Lifelong, lifewide learning for the new abnormal and how digital fits

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'Welcome to the new abnormal' (Miklaucic & Gupta, 2021, p. 2) suggests a play on the ubiquity of the catchphrase 'new normal' in the peri-pandemic period. This editorial considers how the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped lifelong and lifewide learning towards a digital first delivery mode. During the recent years of the pandemic the journal has reflected on its first four decades of publications and this provides an opportunity to trace how and when particular themes have become part of the wider discussions in lifelong education (Holford et al., 2022a). As the journal has the benefit of forty years of contributions to lifelong learning and as part of the 40 year celebrations (Holford et al., 2022b), there was a curiosity amongst the editorial group to see whether there had been a a inclusion of digital education as the prevalence of information technology grew during the journal's development.

One of the reasons for this interest is to consider whether with the near ubiquitous presence of online learning, are adult learners still a 'neglected species' (Knowles, 1973) or has that altered with the ability for learning to be in many homes and 'on-demand'? The changes that have been wrought by the pandemic have embodied our career and lived experiences in a wider, dis-embodied way that has cast digital engagement as a new norm (or new abnormal?). The impact of this shift online disrupts the carefully constructed boundaries of the 8-hour working day which has previously privileged presentee-ism in work, study and networking opportunities.

Along with considering the development of online learning for lifelong education, it is important that we probe our experiences of the pandemic period. The restrictions of the pandemic have revealed an environment made hostile to all but also facilitated a new equity of limited access to face to face learning. All mobility was limited by rules, regulations and well-founded fears of illness. Block et al. as writing on disability theory consider this:

> The pandemic has meant that some disabled peoples "daily normal" have become the "new abnormal" for vast portions of the populations. In some cases, those new to distance learning and working are eager to return to older ways of doing things but sometimes, there is a willingness to fight to keep aspects of the "new abnormal" perceived as personally or structurally beneficial. Disagreements about how to constitute futures of work and learning are emerging as labor struggles and fights to sustain the increased financial and disability access that new modalities have made possible. (Block et al., 2021, p. np)

It is possible to consider the restrictions of the pandemic as Oliver's (1983;Oliver, 1996) social model of disability made universal: that the environment for everyone was made disabling when people's movement and opportunities to associate with others were restricted and contact with others required accommodations, such as the wearing of masks and use of hand sanitisers. The pandemic revealed our physical frailty and what Khan & Huremović, 2019 analysis highlighted about pandemics and the primal reaction of fear of being sick and losing oneself (Khan & Huremović, 2019). The pandemic also showed us how much physicality is involved in our teaching and learning settings and how much we took for granted and naturalised in our education delivery. As one of our previous editorials (Webb et al., 2022) highlighted there is a medicalisation undertone to discourses that concentrate on human-centred education.

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Since the World Health Organisation suggests the end of the emergency period of the COVID-19 pandemic was in sight (News, 2022), this may be a useful time to consider what changes have been wrought. We have discussed the implications of some of these changes in this journal over the previous three years by considering the implications for social inequality (Waller et al., 2020), digital inequalities (Milana et al., 2021) and concerns for the future of lifelong learning to focus on human-centred sustainable development (Webb et al., 2022). Goodson (2020), following the French Annales School, provides tool to help us understand how the shift has been brewing for so long but has seemingly also come quickly. Goodson (2020) contributes that change does not necessarily operate in a linear manner but is complex and operates in long, medium and short timespan. Therefore, it is timely to consider some further implications of the pandemic's digital intensification for lifelong and lifewide education and learning and how the pandemic has been a catalyst for a shift towards an imagined digital first delivery.

Arguably, the new practices of working at home, learning at home, mass digitisation and asynchronous communication have splintered monolithic ideas of learning, working and partici-pating in communities and civic society activities, thereby reforming learning and careers into truly life wide engagements. In Korea, there has been commentary that the meaning of home has been changed into a basecamp and a changing family climate has emerged (Lee et al., 2020). While this has meant significant changes in everyday life experience it also gives an extra dimension to lifewide learning which has been facilitated by the sudden shift online for many, specifically notable in high-GDP economies. That is, these changes in family life and the meaning of the home have facilitated a new way for learning to become lifewide – that is, be present or integral to life in the home through online learning. Maroto et al. (2021, p. 876) suggest that many are now 'working differently or not at all' and that the impact on work has been great. Another significant change evolved from the blurring of borders between private space and professional environment as teleworking brought home (Phillips et al., 2020).

We consider here also the rapid move to online delivery that happened in the short period after the restrictions to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. This moment is a point when real educational change can be made according to Goodson (2020), who identifies such points as occurring when different layers of historical time coincide with each other and significant shifts in educational systems can occur which have widespread implications. Using Goodson's (2020) explanatory framework, the argument being made is that the short-term *événement*[1] of the pandemic restriction is connecting with the medium time historical shift, that is, the increasing tide of digitalisation; the meeting of these two historical layers forms a *conjoncture* of medium time. In turn, this *conjoncture* may result in a further long-term shift in historical time, that is, the *longue durée*, which this editorial argues may result in the ongoing steady pace of increased access to lifelong education.

The coming together of these shifts could be a significant moment of alteration for education engagement in the post-school setting. In this light we ponder what the legacy of the pandemic will be and whether there could be increased access to post-schooling lifelong education as the temporal and physical determinacy for education has been shown to not be absolute. Can we move beyond the dichotomy that the in-person learning and teaching session is the valid, valued experience and other modes are illusory and less real?

> The onset of the pandemic showed we have got to beware of dichotomic thinking that polarises views concerning on-site learning against digital learning (Ivenicki, 2021, p. 373)

Has the pandemic ushered in a new period where we now moved beyond the novelness of online learning where we can actively critique their educational benefit rather than just focus on the mode of delivery? The steady creep of online micro-credentials as a feature adult edu-tainment has been intensified during the pandemic period, but digital learning as a pastime is not new as indicated by the suggestion of digitalisation as having been a medium-term *conjuncture* (Goodson, 2020); this has been a process that has existed for some time. The history of online learning has been intimately engaged with non-school settings, the multiple delivery modes being particularly fertile sites for

small scale development long before the pandemic. Thus, digital engagement has been for a long-time part of lifelong learning (Ivenicki, 2021), in contrast to the previously reified onsite higher education courses.

Although not exact, the inclusion of content related to digital learning in the *International Journal of Lifelong Education* (IJLE) could be seen as a proxy for the development of digital as a *conjuncture* as per Goodson (2020). In this way the journal provides an ideal collection of research in which to trace the gradual but steady shift of learning modes. Even within the *conjuncture* there can and will be different phases and during the close reading of journal articles it was recognised that there was within this theme something of a chronological border. There appeared to be a distinct difference in how the term digital and its associated topical key words figured in the journal articles depending on the publication date of the article. The observation which suggested the boundary point was when there was a move between digital issues introduced as novel contributions which seemed to persist in until around 2010. A key marker in this difference is prompted firstly by the distinct bifurcation in frequency in publications mentioning digital issues. There were 20 articles retrieved with identified search terms of digital, information technology and computers found in the author keywords, abstracts or titles up until the end of 2010, volume 29. However, from volume 30 to 40 there were 24 articles retrieved, so the frequency and presence more than tripled. While digital was not featured in every article after the end of 2010, the temporal introduction of digital technologies ceased being a central feature of abstracts but were presented as something that was already part of the society. Digital at this point would be mentioned not as the object of the study but as a feature of the environment, the research or general society.

In reviewing the forty years of journal publications, there were several contributions that reflected on the facilitative properties of digital technology. That is, how it could support delivery of education in new ways such as facilitating collaborative learning (Smith, 2010), using new forms of expression such as blogging (Harju et al., 2016) and new modes such as in the technological adaptations of the Open University (Rumble, 2001) and with the university of the third age online in Australia (Swindell, 2002) and latterly MOOCs (Howarth et al., 2016; Luik et al., 2020).

Increasingly, digital became written about in the journal as a part of andragogical/pedagogical challenges and there is debate about whether the move to digital requires new ways of andragogic practice (De Bruijn, 1993; Youde, 2018). Information and communications technology facilitates a promise of new forms of learning and creating a learning society (Gorard et al., 2003). This promise was extended into explorations about how digital technology supports rural colleges' sustainability in the United States, enabling widening participation (Zacharakis et al., 2014) and how online study can enable study which may not have been previously possible (Meyers, 2017).

From the early days of the journal there was a distinct stream of contribution that promoted digital engagement for its potential to extend access for learners with specific characteristics. There are specific cohorts that contributions to the journal describe as being particularly beneficiaries of the engagement of digital technology in lifelong learning. Hansen et al. (1993) engage with the issue of disability with education and the danger of lack of accessibility for disabled people and digitalisation's implications and opportunities (Cooke et al., 1987). A decade later, Jotham (1996) (notably the second author in the earlier (Cooke et al., 1987)) also engages with education and IT for disabled people, but he is very much focused on looking into specific IT training for adults.

That the offer of digital will make lifelong learning 'more convenient, intellectually more stimulating and more entertaining' is the promise from James et al. (1996, p. 50). Much of that promise has been realised. It is interesting that the issue of confidence is invoked as a key issue in digital learning, and it is a recurrent theme to this day in digital technology – but also can be seen as a way of deflecting away from the real processes and competencies that have to be learnt to use digital technologies. This theme is picked up in the 2000s with regard to 'later life computer learners' (Russell, 2007) and the promise of technology, and this is returned again a decade later as a continuing issue of digital inclusion (Reneland-Forsman, 2018). So, while significant discussion about support of people's needs with digital technology has been previously carried out this has

been somewhat siloed with different accommodations and special arrangements to use digital technology to support lifelong learning.

Many of the more recent articles that were found over the period presented the multifaceted theme of digitalisation and technology as part of the society, evidencing the slow development of digital engagement. The quotidian nature of digital in contributions just before or at the time of the pandemic background evidence the interconnectedness between digital and lifelong learning (Rangraz & Pareto, 2021; Youde, 2018) and the digital elements form an embodied part of understanding the learning culture of a city (Boshier, 2018; Lido et al., 2016).

Across the period digital technology is presented as an emancipating force, opening up access for people to learning. We know from recent contributions on digital exclusion (Reneland-Forsman, 2018) that this promise is not fully realised. However, it is a recurring theme within the journal's emerging period of digital engagement (Kodesh, 1997; Swindell, 1997; 2003). This is unpicked in a particularly significant theoretically engaged piece by Gorard, Selwyn and Madden, 'Logged on to learning?' (Gorard et al., 2003), which twenty years ago assessed the impact of technology on participation in lifelong learning. Prophetically Gorard et al. (2003) described the policy enthusiasm for online delivery to adults as hoping for 'extending learning opportunities to "anyone" on an "anytime, anywhere" basis' (Gorard et al., 2003, p. 281) and indicated how digital technology had the potential to reform lifelong education systems.

The decades of slow but steady introduction of digital in lifelong learning did not for a long time have a transformative impact on the nature of lifelong learning. It is even more un-evidenced whether the digital has necessarily been wholly good in the emancipation it has caused from individual instruction. We were fortunate in some ways that while in many places there was great disruption to education there was still an opportunity for digital learning as Block et al. (2021) explain:

> after our crash course in 2020-2021, university professors, secondary and primary schools have learned that while remote learning is harder for some, for others it makes learning possible' (Block et al., 2021, p. np)

However, as we have discussed earlier in an editorial (Waller et al., 2020) there has been substantial digital exclusion: this is picked up by Gleason et al. elsewhere who confirm 'Long-experienced access barriers to online education were exacerbated by the abrupt transition of in-person to remote instruction' (Gleason et al., 2021, p. 2). It is important to also show and discuss the shortcomings of learning technologies and digital learning platforms as it creates very different lifelong opportunities, for instance, between a blue-collar worker and a knowledge worker, between a young and a more experienced worker, between public and private enterprises. The sudden shift to online as primary delivery method revealed some problematic practice that meant learning opportunities were not perfect and we were not prepared. The shifts towards digitalisation has also created a booming industry that develops and provide the digital technology needed to support 'learning' of different types that are not without problems. For example, what type of learning processes and outcomes are the digital able to support – and what is missing? Who owns data, and how is data used, especially for the larger providers? Are there new dependencies that arise from digitalisation? The shift has been so naturalised, by the specific requirements of the pandemic immobility that perhaps the role of policy as regards provision of digitalised learning has lagged behind.

The post-pandemic education and policy world could be an opportunity for a future with a focus on capabilities and human flourishing (Penalva, 2022). The mass move to online is that a great deal of testing and trialling has taken place and issues with digital have been highlighted:

> digital learning is foremost about learning itself . . . equity and social justice educational policies that should be considered within the local contexts where digital lifelong learning is developed. That aspect should be considered in a multicultural, equity-oriented paradigm in lifelong learning. Within that framework, it is central to problematise the extent to which educational policies target heterogeneous access to technology, particularly in highly unequal societies. (Ivenicki, 2021, p. 370)

Could the moment of change that is offered by the pandemic lead to a greater access to adult learning globally, for previously excluded populations including those learning in the Global South? Taking particular focus on the engagement of people with disabilities while there has not been an immediate opening up of opportunities, the application of digital technologies to engage this group of people has led to some variation in the mode of what was expected norms. Meeting individuals' needs has been of particular concern to populations of disabled people as has the offer of digital. Emancipating people from individual need requests and accommodation led to the development of the design principles of Universal Design of buildings. Latterly, this universalising need approach has been brought to the learning domain in the principles of universal design for learning (CAST, 2018). The principle of such an approach would be to support more than just students with disabilities and their accommodations requests. Instead, the concept holds that it is optimal to build in choices for all learners from the start. A Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and its related ideas including Universal Instructional Design could be one way to meet the challenges of lifelong education in a digital first environment. The offer of UDL promises different modes of engagement and representation, which facilitates multiple means of action and expression to support the learner choice of engagement in digital lifelong learning that may resolve some new challenges that have been introduced over the period of the pandemic.

A key rationality in the shift online that seems to have become mainstream during the pandemic is that all adult learners can prosper in digital delivery and that it is better for everyone. As a means to question this logic, UDL proposes an approach that holds as core the idea that all learners are different. The consideration of such an approach contests the notion that digital solves access issues and is a panacea – in fact all learners and particular ones in their non-compulsory years of study have diverse needs that cannot be all solved in the same way. UDL provides a framework and a structure that could mobilise key learning from the rapid shift online during the pandemic; that some people benefitted from the move to online yet some suffered and all needs should be recognised. By adopting a UDL approach for all learners there could be a possibility of moving away from rigid pre-destined engagement patterns where only being present and visibly engaged is supported, or alternatively where there is no engagement but just asynchronous materials. There is a potential for an ethical renaissance of adult education that does not have to be owned by for-profit companies with hollowed out short courses. A workable framework, including one such as UDL, that does not advocate for wholesale immediate changes, could be considered in different adult education systems.

To conclude, the pandemic has been a wake-up call for lifelong learning to be more about life, to embrace flexibility of learning, and the *événement* (Goodson, 2020) of the pandemic has realised the steady progress of increased digitalisation in adult education which has been going on for some time. What is important now is to ensure that the enthusiasm towards digital learning is not cheapened by online learning, which is accessible but does not support the development of useful skills nor powerful knowledge (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2022).

Notes

1. Goodson's (2020) framework uses words borrowed from the French, following the Annales school in France and the term '*événement*' can be roughly translated as events, '*conjoncture*' is used as a French word but is similar in English meaning some combination of events and '*la longue durée*' likely to be best understood as an extended (or long) duration of events.

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