

Connecting and engaging equitably through webinars: reflections on online pedagogy in a global online MSc public health program

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Abstract

This article discusses the pedagogical challenges associated with synchronous webinars in a fully online MSc in Public Health, designed for students across diverse global contexts. The program integrates asynchronous, self-paced study with synchronous learning, including webinars intended to enhance engagement, dialectical dialogue, and assessment clarity, and to support learning outcomes aligned with Fink's taxonomy of significant learning. Drawing on pedagogical frameworks including the Community of Inquiry model, Universal Design for Learning, and Assessment for Learning, this article reflects on how webinars are positioned to advance student-centered learning and inclusivity. In practice, however, three interrelated challenges have emerged. First, the imperative to record sessions for equity and accessibility may simultaneously inhibit open and experimental dialogue, as there are risks that their contributions could be scrutinized or misinterpreted, echoing wider issues of polarization and self-censorship in higher education. Second, a paradox arises between the program's

emphasis on asynchronous flexibility and students' desire for real-time connection, highlighting persistent tensions between autonomy and belonging in online education. Third, low attendance diminishes the potential for dialectical dialogue, often reducing webinars to perfunctory exchanges, lectures or instructor-led conversations, failing to align with webinar purposes. These challenges highlight the need for ongoing pedagogical innovation to reconcile flexibility, equity, and engagement. Potential strategies include partial recording practices, the cultivation of student-led peer communities, and empirical research into students' perceptions of safety, openness, and participation in digitally mediated environments. Webinars can serve as critical sites for sustaining interactivity, equity, and support in the delivery of flexible public health education.

Keywords: online learning, public health education, webinars, synchronous learning, student engagement, equity, inclusivity, Community of Inquiry, Universal Design for Learning, assessment for learning

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Introduction

Over the past decade, higher education has experienced a steady shift toward online and blended learning due to technological changes, a transformation dramatically accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁻³ For example, evidence from the United Kingdom (U.K.) shows that the proportion of higher education students in third year of study or higher reporting exclusively online or remote study increased from 32% in 2019–20 to a peak of 87% in 2020–21, then declined to 45% in

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2021–22,⁴ with around 10% enrolled in distance learning in 2024–25 as in-person teaching resumed and blended models expanded.⁵⁻⁷ Similarly, evidence from the United States (U.S.) shows that the proportion of higher education students enrolled exclusively in online learning has increased from 17.3% in 2019–20 to a peak of 45.8% in 2020–21, which then declined to 29.7% in 2021–22 and 26% in 2022–23.⁸ The rapid expansion of fully online programs during the pandemic has prompted a shift in thinking about unprecedented opportunities for

flexibility, accessibility, and global reach,³ with many U.S. and U.K. universities moving towards online or hybrid programs.^{7,9}

The pace of online education innovation has outstripped the development of evidence-informed practice, raising ongoing questions about how best to enable dialogue, sustain connection and community, and ensure equity in online environments, including how to address increased isolation among learners.^{10,11} As with other educational approaches, online public health education and training encounter similar challenges. Programs aimed at developing the knowledge and skills of the public health workforce should be intentionally designed to advance meaningful engagement and critical dialogue, as these elements constitute fundamental determinants of effective learning outcomes¹² supporting inclusive, participatory, and equity-oriented capability development.^{13,14}

According to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) portal, 85 providers offer postgraduate courses in public health or related fields, of which 16 provide distance-learning options at both part-time and full-time levels.¹⁵ The part-time online MSc in Public Health at King's College London (KCL) is presented here as an illustrative case of a postgraduate public health program delivered entirely online. This program provides a route for study, which through its predominantly asynchronous modes of teaching and learning affords flexibility to balance study with other commitments. Significantly, although the program is designed for part-time study, we recognize that many of our students are effectively full-time health professionals or individuals who are seeking to change their existing career path, or embark upon a new one. The program comprises of 12 modules providing students with a foundation across the different domains of public health practice, with options to specialize in a general Public Health track, Public Mental Health or Global Health, with successful completion leading to a MSc in Public Health.

Importantly, this program is designed for students across the globe, providing access to high-quality

education, drawing upon key disciplines that inform public health practice, with knowledge and skills that can be applied to different geographical contexts. As a UK higher education institution, we recognize that such programs are often grounded in a Eurocentric lens; however, students are actively encouraged to engage with pluriversal perspectives – and required through assessments – to critically evaluate the meaningful application of knowledge to diverse global contexts.^{16,17} The combination of asynchronous and synchronous elements reflects blended learning frameworks such as the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model.¹⁸ This model emphasizes cognitive, social, and teaching presence in online education, and highlights the importance of balancing independent study with interactive learning opportunities.¹⁸ Asynchronous elements allow students to learn independently and flexibly, while synchronous elements support interaction, immediacy, and social engagement.

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are central to the program design and are operationalized through deliberate alignment with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which emphasize anticipating learner variability through the provision of multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression.¹⁹⁻²³ To reduce barriers to participation, the program combines asynchronous and synchronous learning activities to support flexible engagement while maintaining opportunities for interaction and belonging, drawing on evidence from online and blended learning research.^{18,24} Core content is provided in varied formats, including recorded and captioned interviews or discussion, written summaries, and readings, enabling learners to access and revisit materials in ways that align with diverse cognitive, linguistic, and accessibility needs.²⁵ Students are also offered multiple opportunities to participate and demonstrate learning through written, verbal, and reflective activities, supporting dialogic engagement and encouraging the safe expression of emerging or provisional ideas as part of the learning process.^{26,27}

Webinars

An important synchronous pedagogical component of the MSc program is the use of webinars (i.e.,

online seminars). According to King's Digital and the King's Academy - two teaching and learning bodies at KCL - webinars enable "students to construct knowledge and understanding, interact with the material and interact with others to construct knowledge for themselves - in other words, to engage in the higher-order learning that we value in higher education."²⁸ Webinars are therefore instrumental in supporting higher-order learning through dialogical approaches, including critical discussion and debate on course content. They also provide pedagogical scaffolding by offering a structured forum in which students can raise questions, receive clarification, and engage with instructions and assessment requirements. In this sense, webinars are a means of creating student-centered learning, encouraging active engagement rather than passive reception of knowledge.²⁹ Typically, they are delivered in combination with reflections and observations that students have uploaded asynchronously—these may include brief written or recorded responses capturing their insights, learning experiences, or reactions to specific readings, activities, or case studies. This reflects principles of active learning, which emphasize that students learn more effectively when they are actively engaged in discussion, problem-solving, or analysis, rather than passive listening.³⁰

Challenges in Implementing Webinars

Webinars are essentially seminars that are conducted online, functioning as opportunities for "assessment for learning".^{31,32} By enabling students to ask questions and receive feedback in real-time, they create conditions for formative assessment, where learning is advanced through dialogue and clarification. This is consistent with Black, Wiliam³² work on formative assessment, which emphasizes the importance of feedback, scaffolding (i.e., temporary support that helps students progress beyond what they can do independently)³³ and interaction in enabling students to close the gap between their current understanding and desired learning outcomes. Webinars thus, similarly to seminars, embody principles of student-centered learning,²⁹ active learning,³⁰ and formative assessment.³² The translation of seminars to webinars within the online program has revealed three interconnected challenges: (1) balancing open

dialogue with the scrutiny and reduced confidentiality that comes from recorded sessions; (2) navigating the paradox between flexibility and the desire for real-time connection; and (3) managing the competing demands of part-time study, work, and personal commitments, which affect webinar attendance. The following discussion reflects upon each challenge and suggested areas for empirical research going forward.

Discussion

1. Dialogical Learning and Scrutiny from Recordings

The imperative for inclusivity requires creating learning environments where all students feel safe to share their perspectives and engage critically with others.^{27,34} Research on recorded online teaching highlights benefits for accessibility, flexibility, and student satisfaction, with much of this evidence derived from structured, lecture-oriented webinar formats in which interaction is limited or managed separately from recordings.^{35,36} However, the implications of recording for dialogical, student-led learning environments remain less well understood. Facilitating dialogical learning (i.e., learning through collaborative reasoning and critical talk among peers)³⁷ may thus be challenging if students feel scrutinized by the presence of a recording. While such learning is intended to promote collaborative reasoning and critical thinking through questioning and contrasting viewpoints,^{26,38} students may hesitate to contribute if they fear their comments could be misinterpreted, taken out of context, or harm their reputation.²⁶ Moreover, the recording of some forms of discussion—particularly those drawing on shared, sensitive, or personal experiences—may be constrained by concerns about confidentiality, vulnerability, or potential judgement.³⁴ This can limit opportunities for peer learning, even where such exchanges might otherwise be highly valuable.²⁶ Classrooms and webinars should therefore be cultivated as inclusive, *dialogical spaces* in which learners are encouraged to voice different perspectives, explore and refine emerging ideas, and participate within a non-threatening and supportive learning climate;³⁹ where sensitive issues are discussed, this should be underpinned by clear expectations around respectful dialogue, confidentiality and psychological safety.^{27,40} Such open and exploratory dialogue

involves risk-taking, speculation, and provisional thinking, allowing students to create an inclusive environment to express incomplete or uncertain ideas as part of the learning process.^{26,37,38,41}

This highlights an opportunity for further empirical research into how the recording of webinars affects engagement. Such research might explore questions such as: How do students perceive the risks of speaking openly in recorded online sessions? Do recordings inhibit critical thinking and discussion? What hybrid strategies (e.g., selective recording or anonymized contributions) best balance equity and openness? Exploring these questions could offer valuable insights into how online learning environments can support both equitable access and open, experiential dialogue.

2. The Paradox: Asynchronous Flexibility vs Synchronous Community and Connection

The program's design prioritizes flexibility: asynchronous content allows students to learn at their own pace around professional and personal commitments.^{42,43} Yet consistent with educational research, MSc students express a desire for community and connection, which can help alleviate feelings of isolation and increase student retention,^{18,44} the latter of which can be achieved via synchronous learning approaches.⁴⁵ This tension reflects the paradox of the webinars in online learning: while independence and flexibility are valued, belonging and interaction remain central to engagement^{46,47} and which the webinars can provide.

This tension highlights an opportunity for further empirical research into how best to balance flexibility with community and connection: What forms of community-building are most effective in fully online postgraduate programs that prioritize asynchronous learning? How do students navigate the trade-off between independence in their work and the desire for connection with peers? What role should institutions play in supporting—but not dominating—social presence or peer networks? What alternative approaches can be used to build community and student engagement in online programs? Addressing these questions is crucial for developing online learning environments that are both inclusive and meaningfully engaging.

3. Competing Demands and the Challenge of Dialogue

Students continually need to prioritize part-time learning alongside personal and work commitments. This affects webinar attendance rates, creating a practical barrier to using webinars as spaces for dialectical dialogue. At times, when only one or two students attend, sustaining such dialogue becomes practically difficult. In such cases, for the MSc program, instructors may adapt by recording conversations between module leads, however this approach does not directly engage students in real-time dialogue. This concern aligns with research showing that students often value live sessions for the opportunity to interact with staff and peers, even if such attendance does not necessarily improve academic performance.⁴⁸ However, lower-performing students in particular may benefit from attending live sessions rather than relying solely on recordings.⁴⁹ While some studies have found no clear link between accessing recordings and academic outcomes,⁵⁰⁻⁵² this evidence largely comes from lecture-based contexts and may not translate to interactive webinars, which depend on active participation to be effective.

This challenge highlights an opportunity for further empirical research into how to enable open and exploratory dialogue or alternative engagement in response to low webinar attendance. Key questions include: How do students with busy schedules decide whether to attend webinars? Under what conditions are they more likely to prioritize or make time for attendance? What factors influence participation in synchronous webinars within flexible, predominantly asynchronous programs? Do low-attendance sessions reduce students' sense of the value or purpose of synchronous activities? And might alternative formats—such as rotating small-group tutorials or student-led sessions—enhance participation and engagement? Addressing these questions is crucial for designing webinar models that are sustainable, participatory, and well-aligned with the flexible nature of online postgraduate learning.

The experience of delivering webinars in the fully online master's program illustrates the pedagogical tensions inherent in online learning environments.

Although webinars can facilitate active and formative learning, peer learning and the development of learning communities, they also present persistent challenges related to engagement, equity, and openness. In particular, sustaining dialogue under the scrutiny of recordings, reconciling the tension between asynchronous flexibility and synchronous community, and understanding how students manage competing priorities—and how institutions address low attendance—highlight structural barriers to the effectiveness of webinars. These issues suggest a

need to explore a broader range of pedagogical approaches for fostering community and critical thinking in online programs, including hybrid recording practices, structured yet student-led peer learning networks, and empirical investigation of students' experiences of safety, risk, and openness across different online formats. Advancing such strategies is essential to ensure that webinars serve as spaces of trust, interaction, and meaningful learning rather than passive or performative exercises.

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