyse their pedagogic design; share their learning designs with each other, so as to reflect on the best way possible to integrate technology in the curriculum design. Basically, the Learner Designer is concerned with the choices teachers make after considering all the different elements of a teaching-learning experience, including learning outcomes, teaching methods, assessments, learning environment (i.e. online, in person, or a blend of the two).

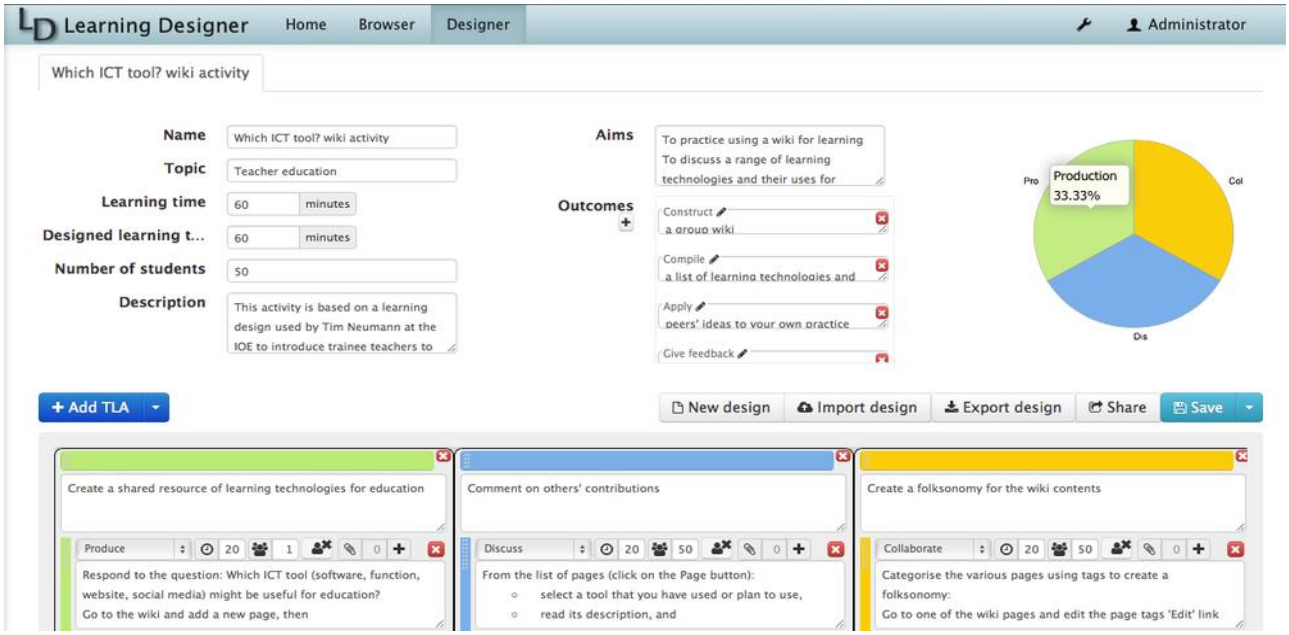

Fig. 3. The Learning Designer

Teachers are invited to specify their teaching aims and outcomes (Fig. 3), which can be categorised according to Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives. On the basis of this information, learning experiences are designed as sequences of teaching and learning activities (TLAs) aimed at helping students achieving their learning goals. Each activity created has to be matched to the six learning types identified by Laurillard in the Conversational Framework, so as to identify how learning is going to take place, if from acquisition (Read/Watch/Listen), inquiry, practice, production, discussion or collaboration.

The experience of online teaching over the past two years has actually shown that it does not require less time – rather, a different distribution of it – but it takes a lot of effort. The amount of time taken to teachers in online classes is apparently 8% higher than it would take them to run a face-to-face class, because of preparation work, support to students, actual class, etc. (Laurillard 2020). Still, as widely shown by the recent educational experiences, when it comes to online pedagogy, maybe the greatest concern is how to ensure teachers-students interaction and pick up the students' cues (through body language, facial expression, feedback, etc.) to adapt the teaching activity (Shan, Li, Shi, Wang, and Cai 2014; Kinash, Knight, McLean 2015; Hartnett 2016; Alawamleh, Mohannad Al-Twait, Al-Saht 2020). Blended and online learning can be optimised through active participation by individuals and small groups as well as by using all the active learning types of inquiry, practice, discussion, collaboration and production.

In addition to what has been observed so far, with the shift from entirely online classes after Covid-19 outbreak in 2020, to dual delivery style in many educational institutions in 2021, further considerations need to be made. What has it been like to learn and teach in this new style? How can the recent experiences of students and educators enhance new approaches for subject delivery? What are the implications of this new mode for specific pedagogies and for broader application?

A possible solution in this regard comes from the University of Melbourne, Australia, where the Built Environments Learning and Teaching group in the Faculty of Architecture Building and Planning has recently developed "Guidance for Dual Delivery" (2021). As summarized by Fig.3, this online guide tries to envisage possible future challenges for teaching staff, offering practical strategies connected with this special mode of teaching and identifying key considerations on the issues of "learner equity and access" (providing all students with equivalent opportunities and support to achieve the subject's intended learning outcomes; allowing for differences in the two learning modes, and the opportunities they present, when preparing and reviewing student activities); "cohort building" (offering informal and formal activities for all students in the subject – online and blended – to develop a sense of belonging and to identify as a collective learning community; considering how students in each learning mode can contribute and participate most effectively to the activities of the whole cohort (avoiding either group becoming simply a spectator) and "staff and student perceptions" (transparently communicating the design of a Dual Delivery subject and the value of learning activities for students in each learning mode).

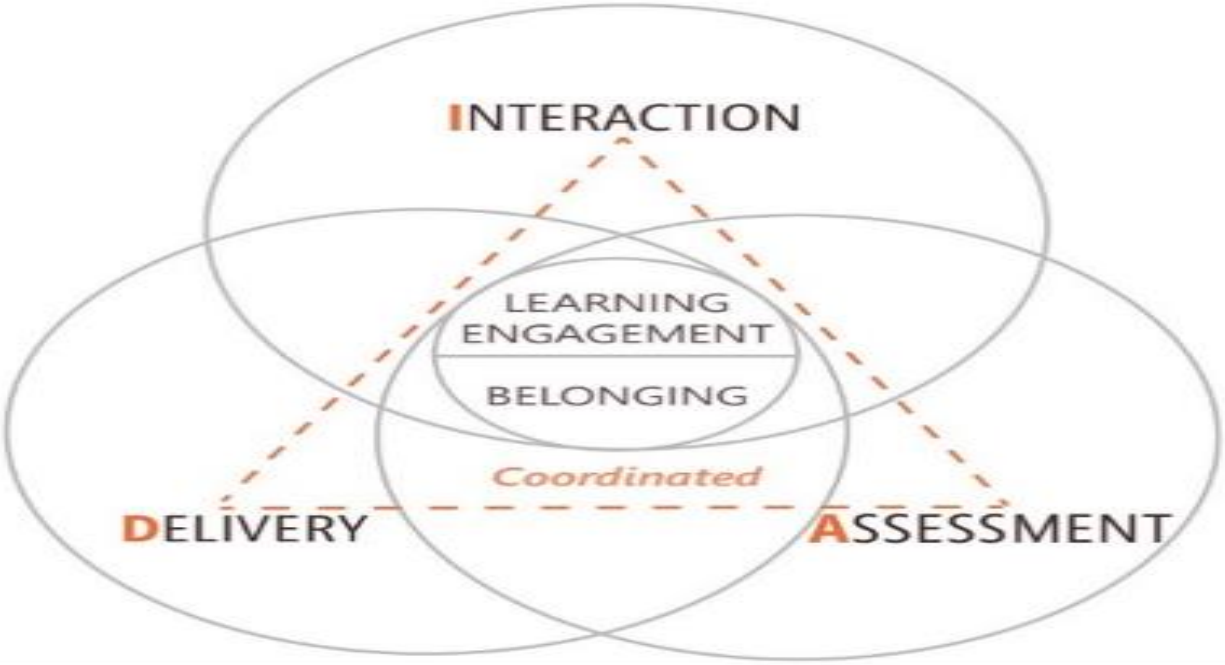

Fig.4. Dual Delivery: key elements

The issues of student engagement and connection to their institution, particularly in an online environment, have been compelling topics for universities long before the Covid-19 pandemic. Clearly, they have been intensified by the impact of the pandemic, with the ensuing social distancing, an abrupt shift to online learning, and increased feelings of stress, anxiety and social isolation among students and staff alike.

An additional aspect to reimagine or at least modify, in a new scenario of post-Covid future, is that of assessment practices. Globally, most schools and universities use written exams primarily as a summative assessment, that is an assessment aimed at judgement or accreditation. What is desirable, though, is to develop more occasions for formative assessment throughout courses, so as to give more and constant feedback to students on their own learning process, highlighting learning gaps and improvement areas. This could come through "feedback on essays, written comments on assignments, grades during the year that do not add to end of year mark and multiple-choice questions/answers for feedback only" (O'Neill, McMahon 2005:34).

4. Innovating EFL classes for dual delivery learning & teaching

After a seemingly ordinary beginning in semester 1 2020/2021, almost immediately interrupted by a new lockdown and therefore transitioned fully online, in semester 2, 2021, classes in our university were held in dual delivery teaching mode. Here, we report on the strategies used to facilitate active learning and student engagement, experiences, outcomes, and student feedback regarding four undergraduate English courses[4] at an Italian University, in an attempt to cope with a constantly evolving situation.

During the synchronous two-hour weekly lectures – delivered via the university-provided Cisco Webex platform – discussion on challenging content was prompted and students were encouraged to contribute ideas and questions to the discussion via the Q&A or Chat tools. The students' responses allowed both the teacher and students to identify any weaknesses throughout the teaching/learning process and helped the latter to get regular feedback on their learning experience. This aspect, as shown by the students' feedback reported in the next section, improved their outcomes and satisfaction in the subject.

In keeping with the guidelines for curriculum design provided by the UDL and by Laurillard's Conversational Framework, students were given multiple possibilities for learning not only in synchronous learning settings, where animated presentations were regularly used, but also through asynchronous reinforcement and catch-up activities uploaded on a Moodle platform associated with the University Language Centre. Video and listening materials were regularly added, so that students wishing to revise them for further training or simply to view them for the first time – in case they had not attended the lecture or had connection problems throughout – could do so after creating an account. Students' access could be monitored at any time by the teacher being automatically tracked on the platform.

During the course, students were similarly given many occasions for peer and self-assessment, that "both give some control and responsibility back to the student" (O'Neill, McMahon 2005:34), turning them into active participants and co-creators of their own learning process. They were actively engaged in giving class presentations, both in fully online and dual delivery classes: besides favouring a real student-centred approach, this task provided speakers with a valuable opportunity to apply the concepts they learnt into practice, exercise their spoken English, particularly ESP, refine their soft skills (by designing and delivering a public presentation), boost their critical thinking and employability skills (i.e. oral communication through presenting, conversing, and listening), while receiving at the same time a twofold feedback – from peers and from the teacher – useful to check any parts of their presentations to be improved and/or mistakes to be corrected. In this regard, from a theoretical point of view, the whole process seems to closely relate to the social constructivist view, for its emphasis on activity and the importance of communities of others/practice in the learning process (O'Neill, McMahon 2005:32). It actually helped foster a dynamic, healthy online learning community.

A further valuable reference in this direction is the Online Engagement Framework for Higher Education (2018) developed by Redmond et al. "from a social constructionist perspective in higher education where asynchronous and synchronous group discussions occur as an intentional way to promote individual and group learning". Not meant as a hierarchical or linear framework, it tries to unveil the dynamic nature of online engagement (Table 1).

[4] The courses examined here were core modules included in the first-year syllabus for students attending the Departments of Engineering and Business Economics.

Online Engagement Element	Indicators (illustrative only)
Social engagement	Building community Creating a sense of belonging Developing relationships Establishing trust
Cognitive engagement	Thinking critically Activating metacognition Integrating ideas Justifying decisions Developing deep discipline understandings Distributing expertise
Behavioral engagement	Developing academic skills Identifying opportunities and challenges Developing multidisciplinary skills Developing agency Upholding online learning norms Supporting and encouraging peers
Collaborative engagement	Learning with peers Relating to faculty members Connecting to institutional opportunities Developing professional networks
Emotional engagement	Managing expectations Articulating assumptions Recognising motivations Committing to learning

Tab. 1. Online Engagement Framework for Higher Education

It is maybe worth pointing out that both during semesters 1 and 2, 2020/2021, more students regularly asked for tutoring than in pre-Covid times, through live meetings on Cisco Webex: these proved to be occasions for exchanging ideas, setting tailored learning goals, negotiating a learning schedule, checking students' written and oral performance before final exams (as a formative assessment) and, more than once, just for feeling more confident and less isolated while studying. Tutorings involving a small group of students were also times for peer support and socialization, as participants were often encouraged to ask each other questions to clarify or revise a specific course topic instead of simply asking the teacher.

5. From the other side of the lens: valuing the students' opinions

This section focuses on the students' own perspective by examining the data collected during semesters 1 and 2, 2020/2021, through a voluntary survey that sought to measure the effectiveness of incorporating the practical suggestions described so far into the online lectures.
Forty students responded to the survey, whose completion rate was quite low in the online cohort compared to the significantly higher number of attendees. Students were asked to reflect on the benefits and challenges from their online study of the subject by filling in a questionnaire structured into 5 sections: 1) Attendance; 2) Teaching methods; 3) Topics & lecture materials; 4) Interest & motivation 5) Interaction with the teacher and their perceptions of the future state of teaching delivery in post-Covid.

By the time they participated in the survey, respondents were all regularly attending lectures (67.5% declared an attendance rate >75%) and reported having no problems using the online environments. 90% were satisfied with the online teaching approach used in the English lectures, appreciating, in particular: participation and engagement (40%: "I really like the interaction between

us and the teacher during the explanation and the exercises because it is a method that allows us to better understand the topics covered"; "The aspect that I appreciate most of the teaching is the participation that the teacher asks of us, in fact in front of the computer it is easy to get distracted") as well as the teacher's encouraging attitude; the use of slides to facilitate content comprehension (10%); the inclusion of different learning activities appealing to various skills within the same lecture (25%) and the comfort of following lectures from home (10%). The weaknesses highlighted, instead, were mainly connected with: lack of face-to-face interaction (10%); a teaching delivery perceived as being too fast for the personal level of English possessed (10%); connection problems (15%).

When asked to rank their preferred topics, 55% of students nominated ESP issues as their preference (mainly introduced through handouts specifically crafted by the teacher for each Degree Course and made available on her personal university webpage). In the direction of co-creation of future course contents, students were asked to specify which topics in the English program they would have rather changed and/or added: in particular, 25% declared they would not change anything at all; 12.5% preferred more grammar insights, while 7.5% suggested adding more listening and speaking activities; a lower percentage suggested to further enhance ESP.

Reflecting on their use of the course video and listening materials, 57.5% answered they did about twice a week; 62.5% found them useful for a variety of reasons (to test their understanding of spoken English; for their immediacy and brevity; to improve their listening skills, pronunciation and vocabulary; to boost their understanding of ESP topics introduced during the course). Such data indicate that students were actually gaining essential knowledge and skills and perceived their online learning experience as worthwhile.

As to interest and motivation, 25% said there were no relevant differences between online and in-presence lectures, 55% of respondents declared that online lectures were increasing their interest in learning English, while 15% admitted it was decreasing, instead (mainly because of: more mind-wandering after many hours a day in front of a screen; the reduced interaction with the teacher and the other students entailed by online lectures; connection problems affecting the quality of attendance).

What students perceived they were gaining the most from learning in a new online environment was: getting more digital skills (25%); improving focus and concentration (12.5%); improving their study organization and time management skills (10%); just adapting to a new situation (7.5%). Most of these experiences were held to be helpful in the future, especially in a work environment and to keep on studying online.

A final question, asking if online lectures should become part of university teaching – being offered to students along with traditional lectures – was thought in the direction of future post-Covid scenarios: a high rate of 82.5% agreed with this view, still highlighting the fact that in-presence lectures are the priority, while online lectures could be used as a useful alternative for students who cannot commute to campus, also enabling them to balance external commitments with their studies; only 12.5% were against such a view.

6. Concluding Remarks

The unique circumstances of 2020 have accelerated the modernization of university teaching practices, binding educators to use modern technology in teaching. This has entailed a series of necessary tasks for professionals in the education sector, namely re-examine course objectives and consider how they can best be achieved in a hybrid environment; help students understand a new course structure and delivery; define clear expectations for student work and interactions in both synchronous and asynchronous modalities. Key issues commonly related with online teaching are lack of student engagement, decreased motivation and high fail rates. Considering the increase of online courses delivered by universities as a response to Covid-19, student engagement in this new mode demands greater attention and further investigation.

The considerations developed so far highlight the need for educators to investigate and apply pedagogical approaches that can facilitate high quality motivation and student connection, especially when deploying online learning environments. Some key practices remain crucial in this direction, including an accurate learning and teaching design, informed by both experience and education literacy, and the use of technology to build a continuing supportive community of practice for educators at all levels. Learning activities should also be designed catering to modern era learners, whose increasingly volatile attention spans – conditioned by high exposure to quick resources explored on the web – make them need shorter, higher yield and more engaging materials.

Drawing upon student response to a basically student-oriented approach in some undergraduate English courses as well as current scholarship, it has been shown that the students' experience of online learning can be boosted by the careful selection, evaluation and deployment of tools aimed at engagement and communication. The recent experience of online teaching and learning has clearly revealed that working in isolation has a demotivating impact on student engagement with the learning activities and is one of the main factors contributing to high failure rates in online subjects. Chen et al. (2010) therefore, underlined the importance of ensuring quality in programs and pedagogy necessary to provide online students with the same level of support as in-presence students. Equally beneficial to both teaching and learning is to consider mechanisms for collecting student feedback on educators' teaching not just at course end, but also midway through the subject.

The shift of higher education institutions to online clearly presents challenges for course design and pedagogical practice. While borne of necessity, despite adjustments and improvements still to be made, these new delivery strategies present pedagogical opportunities and are undoubtedly shaping the expectation of university students going forward. As Gardner (2000:35) claimed, referring to the possibilities offered by technology to exploit our multiple ways of learning, "a marriage of education and technology […] will only be a happy marriage if those charged with education remain clear on what they want to achieve for our children and vigilant that the technology serves these ends".

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