
Cocoon and connectability: A case study of an online learning programme for adults with Intellectual Disability during the pandemic

Declaration of interest: The researcher has a personal connection to this organisation - one family member is a participant in the organisation, and another family member sits on the board of education of the organisation. This information was clearly communicated to all research participants and consent forms indicated that refusal to take part would have no adverse impact on any relationship they have with the organisation or its staff members.

Introduction

When the Covid-19 lockdown was announced in March 2020, '**Inspired**', a community organisation for people with Intellectual Disabilities, quickly decided to move its' classes online. Online learning is not a mode of education that has typically been used by adults with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) in Ireland. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, with online learning becoming more and more prevalent, it is important to capture and document experiences of people with ID in online learning so that the educational inequalities that people with ID have experienced in traditional face to face education are not perpetuated in the online domain.

Inspired - the organisation

Inspired provides education, employment opportunities and community participation opportunities for adults with learning disabilities (LD). The organisation was started in 2014 by a group of parents of adults with ID who were '**desperately seeking an alternative to traditional post-secondary institutional settings**' (Inspired, 2020). One of the organisation's core values is that the participants are the decision-makers of the organisation, deciding what classes and opportunities should be offered. Initially, the organisation was funded entirely from the fundraising initiatives of the parents; now it is part-funded by the European Social Fund and the Health Service Executive (Inspired, 2020).

The online learning programme developed consisted of three 60 to 90-minute classes per day. The organisation posted a weekly schedule to each participant, which contained class details and login details. All classes took place over Zoom, a widely used online video conferencing website. The organisation provided iPads to participants if they did not have a computer, and delivered materials if they were required for a class, for example, art materials. These classes were led by a tutor and were also attended by a facilitator. The role of the tutor is to teach the class. The role of the facilitator is to support the participants – for example by ensuring that participants' technology is working, supporting communication, monitoring for understanding, etc.

Once online learning was established with the full-time participants of **Inspired**, it was also offered to other groups of people with ID. These groups included a mixture of adults who were known and not known to the organisation, for example, school leavers from local special schools and a group of adults with ID in another county.

Case study

This case study was completed through Queen's University Belfast, with the support of Dr Alison MacKenzie. 15 research participants took part in the case study: nine participants with ID, two tutors and four facilitators. The staff members engaged through questionnaires and focus groups. The participants with ID were offered three methods of participation – questionnaire, individual interview or focus group. The case study aimed to be as inclusive as possible through the use of accessible information sheets and consent forms, offering choices of method of participation, sending questions in advance and having the option to bring a family member along to interviews.

The results

- **Participants found Covid-19 restrictions very challenging**

The participants reported feelings of sadness due to the restrictions; missing loved ones; missing work or educational activities, and missing incidental social interactions. Some participants spoke about feeling sadness or feeling stress during this time:

It was sad....Very stressful...it was hard (participant 6).

I think I wish the virus was gone because I wish everything was back to normal (participant 4).

Many of the participants spoke about how hard it was to be separated from loved ones:

It's hard because I can't see my family, or my boyfriend and you know I miss them... It's not easy (participant 1).

One participant spoke about how he missed incidental social interactions such as **'meet[ing] people...downtown or in the street or in the pub'** (participant 8). Many participants spoke about the monotony of the day during lockdown, about **'trying to keep [themselves] going'** (participant 2). Participants also spoke about how they missed work or engaging in educational opportunities and hobbies:

It feels a bit quiet. Because we can't go to work or anything like that (participant 3)

[speaking about her job in a hair salon] - **I couldn't sweep the hairs or wash the cups...I couldn't fold the towels** (participant 6)

Some participants were disappointed that they were missing other opportunities, such as holding a 40th birthday party. One of the participants who lives in a supported living environment moved back to her parent's house during lockdown. She said that while it was the right decision to move home, she missed her housemate

I find it very hard not seeing my housemate, because I find that I miss her. She's very lonesome all by herself, you know? (participant 4).

All participants reported that lockdown would have been harder without the classes, mostly because they would have had nothing to do during the day. Participant 8 expressed this very eloquently – **'I'd have no hope...there's**

no question about it, I got no hope, no fun and no craic'

Staff viewed the Covid-19 restrictions as being more difficult for the participants due to social isolation; a reliance on routine; and difficulty understanding the pandemic and government restrictions.

I think a lot of the participants felt lost and isolated when everything closed and the online classes were a lifeline for a lot of them (staff member 2).

- All of the participants found the classes valuable

This was because participants enjoyed the classes, and they helped participants to stay active

I learn different things, different classes in [the organisation] and it keeps me active when I'm at home (participant 1).

One participant spoke about how the classes were a good distraction from worrying about the Covid-19 pandemic

Well, if not like this then then then there was then I would in thinking about that, about that coronavirus (participant 7).

Some of the participants spoke about the physical and mental health benefits of the online exercise classes

I do Zumba and yoga because I find them very good, because they help me to relax and motivated like to relieve my stress as well (participant 4).

The staff also spoke about the mental health benefits of the classes in terms of providing a routine to the day, when the participants most needed routine

Their routine was supported by the online classes, I think it gave them a sense of comfort and security and most of all fun (staff member 3).

- The participants viewed the classes as a social opportunity

This may be where the organisation's classes differed from a generic online class. The participants were not only getting an opportunity to learn and engage in enjoyable activities but also to connect with people who are important to them. Participants spoke about how they liked seeing their friends and catching up with them. Staff also viewed the classes as a social outlet for the participants, during a time when social interactions were very limited. After a few weeks, the participants began to log in early, so that they could talk to their friends before class

A few of them would come on a few minutes before the class to have the chat, because you know they need that too... it's lovely to see them meeting there a bit early (Staff member 3).

One participant who lives in a very isolated rural area described how the classes gave her the opportunity to meet

her friends, but also to feel part of a wider community

Well, yeah, because I think...they help me more to benefit towards the community and be part of [the organisation], be part of the environment, interact with other communities as well (participant 4)

- The classes helped people with ID to learn new skills

Many participants spoke about the educational benefit of the classes.

I found it very good for like helping me like to learn new things...It is giving me more independence and more confidence...it's good because I because I'm learning new things and like, meeting, communicating with other people. (participant 4).

Some participants viewed online learning as a new opportunity in their lives outside of the Covid-19 pandemic, and spontaneously generated ideas for new classes such as classes about makeup and nails, an online fashion show event, literature, literacy and numeracy class, amongst others.

Some participants of this study found online learning difficult due to the emotional impact of Covid-19 restrictions

Some participants spoke about how it was hard to see people, but not be able to meet them in real life. For these participants, seeing their friends in this unusual context seemed to amplify the stress of the pandemic. Some participants spoke about how it was difficult to see people on Zoom -

My friends. The pictures are really smaller....I can't see them. I want to see my friends... I can see them but it's sad (participant 6).

- Staff members were surprised at how well people with ID engaged in online learning

The tutors reported that from the beginning, they expected the participants to engage in online learning successfully. When I asked whether they had concerns that the participants would be able to engage in online learning, their response was very brief **'We never doubted them, did we?'** (staff member 6). However, they were concerned that the participants would not be able to learn new skills online and saw it as an opportunity to reinforce skills learned face to face. The tutors reported that in fact, the participants were able to learn new skills online.

While the tutors did not have concerns about whether online learning would be accessible to the participants, the facilitators felt differently. They spoke about their initial concerns, that they wouldn't be able to engage with the participants online, or that the participants wouldn't be able to access the technology - **'First I thought "Oh My God, how is this going to work" ...we didn't know how they'd manage with it'** (Staff member 1). Despite trepidation, the facilitators reported that they were pleasantly surprised when participants could access the classes, and **'presented to them'** (staff member 1). While some participants took time to adjust to the online environment, **'they all managed in their own way really'** (staff member 4). Overall, facilitators felt that all participants were suitable for online learning and **'not only [connect] with each other but to get involved in whatever subject or activity'** even though they might engage in it differently. They viewed their role in online learning as supporting

'...the participants to be involved in a way that suits them the best' (staff member 3).

Challenges identified by the participants and staff

The participants identified some challenges to online learning - difficulties with technology and communicating online. All participants reported that they use the internet and devices such as phones and tablets frequently, however, some reported that they needed help to log in to the classes on Zoom.

One participant who speaks in a very quiet voice reported that she found the online classes difficult - **It's hard. They can't hear me** (participant 6). The classes may be particularly challenging for a person who speaks in a low volume, as their responses may not be heard by the tutors or other participants. Similar difficulties were experienced by a participant with hearing difficulties.

While overall, staff reported that online learning worked well, as one facilitator put it, it was '**a learning curve**'. The staff identified the following challenges to online learning:

- technical difficulties,
- balancing turn-taking,
- holding the participants' attention.

Staff identified effective strategies to overcome these challenges.

Effective strategies in online learning

Staff identified the following strategies for teaching adults with ID online:

Rational	Strategy
Actively ensure that all participants get the opportunity to contribute	Turn-taking is more difficult in the online environment, so tutors needed to put in place strategies to manage this, such as muting all other microphones if they needed to hear a response from one participant.
Planning 'standalone' classes	Tutors found that these types of classes were much more effective online than project based work, which required more organisational skills from the participants.
Incorporating a routine into the classes	The tutors felt that once the participants got used to the routine, they felt more comfortable and were more receptive to learning new material.
Using shorter, more direct sentences	In the absence of non-verbal communication as discussed previously, staff found that they had to adapt their verbal communication to support understanding.
Individual 'check-in'	Facilitators called participants regularly to check-in, or if they needed support to finish an activity when a class had ended.

Table 1: Online learning strategies used by staff

As well as adapting to online learning through the use of strategies, staff also found that some subjects translated better than others to the online environment. Activities with a high language demand were particularly difficult

You couldn't really do things with loads of instructions and steps you know, it was hard to break

This may have been due to the absence of non-verbal communication which would typically support understanding in face to face interactions. The activities that translated best to the online environment were activities which had low language demands, such as dance, exercise, singing or art. In future, activities with higher language demands could be supported by adding visual or text support to the classes to break down instructions and support understanding.

Conclusion

In the current context of extremely limited education and employment opportunities, which may be further limited by the social and economic implications of Covid-19 (UN, 2020), it is vital that all avenues of educational and employment opportunities for people with ID are pursued. People with LD are amongst the most disadvantaged in the educational system (Watson & Nolan 2011, p 38) and the least likely of all people with disabilities to be employed (National Disability Authority 2019, p 10). Unfortunately, this lack of opportunity is reflected in the online domain. While online learning is becoming more and more prevalent, it is not seen as an option for people with ID. There is a concern that society holds prejudicial stereotypes, believing that people with ID are unable to participate in online learning. Inspire, in partnership with its participants, aims to demonstrate that a new pathway to education, educational choice and autonomy is possible.

While there are limitations to this case study, the voice of the participants is heard. The participants of this case study have illustrated that they can engage in online learning; that they are motivated to learn; and that they have a broad range of interests which they would like to pursue through online learning.

Future research

Further research is needed in order to determine how people with LD can engage in on-line learning, and what types of support are required in this area. All research should have at its core the voice of people with ID.

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