



Opening Doors in ODFL with “Video Chat” – Adding Synchronous Academic Support to Asynchronous ODFL Delivery

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RESEARCH ARTICLES



ABSTRACT

This paper explores the development of bichronous pedagogy through adding an aspect of synchronous academic support, “video chat” to asynchronous ODFL. The intervention aim is to enhance academic social presence, while maintaining the ODFL principles of learner agency and scale. The study, undertaken at The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, seeks to answer the research question: “Does synchronous academic support in the form of video chat improve experience in asynchronous ODFL delivery?” Expanding an earlier single discipline small-scale case-study, the paper describes the purpose, scope, and framing of a pilot study, details the responsibilities of the Academic Staff involved, and describes the practical implementation of “video chat”. Narrative data is drawn from focus group (open discussion) at the mid-point of the pilot duration. The study contributes to two identified gaps in research. Most studies on bichronous pedagogy are concerned with adding asynchronous elements to existing synchronous delivery, this study explores the opposite context, providing an example for asynchronous ODFL. Further, most studies on academic social presence explore the perspectives and outcomes of learners, this study explores the perspectives of academic course facilitators. Findings describe the perceived benefits of video chat for Academic Staff and for the wider ODFL context and detail perceived or experienced challenges.

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This pilot study extends an earlier research project (Brice, 2023) exploring the development of asynchronous on-line pedagogy through the inclusion of synchronous access to academic support, through video chat (VC). This extension aims to provide a strategic approach to a recognised challenge in open distance and flexible learning (ODFL) experience, namely the lack of academic social presence, known to impact learners' experiences in ODFL (Dijkers et al., 2017) and also, this study contests, the experiences of academic staff. This research explores the perspectives of academic course facilitators who have implemented a booking calendar where learners can schedule a virtual, one-to-one, face to face session, with their academic facilitator through instigating a video call. This is an equity focused intervention, for those learners who seek extra support, and/ or personalised contact with their academic course facilitator. The intervention also seeks to mitigate the risk of ad-hoc individual practices evolving in facilitation of learning that may have consequential negative impact on learner experience.

At the Open Polytechnic, the delivery mode designed in 2017 understood learner agency within the context of the principles of ODFL. Being 'open', 'distant', and 'flexible' meant facilitating access to tertiary education through solely asynchronous means that allowed learners to determine their own time, place, and pace of learning (within the institutional structures of tertiary education in Aotearoa, New Zealand). Adding synchronous element/s, sometimes known as bichronous pedagogy (Brice, 2023), can continue and expand the principle of agency, giving learners choice in how and when they engage with academic support, meet changing expectations, leverage technological advances, and enhance human to human connection within a technology enabled context.

In asking the question: "Does synchronous academic support in the form of "video chat" improve experience in asynchronous ODFL delivery?" this research is important in articulating evolving facilitation practices of course facilitators in ODFL, and in seeking to provide guidance that can improve consistency of experience for learners. In ODFL, facilitation practices can evolve independently in ways that may not be well aligned with an asynchronous and scalable model. For example, some academics may provide direct dial access to learners, while others may refuse any phone contact from enrolled learners. Communications on the learning management system (LMS) can be troublesome, particularly where questions from learners form long threads that can't be easily managed by the academic, and written responses from academics can be perceived by learners as cold. The peculiarities of some courses and some cohorts can be difficult to fit within an asynchronous model and in such cases further ad hoc practices may evolve. While these known inconsistencies of practice are a response to learners' needs and academic facilitators' determination to find solutions that work for learners, utilising a technology such as a booking calendar has potential to advance ODFL pedagogy, maintain alignment as technology enabled delivery of education, meet learner expectations of agency, strengthen social presence and relational connection, and provide a greater degree of workload control for academic facilitators.

This research has three principal aims. Firstly, to add to the body of knowledge about bichronous pedagogies currently influencing the development of ODFL from the perspective of adding a specific synchronous element (VC) to an existing asynchronous delivery model. Secondly, to contribute to the research on evolving on-line pedagogy through paying attention to academics' experiences in facilitation, providing an example and guidelines for introducing this element. Finally, to maintain commentary on the role of human-centred connectedness as rich terrain for ODFL scholarship, with a particular focus on its role in advancing equity in ODFL.

LITERATURE

BICHRONOUS PEDAGOGY

Brice (2023) follows others (Martin et al., 2023) in finding bichronous pedagogy can combine the strengths of asynchronous and synchronous delivery components with an aim to provide a more cohesive and personalised ODFL experience. The development of bichronous pedagogy is seen to have emerged largely in response to Emergency Remote Teaching practices (ERT) (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Greenhow et al., 2022; Wilson, 2023) labelled a "mass experiment" (Tate & Warschauer, 2022, p. 194) and born as a practical response to enforced restrictions on

face-to-face learning imposed by Covid-19, which brought with it fears of loss of relational/ social presence of facilitators and potential decline in engagement by learners (Martin et al., 2020; Mohammadi, 2023; Wilson, 2023).

Relational connections and social presence between academics and learners are experienced differently in ODFL from an on-campus environment (Bernard et al., 2009; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Jaggars, 2014). Notably, in ODFL there is a physical separation between learners and course facilitators which can be experienced as a psychological and communication separation (Cung et al., 2018). Adding synchronous elements to an asynchronous delivery model can mitigate some of these differences. Martin et al., (2020) describe this movement towards combining elements of both modes as a way of maximising advantages while minimising the known challenges of asynchronous ODFL learning.

As an emergent pedagogy, literature is currently dominated by studies focussed on fully synchronous delivery examples adding asynchronous elements to mitigate changing needs and environmental challenges (Alblooshi, 2021; Brzezinska, 2022; Mohammadi, 2023). As yet, limited literature explores adding synchronous elements to a pre-existing (pre-Covid) asynchronous delivery model. This research extends an earlier small-scale study (Brice, 2023) setting out an example of a developing bichronous pedagogy in an established ODFL environment.

SOCIAL PRESENCE IN ODFL

Although online learning is often positioned as self-directed (Martin & Borup, 2022), the reduced access to in-person facilitation can require learners to exercise higher levels of autonomy and self-regulation (Tate & Warschauer, 2022). Within this context, social presence is consistently identified as a key factor in learner success in digital learning environments (Dikkers et al., 2017; Gunawardena, 2023; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Reio & Crim, 2006; Richardson et al., 2017; Shehzad & Charles, 2023; Widjaja & Chen, 2017). Building on the foundational definition of social presence as the “degree of salience” of another person in mediated communication (Short et al., 1976), Gunawardena & Zittle (1997) define social presence in online education as the extent to which another person is perceived as “real” in digital interaction. Subsequent scholarship has expanded this construct to encompass affective connectedness (Swan & Shih, 2005), instructors’ relational and facilitative capabilities (including those supported through professional development; Shehzad & Charles, 2023), and, importantly for this study, an individual’s capacity to signal availability for interpersonal engagement in virtual environments (Kehrwald, 2008).

Short et al.’s (1976) early model provides a foundational framework for analysing social presence by emphasising how communication media shape the experience of social connection through the dimensions of intimacy and immediacy (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). Because intimacy and immediacy are conveyed substantially through verbal and non-verbal cues, distance-based online and digital flexible learning (ODFL) environments may constrain the expression of social presence if interaction is limited to low-cue channels. However, as Gunawardena & Zittle (1997) argue, social presence is not only a function of the medium; it is also shaped by communicators and how they participate across sequences of interaction. For ODFL contexts, this implies that enhancing social presence requires intentional, coherent design across course materials, learning management system (LMS) communication spaces, and facilitators’ communication practices, including their professional development and technology use.

(Richardson et al., 2017) frame social presence as a complex, evolving, and multifaceted construct that is central to learners’ engagement, satisfaction, and perceived learning in online environments. Drawing on its origins in telecommunications research, they note that subsequent studies have challenged interpretations of social presence as a property of the communication medium alone, emphasising instead the role of participants’ perceptions and communicative behaviours (Gunawardena, 1995). In online learning, social presence has been linked to interaction, motivation, satisfaction, perceived learning, course design, and retention (Richardson et al., 2017). Other perspectives conceptualise social presence as a form of digital literacy, positioning it as a dynamic construct shaped by instructors, learners, technologies, pedagogical strategies, and social norms within online learning ecosystems (Whiteside et al., 2017).

Social presence is communicated through verbal and non-verbal cues such as humour, smiling, gesture, stance, posture, and dress (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), as well as through online discourse practices such as welcoming messages, audio and visual communication, and (in text-based channels) the use of emoticons (Dikkers et al., 2017). When instructors are experienced as insufficiently “real” in online environments, learners may report uneasiness associated with not hearing instructors’ voices or seeing facial expressions and other affective signals. Teaching behaviours such as questioning, offering encouragement and praise, using names, and providing timely feedback are well recognised as central to teaching and learning (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) yet may be harder to enact in ODFL settings when interaction is minimal or delayed. Consistent with this, human presence in virtual environments has been linked to engagement and motivation (Widjaja & Chen, 2017), and social experience in fully online learning has been identified as an important influence on success (Dow et al., 2025). While much of the social presence literature focuses on learners’ perceptions and outcomes, Reio and Crim (2006) suggest that this need for social connection is also relevant for instructors’ satisfaction, aligning with sociocultural perspectives on learning (Vygotsky, 1986). Accordingly, interaction should be intentionally designed into online courses (Northrup, 2001).

In an overview of how digital transformation is impacting higher education institutions, Alenezi (2023) argues that educators need to reinvent pedagogical approaches in ways that better support learners to “communicate, collaborate and co-create” (p. 13). Although digital tools can increase flexibility and autonomy, instructors also take on new responsibilities, including developing competencies for using technologies in ways that support interpersonal connection. In relation to building social presence through intimacy and immediacy, Dow et al., (2025) recommend that instructors present themselves as “real persons” through increased use of audio and visual instruction, which Aragon, (2003) similarly identifies as ways to convey warmth and project personality. Although social presence is often measured through learners’ subjective perceptions, it is also a robust predictor of satisfaction in digital learning experiences (Widjaja & Chen, 2017). Notably, Dikkers et al., (2017) found that establishing and maintaining social presence in online environments is challenging but can be rewarding for both instructors and learners.

SOCIAL PRESENCE AND VIDEO COMMUNICATION PRACTICES IN ONLINE LEARNING

The incorporation of video communication technologies into online learning environments brings renewed attention to social presence, highlighting the dynamic interaction between technologies, pedagogical design, and participant behaviour (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017). This is particularly relevant for research introducing live video chat into online classes, where design decisions about when, how, and for what purposes synchronous video is used can shape whether participants experience others as psychologically present.

The literature indicates that the inclusion or use of video itself does not automatically produce social presence. Rather, particular video communication practices may align differently with distinct dimensions of social presence, including perceptions of being “real,” being “there,” projecting oneself, emotional connection, and belonging. Clarifying these relationships helps support more intentional decisions about how live video chat is integrated into online course design (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017). Asynchronous video, such as recorded instructor introductions, weekly announcements, or personalised feedback, is most strongly associated with dimensions of social presence related to being “real” and projecting oneself. Lowenthal and Snelson (2017) identify these dimensions as central in educational contexts, particularly where social presence is understood as the capacity to express identity, personality, and affect within mediated environments.

Instructor-produced video supports social presence by making the instructor perceptible as a distinctive individual rather than an abstract entity. Visual and vocal cues allow learners to infer tone, enthusiasm, and authenticity, thereby reducing psychological distance. This aligns with definitions of social presence that emphasise identity projection rather than interpersonal reciprocity (Gunawardena, 1995; Rourke et al., 1999). However, because asynchronous instructor video is typically unidirectional, it supports social presence indirectly and does not, on its own, generate strong feelings of connection or belonging among learners.

Synchronous video practices, including live video chat for tutorials, office hours, and real-time classes, most closely align with dimensions of social presence related to salience, co-presence, and psychological immediacy (Lowenthal & Snelson 2017). When designed for interaction (rather than broadcast), live video enables rapid feedback, spontaneous dialogue, and affective signalling, which can reduce psychological distance between instructors and learners.

While camera-on expectations are often implemented with the assumption that visual exposure enhances social presence by increasing salience and accountability, social presence research challenges this assumption. Lowenthal and Snelson (2017) highlight that social presence is a perceptual and psychological phenomenon, going far beyond the simple function of visibility. Being seen does not guarantee that one is experienced as authentic, connected, or engaged. For some learners, mandated camera use may undermine willingness to project oneself, thereby diminishing social presence rather than enhancing it. This finding reinforces the importance of learner agency and psychological safety in presence development.

Taken together, these understandings suggest that different video practices support different dimensions of social presence, and no single practice addresses the construct in its entirety. Video is most effective when it enables learners and instructors to project identity, engage reciprocally, and experience others as psychologically present. Consequently, social presence should be understood not as an automatic outcome of video use, but as an emergent aspect of how video is pedagogically and socially enacted within online learning environments (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017).

FOCUS ON EQUITY

According to Tate & Warschauer (2022, p. 192) “equitable learning occurs when every learner belongs, contributes, and thrives, regardless of race/ethnicity or socio-economic status.” While ODFL is considered to be learner-centred, championing learner agency through asynchronous access that enables learners to choose their own time, place, and pace of learning, there are systemic equity concerns to be considered (Greenhow et al., 2022). Tate & Warschauer (2022), highlight how patterns of achievement gaps seen in face-to-face delivery are further exacerbated in on-line learning.

Warschauer (2003) provides a framework of necessary resources for examining equity in on-line learning spaces; physical resources, human resources, and social resources. While all are important, this study is focused on social resources which include the importance of skilled facilitators whose teaching methods are underpinned by inclusive principles. According to Jaggars (2014), the more difficult the course, and, the more important or high-stakes the course, the greater the need for person-to-person interaction. For Tate & Warschauer (2022) intentionally increasing interaction improves student learning and for Cung et al., (2018) methods for intentionally increasing interaction known to influence learner outcomes include providing optional in-person meeting hours and frequent in-course posts.

Notably, in a recent study, Gunawardena (2023) explore the connections between culture and social presence. Their findings suggest that those who experience unequal power relationships in life see on-line learning as an equalising medium where their societal status difference is not seen or known by others. Social presence from this perspective is experienced differently; learners who have experienced previous disadvantages in education may choose the anonymity of on-line learning and the associated low social presence as a preferred state.

METHODS

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study was framed by the question: “Does synchronous academic support in the form of “video chat” improve experience in asynchronous ODFL delivery?” This study has three aims: firstly, to contribute to research on innovative bichronous pedagogy by examining the addition of a synchronous support element to an established asynchronous ODFL model; secondly to extend understandings of evolving online pedagogy by examining academic facilitators’ experiences of implementation; and thirdly, to maintain focus on human-centred connectedness and equity in ODFL.

Following on from an earlier single discipline small-scale case-study (Brice, 2023), this pilot study utilised qualitative methodology in the form of recorded focus group sessions with the participant course facilitators. Data collection and evaluation occur at the mid-point and end point of the pilot. Only qualitative narrative drawn from mid-point focus group data was available for this paper at the time of writing. Focus questions were generated by the researcher to guide the sessions and participants responded verbally with their reflections to each question. Two focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed.

RESEARCH GROUP

Participants in the study were volunteer academic course facilitators ($n = 11$). As academic course facilitators interact directly with our learners, their voice is critical in determining whether the intervention is extended across all delivery, their view in how it impacts on their workload and sense of satisfaction, and their experiences of engagement through VC with learners, form the basis of this data. The pilot project was presented to academic staff with a call for expressions of interest to participate. Selection criteria for participation included those with courses with greater than 20 students per offering. The intervention ran across 6 monthly offerings of 32 courses ($n = 192$). While the full data set was not complete at the time of writing, the data and findings presented here provide insight for the practice implementation of VC in on-line delivery.

DATA ANALYSIS

This data was analysed thematically by the researcher using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where researcher subjectivity is acknowledged. In this research, participant subjectivity and assumptions made during the set-up of the research process are also acknowledged. The data analysed here has been specifically collected for this paper with no pre-existing coding mechanisms. This form of analysis allows for thorough explorations of a narrow subject within a known context, providing an opportunity to deeply explore perceptions of reality within that context.

FINDINGS

Focus group data at mid-point of the project revealed different experiences for academic course facilitators in the implementation and take up of VC across their courses. The findings discussed here reveal positive experiences and challenges in providing video-chat opportunities for learners to engage one on one with course facilitators. These are summarised under the themes of take-up, perceptions of learner needs, optimising time and availability, perceptions of the value and benefits of video chat interactions.

TAKE-UP

In the first weeks of the pilot, there were some courses ($n = 3$) where learners did not make use of the booking calendar. In these courses facilitators stated that learners were phoning them directly, these learners being well advanced in their programme of study and had established expectations of being able access assistance through this method. Some of the participant academic facilitators generally made themselves available by phone and had posted their direct dial numbers into the course talk channels. In the focus group discussions, it became clear that the provision of VC should be introduced with first courses in a programme, enabling expectations to be established with learners at the outset of their studies, and reducing the advertising of and availability of direct calling. In other courses where there was low or no take up of VC appointments, academics surmised various reasons for this: that learners were able to access the help they needed through the universal supports available, such as posing questions in the open or private talk channels on the LMS, communicating with academic facilitators through email, or by calling student services freephone line and asking to be put through to their facilitator. As one academic suggested “lack of uptake suggests that students feel they have other avenues that they can find information and that this isn’t something that is really needed.” This finding is important in suggesting that ODFL support systems are largely

PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNERS' NEEDS

Academics also surmised that many learners were perhaps 'shy,' or 'apologetic,' this being an aspect of why they might choose ODFL rather than an on-campus environment, and why they held back from the option of face-to-face interaction. Although experiencing low take-up of VC, one academic noted that he had several positive comments regarding its availability, should it be needed: "...feedback I got was that they appreciated that they had the chance to book. They might not need it but it's there." Academics also noted that where they were able to detect anxiety or stress from learners, often observed through the frequency and tone of questions asked in the talk channels, they could then direct that learner to make a VC booking "so they could get to know them." Academics noted the positive experiences of being able to ameliorate learners' anxiety through this personalised interaction: "they start off quite nervous but throughout the call you can see the anxiety melt away and they leave smiling, some even say, 'it was such a relief to talk to you'."

OPTIMISING TIMES AND AVAILABILITY OF VIDEO CHAT

Participants noted some difficulty with the time allocation of the video call, initially set at 20 minutes, and with identifying the optimum hours of booking availability across the week, initially set at three per week, with two different lunchtime booking hours and one late afternoon. For some, the 20-minute booking time was too short, their learners needed longer to resolve a problem or gain clarification on content. This was resolved by allowing the VC to take longer where needed (where no other booking was in place directly following) or encouraging the learner to review what had been discussed and book a follow up VC if needed. Academics also reported that they used much of the time in a first VC to establish relational connections with a learner "... probably first 5 or 10 minutes just getting to know them, building the bridge as they are a virtual stranger in that sense." Finding the optimum times of availability was also variable, some found their lunchtime availability the busiest, while others found early evenings to be more popular. It seems that the suitability of the time slots is sensitive to the cohorts of learners and their needs and circumstances, and that a range of available booking times over the week is preferable.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALUE AND BENEFITS OF VIDEO CHAT

Participants reported that their interaction with the learners during VCs was positive, learners appreciated the opportunity to engage with their facilitator, some "...have said why weren't we doing it beforehand." Facilitators found that many of their bookings were from learners who "just wanted reassurance" particularly those in first courses, "I get the impression the sessions have gone well, I've enjoyed them. And maybe helped them to feel more confident to contact me in other ways afterwards." Participants also noted that the use of VC was better preparing students for the realities of practices common in the industries they were qualifying for. Participant academics found VC "... a way being able to share our own experiences from industry" in ways that were not generally accommodated in on-line learning. Another advantage described as "invaluable" was the ability to screen share in a video call. Academics quickly learned they could use this feature to provide drawings or images of difficult concepts as a way of responding to diverse learning needs "...what's really practical is being able to share my screen, I was able to put an old assessment up on screen, offering visuals really does help." These advantages, giving reassurance, sharing personal experience and industry knowledge, preparing students for the reality of practices used in industry, providing different ways of presenting materials, all added a dimension of satisfaction to the academic role.

Academics also suggested that the use of VC appealed to some students more than others, and that their use of the camera in the video call was variable "... it seems to attract diligent students who want to do well. I give them the option of putting the camera on or off, I've had both." "The learners find out I'm a real person. I leave my camera on, even if they have theirs off." Another perceived advantage identified was the booking calendar requirement that learners state the reason for their call or the nature of their question when making their

booking. This information allowed academics to prepare for the VC in advance. Academics also suggested the VC booking system served as a gate-keeping strategy, effective where some learners over-used the expectation of being able to phone their facilitator on-demand.

The focus group participants revealed increased feelings of satisfaction in their role as course facilitators through this opportunity to engage face-to-face with learners. Some mentioned that they had missed interacting with learners as they had done in previous academic roles and found the opportunity to do so with VC invigorating and satisfying: “having the opportunity to talk with students face to face has been amazing” “...has been a bit of an icebreaker, they can put a face to a name. I thought it would be a bit of a hassle, but actually I have found it quite fun, a lot more positive than I expected.”

Summary table of findings

THEME	POSITIVE EXPERIENCES/BENEFITS	CHALLENGES/CONSIDERATIONS
Take-up	Some learners used established support avenues effectively (talk channels, email, phone, student services), suggesting existing systems met many needs.	Low or no use of booking calendar in some courses; learners phoned directly based on prior expectations; recommendation to introduce VC early in a programme to set expectations and reduce direct calling; variable communication practices across facilitators.
Perceptions of learners' needs	VC could reduce anxiety through personalised interaction; learners appreciated having the option available even if not used; facilitators could direct anxious learners to VC to build connection.	Some learners may be hesitant to engage in face-to-face interaction (e.g., shy/apologetic), potentially limiting uptake.
Optimising times and availability	Flexibility (allowing longer calls when needed; follow-up bookings) supported learner needs; initial VC time used to build rapport; different cohorts benefited from different time slots.	Initial 20-minute allocation sometimes too short; identifying optimal hours was variable; lunchtime vs early evening popularity differed; need a range of booking times across the week.
Perceived value and benefits of video chat	Learners valued direct engagement and reassurance; VC helped prepare students for industry practices; screen sharing enabled clearer explanations and visuals; facilitators reported increased role satisfaction and stronger connection with learners.	VC appealed more to some students than others; camera use varied; booking-calendar reason field was helpful to academics. VC also acted as a gate-keeping strategy.

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper asked: “Does synchronous academic support in the form of video chat (VC) improve experience in asynchronous ODFL delivery?” The mid-point focus group findings suggest that, when taken up, VC can strengthen academic social presence by increasing immediacy, salience, and opportunities for interpersonal connection (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kehrwald, 2008; Short et al., 1976). Importantly, the data also aligns with cautions in the literature that social presence is not produced by video technology alone, but emerges through how video is pedagogically enacted and experienced by participants (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017). The discussion below therefore interprets the themes of take-up, learner needs, optimisation of availability, and perceived value/benefits in relation to bichronous pedagogy, social presence, and equity in ODFL.

The low initial take-up reported in some courses is a substantively important finding, because it indicates that adding an *optional* synchronous support pathway need not undermine the ODFL principles of learner agency and scale. In bichronous terms, VC functioned as an “on-demand” synchronous layer rather than a mandatory attendance requirement, preserving flexibility while widening learners’ choices about how to seek support (Martin et al., 2023). This also helps avoid technologically deterministic assumptions: simply making VC available does not mean it will be used, nor that it will be equally valued across cohorts (Lowenthal & Snelson,

2017). Instead, the pattern of uptake suggests that many learners' needs are met through existing asynchronous supports (course materials, LMS channels, and universal services), consistent with ODFL being positioned as relatively self-directed and autonomous (Martin & Borup, 2022; Tate & Warschauer, 2022). At the same time, the focus group data indicates that when learners did engage via VC, the interaction could rapidly increase perceptions of the facilitator as "real" and available (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), thereby reducing psychological and communication distance commonly associated with ODFL (Cung et al., 2018). Essentially, VC appears to add value as a targeted, high-immediacy support for some learners, rather than as a universal requirement for all.

The take-up theme also highlights that communication practices and expectations are culturally and programmatically "sticky." In courses where learners had established norms of direct phone access, VC appointments competed with (and possibly displaced by) faster, familiar channels. This finding speaks to the importance of coherent design across course communication spaces and facilitator practices, as social presence is shaped not only by the medium but by interaction sequences and norms over time (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson et al., 2017). It also reinforces that introducing VC is not merely a technical change but a change to the social and workload expectations of facilitation. The recommendation to introduce VC early in a programme can therefore be understood as an effort to establish shared expectations and reduce inequities created by variable "informal" access to staff (e.g., some learners gaining advantage through direct dial, while others rely on slower text channels). However, the equity literature also cautions against assuming that "more" social presence is always preferable: for some learners, anonymity and lower presence can be protective or culturally comfortable (Gunawardena, 2023). Maintaining VC as optional—and clearly positioning it as one of several legitimate support routes—may therefore be important for ensuring that increased presence remains agency-enhancing and equitable.

Under the theme of perceptions of learners' needs, facilitators' observations suggest VC may be particularly valuable for learners who experience uncertainty, anxiety, or lower confidence—especially early in a programme—because the medium affords immediacy and richer verbal and non-verbal cues than text channels (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Short et al., 1976). These cues can support affective connectedness and reassurance, which the literature identifies as key mechanisms through which social presence contributes to satisfaction and engagement (Swan & Shih, 2005; Widjaja & Chen, 2017). From a practical standpoint, participants described using VC to "get to know" learners and reduce anxiety, which aligns with conceptualisations of social presence as an individual's capacity to signal availability for interpersonal engagement (Kehrwald, 2008). Although retention outcomes are not measured in this dataset, the findings are consistent with scholarship suggesting that intentional increases in interpersonal interaction can support learning and persistence for some learners (Cung et al., 2018; Tate & Warschauer, 2022). Importantly, this is where the equity framing is most salient: optional VC appears to function as an additional social resource (Warschauer, 2003) that can be activated when learners need high-touch support, without requiring all learners to participate in high-presence interaction.

Optimising time and availability proved challenging in the initial implementation, which is unsurprising in ODFL contexts where learners' time-of-day availability is shaped by work, caregiving, and other commitments. The pilot parameters (three one-hour blocks comprised of three short appointments) provided a bounded structure for workload control, but participants' accounts indicate that "fit" depends on cohort characteristics and on the pedagogical purpose of the interaction (e.g., rapport-building versus problem-solving). The literature on social presence suggests that immediacy and intimacy are achieved through interactional quality and responsiveness, not only through the existence of a synchronous channel (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Short et al., 1976). In practice, this means that overly rigid timeboxing may constrain the relational work that makes VC valuable. The participants' adaptive strategies—allowing longer calls where possible and encouraging follow-up bookings—represent emergent design responses that seek to balance learner support with scalability. Future iterations would benefit from triangulating facilitator perceptions with learner feedback and booking analytics to identify patterns of demand and to ensure that availability supports equitable access across different learner circumstances (Tate & Warschauer, 2022; Warschauer, 2003).

Finally, academic facilitator accounts of the value and benefits of VC interactions suggest two connected contributions. First, VC appears to support instructor social presence by enabling learners to perceive the facilitator as a “real person” through voice, facial expression, and conversational flow—features that are central to past and present definitions of social presence (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kehrwald, 2008; Richardson, et al., 2017). Second, VC appears to expand pedagogical repertoire in an asynchronous model through features such as screen sharing, which participants described as “invaluable” for explaining difficult concepts and offering visual supports. This aligns with arguments that digital learning requires educators to develop competencies in using technologies to support communication and co-construction of understanding (Alenezi, 2023) and with recommendations to use audio/visual modalities to project warmth and personality (Aragon, 2003; Dow et al., 2025). The finding that facilitators experienced the work as enjoyable and professionally satisfying is also consistent with suggestions that social connection matters for instructor satisfaction, not only for learners (Dikkers et al., 2017; Reio & Crim, 2006). Taken together, these themes indicate that VC can operate as a scalable, selectively used form of “high-cue” interaction within an otherwise asynchronous ecology—potentially strengthening relational connection while maintaining ODFL flexibility—provided it is framed and implemented as a pedagogically purposeful option rather than a default expectation (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Martin et al., 2023).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Introduce with first courses in programme of study and continue as learners progress
- Include information about VC in orientation messaging
- Reduce/eliminate availability of direct dial calling and email, redirect communications through LMS talk channels and VC
- Provide regular posts in LMS talk channels that include the link to the booking calendar
- Canvas optimum times and availability across programme, courses and cohorts
- Use camera on and share screen where appropriate

Provide professional development for facilitators in establishing social presence through use of VC including being aware of facial cues and micro-communications such as smiling, voice, nodding, encouraging etc.

CONCLUSION

This study had three aims: (1) to contribute to research on bichronous pedagogy by examining the addition of a synchronous support element to an established asynchronous ODFL model; (2) to extend scholarship on evolving online pedagogy by centering academic facilitators’ experiences of implementation; and (3) to maintain focus on human-centred connectedness and equity as important terrain in ODFL. Based on mid-point focus group data, the findings suggest that optional VC has the *potential* to improve aspects of experience in asynchronous ODFL by strengthening facilitator social presence through increased immediacy and opportunities for relationship-building (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kehrwald, 2008; Short et al., 1976). However, uptake patterns also indicate that VC is not universally needed or desired, reinforcing that social presence is an emergent, contextual phenomenon shaped by norms, learner preferences, and pedagogical enactment rather than by technology alone (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Richardson et al., 2017). As an equity-oriented intervention, VC can be understood as an additional social resource (Warschauer, 2003) that can be activated for learners who benefit from high-touch reassurance and clarification, while preserving agency for those who prefer lower-presence modes of learning (Gunawardena, 2023).

The institutional context also matters for interpretation. Internationally, ODFL pedagogy is developing rapidly in response to post-Covid expectations and ongoing digital transformation (Alenezi, 2023; Greenhow et al., 2022). In this setting, Open Polytechnic’s wholly asynchronous model remains well aligned with ODFL principles of flexibility and scale, and existing supports appear to meet many learners’ needs. At the same time, the findings in this paper highlight how informal communication practices (e.g., direct dial numbers and ad hoc email support) can introduce variability in learner experience and can complicate workload management and the measurement of interaction patterns. From a design perspective, this aligns with

research emphasising that social presence and support are shaped across the whole ecology of communication spaces and practices, not only within single interactions (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson et al., 2017). Implemented carefully, VC offers one way to concentrate synchronous, high-immediacy support into a managed structure (appointments), which may reduce reliance on untracked channels while still providing learners with a meaningful option for interpersonal connection when needed.

Overall, this pilot suggests that learner-initiated VC appointments can serve as a selectively used synchronous layer within an asynchronous model—supporting immediacy and richer communication cues when learners require reassurance, clarification, or relationship-building. In line with the literature of social presence, participants' accounts indicate that these interactions can help learners experience facilitators as more psychologically present, and can also support facilitators' professional satisfaction (Dikkers et al., 2017; Reio & Crim, 2006). The practical implications are therefore less about replacing asynchronous supports, and more about providing a coherent, equitable, and manageable pathway for high-touch assistance that does not depend on learners' ability to access "informal" channels. For institutions, the use of scheduled VC also has potential to improve consistency of learner experience and to support clearer workload and interaction measures. Future reporting from the full pilot dataset, including end-point focus group data, learner perspectives, and quantitative usage/impact data, will be needed to establish whether these perceived benefits translate into measurable changes in outcomes such as engagement, retention, and achievement.

LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

There are clear limitations to this study. The number of participants is small ($n = 11$) and although facilitating in a range of different courses, they are from a single ODFL environment. Participants were chosen based on their willingness to participate in the pilot and therefore demonstrating an interest in using VC to enhance their abilities to interact directly with learners.

Further studies with an increased number of participants and in collaboration with other ODFL learning institutions may make it possible to generalise the results. In this study, the participants were academic staff members, areas for further studies could explore the perspectives of learners using this intervention. Quantitative data, not available at the time of writing, would provide insight into the learner usage, impact on outcomes, and be used to assist in identifying optimum booking times and availability.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

This study is linked to the following SDGs: Quality education (SDG 4), Decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), Reduced inequalities (SDG 10), For instance: This study is linked to the following SDG(s): Quality education (SDG 4) and Gender equality (SDG 5).

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Open Polytechnic Ethics Committee Approval received 5th of March 2025 (EC-202502-02).

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author has read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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