

# Being there

## Using webinars to support university students through the COVID crisis

### Rod Woodhouse



*Over the summer of 2020, a colleague (Andy Millington) and I ran a series of weekly webinars for undergraduate students to maintain their wellbeing during the national lockdown and beyond. We perceived that students were experiencing high levels of stress due to the Covid-19-induced national lockdown, and resulting changes in their social and academic lives, and we wanted to provide them with an outlet to reduce that stress in a safe and supportive virtual environment. This article reviews my experience of these webinars and how they developed from a single weekly discussion to become a wider wellbeing community.*

#### Keywords

Wellbeing, community, webinars, development, safe spaces, humour

#### Introduction

Since March 2020, I have been running wellbeing webinars with my good friend and colleague Andy Millington. We both work in Cardiff University's School of Optometry and Vision Sciences and jointly teach sessions on professional awareness. These sessions guide students through the process of developing their own professional personas and cover aspects such as communication, record keeping and maintaining a healthy balance between their professional and personal welfare. We have developed a natural, if oddly Vaudevillian, double-act over the years (see Figure 1) and, like most things in our working relationship, the webinars were Andy's idea. Both he and I are heavily focused on student wellbeing and want to ensure that students have an outlet for discussing any issues that are impacting on their mental health. We both felt we needed to do something to help students through the difficult change in academic and personal circumstances due to COVID-19. Andy's idea was simple: we run voluntary wellbeing webinars for undergraduate students to come along and discuss non-work topics to take their minds off both their academic stresses and the stresses of the ongoing pandemic.

Living up to our respective working titles of Content and Structure, I organised how the webinars would run. An hour or so every week, held online through our Virtual Learning Environment, *Blackboard Collaborate*, where students could drop in and out as their fancy took them. There were the inevitable teething troubles – random internet crashes, a brief issue with anonymous, antagonistic behaviour in the first session, and the

need to arrange sessions around any ongoing teaching – but the response from students has been positive and even overwhelming at times. We now run 1-2 webinars a week and we have also set up a closed Facebook group for further engagement. What began as a way to help our students for an hour or two a week has now blossomed into an ongoing wellbeing community.

**Figure 1: Our normal teaching faces and (inset) Vaudeville alter-egos, Content and Structure.**



Every double-act needs two distinct personalities – if we were to take to the stage, who would we be? Forgoing the classic ‘clown/straight-man’ pairing, our partnership can take on one of two forms. In terms of background, we bill ourselves as a ‘clinician/psychologist’ pairing; Andy being an optometrist of some 30-years good standing and me having a mathematics/psychology background. The overriding consideration for how we relate to each other, and the one most relevant here, is how we approach our work. We adopt the complementary roles of Content (Andy) and Structure (Rod): Andy has all the good ideas on what to teach and I focus on how to teach them. The vaudeville analogy nicely sums up the organised chaos of our teaching sessions.

The success of the webinars has taken me by surprise, as has my enjoyment of them. I consider myself largely asocial, happier inside on a warm summer's day with a good PlayStation game than out picnicking in the park. But I have grown to look forward to the weekly webinars and feel more connected to my students than ever before. In this article, I want to look back over my experience of the webinars to try and tease out the essence of their success.

## Rules of the game

While we wanted to keep the sessions as loose and free-flowing as possible, we did insist on three core rules: confidentiality within the group, transparency of contribution, and student-only membership

### Confidentiality

As befitting someone who craves structure and frameworks, it makes sense to me to start with the rules of the webinars. From the off, we wanted students to feel comfortable, even with the presence of members of staff, so there was only one rule we were prepared to enforce - the Chatham House Rule (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/chatham-house-rule>):

When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.

(Chatham House)

This rule is designed to ensure confidentiality such that no comments can be specifically related back to the person who made them. Andy and I use this rule in our Professional Awareness classes, and using it here too made sense to us both. The Chatham House Rule acted as a safety net in the early days and, while we may no longer need it now that the community bonds have strengthened, it really should be the central rule of any confidential online discussion. As we move into a new world of online teaching, I will be running many more discussions than I used to and having a written rule that protects students will be paramount. As the wellbeing webinars have shown, the presence of this rule develops a level of trust within the group. This only holds, however, if everyone in the group abides by it, including those running the session. This is something we have made clear from the very start and all of us accepted it immediately.

With a rule protecting confidentiality, and maybe the lingering idea of 'us and them; students and teachers' in their minds, attendees might not have been as willing to trust us if it was not clear we were obeying the rules ourselves. The odd unguarded comment here and there achieved that nicely and made us more like equals than aloof facilitators. This may make it sound like we were using it cynically, but that was not the case. We needed to be authentic in the sessions to promote wellbeing and any hint of skulduggery on our part(s) would have torpedoed the success of the webinars from the very start. Breaking down the boundaries was also beneficial for Andy and me; we feel as much as part of the community as everyone else.

## Transparency

Alongside confidentiality, we also made it a rule that attendees must take ownership of their comments and behaviour, so all attendees are identifiable to each other, if not to the world at large. In our initial session, we had a few attendees who signed in under anonymous names and were clearly there to antagonise others. Requiring students to sign in under their own names in subsequent webinars put paid to that quickly, and we have had no more issues with antagonistic behaviour. On a more important level, however, the requirement to take ownership of their comments and behaviour promoted more of a community structure. We were not going to censor student viewpoints, and students quickly realised that they could make statements without the fear of judgement of the group. This, coupled with the confidentiality aspect, did much to put students at ease in the webinars by giving them an outlet to vent if they needed to. With the ongoing COVID situation and the lingering spectre of the industrial action by academic staff earlier in the year, there were several students who needed to air their grievances and needed to be given a safe space to do so. They were probably surprised by the amount of support they got from others, including from me and Andy. In turn, Andy and I both feel we have benefitted from the support provided from students. Our wellbeing has been improved by these webinars as much as it has for the students.

## Student-only webinar and Facebook group membership criteria

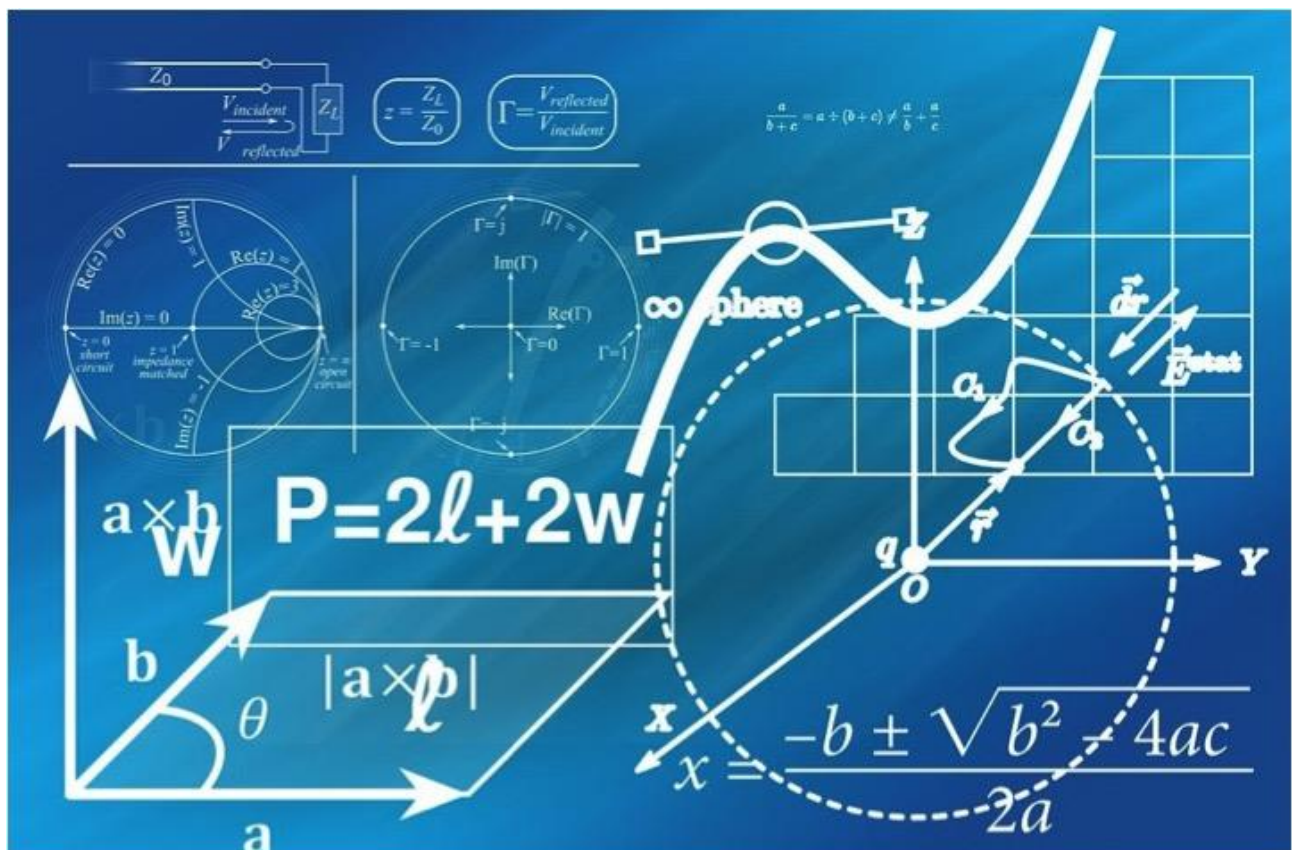
The final rule was regarding membership. Andy and I specifically prohibited any other staff from joining the sessions or the accompanying Facebook group. While this has led to questions about what we're doing (based on genuine curiosity, rather than any implication we are being unprofessional or brainwashing young minds), we decided early on that we wanted it to be 'our thing'. This is not the typical parochial attitude of academia as the definition of 'our thing' automatically extended out to the students. I do not believe we would have anywhere near as much engagement and honesty from the attendees if there was a remote possibility other members of staff could be listening in on their conversations, even with the Chatham House rule in place.

## What does a typical webinar session and attendee look like?

### Agenda and process

To an outsider, eavesdropping on our conversations, there is precious little 'formal' wellbeing content. We do not share stress-busting techniques or advise on how to follow a nutritious diet while locked down at home. Our agenda and discussion topics emerge as part of the session, based on what attendees want to talk about, and Andy and I take on a facilitator role to move discussions along on the rare occasion that it all goes silent. In a typical webinar, the topics of discussion can range from sharing experiences of written exams to synaesthesia via IKEA clothing and inflatable tube men. As the webinars have developed, we have gained a core of regular attendees and, as is often the case with a small group, have acquired several catchphrases, mostly aimed at me and Andy. Andy discussing a book he's recently bought will always be followed by comments of '10% off with Andy's code' and if I even come close to mentioning anything slightly mathematical I'm greeted by a chorus of 'Stop spoiling it with maths!' (which I do, to be fair – see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Some webinar-spoiling maths



There is at least one equation here that will bring our students out in a cold sweat...

### Student membership profile

The regular attendees reflected the gender split of the student cohort as a whole (female students outnumber males by about 2:1), with a typical webinar drawing in about 8-10 students. But is there such a thing as a typical wellbeing student beyond simple demographics? Although they may not be able to attend every week, there is a strong sense of loyalty amongst the regulars which unifies them. There is also a level of acceptance. I alluded earlier to the idea of 'student and teacher' which could mean Andy and I are apart from the others, running the session but not necessarily taking part in it. However, there has been no hint of that other than the occasional misunderstanding of cultural references (they have told me multiple times what 'peng' means, but I still have to keep relying on the internet to remind me that it's an adjective to describe something of exceptional quality. Likewise, Andy still cannot tell the difference between an Xbox and a PlayStation).

### Succeeding in spite of technical limitations

While slicker and fancier packages are available, we chose to use *Blackboard Collaborate* due to the familiarity to the students and (presumed) optimisation for all internet users. We quickly discovered that

Andy's internet is powered by an asthmatic hamster in a broken wheel, so his connection would be slow, or even non-existent, if more than two cameras were on at the same time. This meant that only he and I were able to use cameras and mics while the students had to use a shared chat box. This could have been a recipe for unintentionally establishing a hierarchy – we are in control because you can see us; you are the ones who must listen to what we say because you are the faceless masses. But this is where the existing partnership between Andy and me came to the fore. We naturally fell into the routine of one of us monitoring the chat box while the other was speaking, and we tried to respond to everything that was posted. This ensured that all attendees felt heard and that we were talking with, not to, the students.

For a few weeks, Andy was busy in practice and so I ran the webinars solo. Given that my internet is powered by electricity, rather than thoughts and prayers like Andy's, I opted to try *Zoom* for those sessions so students could use their cameras and talk face-to-face. The shift from chat box to mics felt seamless and the dynamic felt much the same as 'normal' sessions using *Collaborate*, although Andy was sorely missed. However, if the option for students to appear on camera had been there from the start, I am not convinced it would have built the same community. I feel that the anonymity of using the chat box was necessary in the early sessions, as it enabled students to explore the bounds of trust we were establishing and appreciate that this was a safe forum for them to express themselves.

### **The importance of humour**

One thing running through each webinar is the need to make students smile and laugh. It is one of the few things in my teaching career I have some knack for and has to be my primary contribution to the wellbeing of the students. It feeds back into the idea of not having formal content. If we had a number of points or prepared topics to cover, it would be too much like a teaching seminar and not enough like a wellbeing seminar. In the early days, we did come to each webinar with a few ideas of what we were going to cover (sadly, 'What should Rod get as his next tattoo?' never really took off), but that approach has now fallen by the wayside. Indeed, if I had to identify a transition point where the webinars ceased to be a weekly formality and became a fledgling community, it would be the point where we dropped the list of possibilities and just went with the flow. This gave core control back to the students and enabled them to choose some of the content, with us holding the space. Some of the best and most enjoyable sessions have certainly been where students have taken control of the discussion. They have also shown an almost uncanny knack for being able to find photos of staff from outside the University website.

### **Wellbeing vs information webinars**

Alongside the wellbeing webinars, students were given regular information webinars held by the head of school (and by me on one occasion, the lucky devils, when the HoS couldn't get in). Both the wellbeing and information webinars laid bare the stresses students found themselves under over the summer. We had expected students would struggle with the lockdown as much as with the change in their studies, but the stresses associated with their academic performance were far more dominant than enforced isolation. The change to online-only exams (which carry significant weight in our School) was a terrifying prospect for most,

if not all, students. Students were concerned about the change in questions, how they would manage an exam without getting disturbed by well-meaning family members, and content that had not been deliverable. The differences between how these stresses were addressed in the information and the wellbeing webinars deftly show how far the community has developed.

In the information webinars, students are there to receive information and not to engage in discussion. This makes them feel cold and anodyne in comparison to the jovial lightness of our sessions. The stress radiated by students in the information sessions, even through a chat box, is almost palpable. They were there to have their questions answered, their fears put to rest and, perhaps, even to grind a few axes. In our wellbeing sessions, the tone is subtly different. They still ask questions, but know they will receive a personal answer rather than the University mantra (this is by no means a slight on the HoS or University, just further evidence of community building). Their fears are put to rest by gaining more information on what is causing them, but also by being able to raise and discuss them with others and possibly even finding out they are not on their own. And yes, they can come to us to grind their axes. In some cases, we even hand them the whetstone or borrow one from them.

### **The secrets of our success**

Tempting as it is to finish with a pithy set of points and learning outcomes to take forward, that does not seem to fit the organic development of the webinars. They have grown, taking on an anarchic life of their own, and distilling them down into a framework loses the essence of them. They cannot be pushed, filed, stamped, indexed, briefed, debriefed, or numbered, so finding the secret of their success is akin to searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack.

Ultimately, even though I can discuss individual elements of the webinars and why they have contributed to the community-building, I cannot help but feel that asking why the webinars work as a whole is like asking 'why is this joke funny?' Once you begin to deconstruct the whole down to the sum of its parts, then you lose the sense of it. It's tempting to point to any given element of the webinars and scream 'BEHOLD! The Philosopher's Stone which will magically transmute all online teaching into gold!'. But what worked for us might not work for you (and vice versa) and holding aloft a single element from our experience would be no more a guarantee of success than any other element we could choose.

### **Last words**

As I continue to rack my brains for a suitable conclusion to this article, my thoughts keep returning to a single idea. Perhaps my inability to identify exactly why the webinars were successful in the eyes of the attendees is because nothing we did would have worked if it wasn't for the students who took the time to come and see what we were doing. Those who attended week-on-week, those who popped in and popped straight back out again, and those who came back after weeks away and were welcomed with open arms (well, gentle mockery).

So it is only fitting that the final words on the webinars come from them. I have mentioned above that there is a hardcore of webinar attendees and I approached them for their take on the webinars and if/how they helped them. The responses were swift, uplifting, and heart-warming, and I wish I could capture the full extent of them. The students see them as a source of familiarity and stability in turbulent times, something to look forward to on a weekly basis. They are safe spaces where they can talk and share without fear of judgement and have established me and Andy as staff members that students feel they could approach in future if they are experiencing difficulties. It brought existing friends closer and created new friendships marked by openness and honesty. All of them needed wellbeing support and, in the end, we were able to provide that just by being there for the students when they needed us. It was, and continues to be, them who make these webinars what they are.

### **Acknowledgements**

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Last, but not least, this article is dedicated to my students who have maintained my wellbeing as I tried to maintain theirs. Thanks to every one of you. You keep me going more than you realise.

### **About the author**

**Rod** is a dual-class mathematician/psychologist and career academic who currently works as a Lecturer in Cardiff University. His main teaching focus is on integrating psychological theory with clinical and professional practice, but also teaches research skills, statistics, and visual perception. Despite this, his students mainly know him as the one who makes them write reflections.

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Figure 3: Timmy (Yorkie - top), Winston (Puggle - bottom left) and Harriet (Basset - bottom right)



Timmy made a weekly cameo since we could lift him into camera shot. When we lost him to ongoing health issues, he was sorely missed by all. Winston and Harriet make more sporadic appearances because they either do not like being picked up (Winston) or are too big to pick up (Harriet).

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