

How to make the most of a virtual conference

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2020 has been a year of many firsts for the education community. Here at CORE we are taking our uLearn20 conference online for the first time. It is an epic and exciting undertaking, and offers an opportunity for us to explore new ways of learning collaboratively by distance.

If you have been to uLearn or heard of the conference, it might be hard to imagine how three immersive days of boundary pushing, face-to-face learning could be transformed into a valuable virtual experience.

To help expand our collective understanding, I asked two leading connected educators, whom I admire immensely, [Tessa Gray](#) and [Anne Kenneally](#) to share their insights on the merits of virtual.



From left: Chrissie Butler, Tessa Gray and Anne Kenneally

Chrissie: Nau mai, haere mai Tessa and Anne. Thank you for agreeing to this little interview. I think to kick off could you introduce yourselves and just give us a bit of a heads up on your “virtual” credentials.:

Tessa: Ngā mihi nui a koe Chrissie. I've long thought educators do amazing things in the shadows, that's why I believe in the power of educators and kaiako sharing their expertise with each other. For many years I've worked in social learning networks and online communities and learned about their collective good. I share the love of virtual mentoring in the spaces I work – the Ministry of Education's communities of practice for both [Enabling e-Learning](#) and [Kia Takatū ā-Matihiko](#) and more recently for CORE Education's own community of practice, [edSpace](#). When I'm not virtual, I'm facilitating PLD support in schools across the central North Island and I spend most my weekends with family enjoying what Aotearoa has to offer.

Anne: Kia ora, I'm a facilitator of happiness, in the CORE south team. I am a connected educator, privileged to have a large network of friends, colleagues, mentors and mentees across Aotearoa and globally. I work face to face and virtually with educators around the south of Te Wai Pounamu and out in Rekohu, Wharekauri, Chatham Islands. Some of my favourite times are my virtual mentoring sessions, walking alongside educators, creating better tomorrows. I took a year out with a study leave and travelled Aotearoa, meeting educators, connecting and learning in classrooms, and realised the potential of an online connected world. Now more than ever we NEED to connect online with our peers across Aotearoa, and develop our support networks.

Chrissie: Thank you both. So let's get started. First question: Why go to a virtual conference, when there is already so much great content online that you can view whenever you want?

Anne: I asked myself that until I attended our recent [Deep Learning Lab](#). My most profound takeaway was the incredibly rich connection I experienced joining in from my very own home. From large audience keynote experiences, to workshop sessions, to panel discussions, and virtual drinks, there was something for us all. We were able to pick our path to connect in ways that met our needs, from large groups to intimate sessions. I came away feeling truly connected and networked in my recent learning experience. The value for me was in connecting, reconnecting, discussion and sharing the rich content we were immersed in.

Tessa: Āe, I'd have to agree with Anne, there's a real sense of empowerment when you get to choose your own learning pathways, explore those things that you love about the profession, while having your own ideas extended and repositioned – all the same goodness but from the comfort of your own lounge. More importantly, there are multiple opportunities to engage formally and informally with other uLearn whānau sharing similar learning experiences.

As well as Twitter, you can also get involved in the backchannel chats and facilitated discussions. We're social creatures after all, and having that ability to connect and reflect is hugely important when debating or consolidating new learning concepts. We don't normally do that in a vacuum, so a virtual conference like uLearn enables us to broaden our thinking alongside (and with) other like-minded educators across Aotearoa.

Chrissie: Second question: What kind of impact could participating in a virtual conference have on a teaching team?

Tessa: Sometimes educators have missed out on attending larger conferences, due to limited PLD funding. A virtual experience like uLearn20 creates more equitable and affordable opportunities for teams of educators to undertake professional learning. There's an opportunity for everyone to hear similar messages, while also pursuing personal PLD choices. Again these pathways can be strengths-based or an extension out of one's comfort zone – from the comfort of their own home, of course!

Some practical ways to support teams of educators as a collective and as individuals, is to create shared documents for note taking, resource sharing and reflection. This can be shared with others and used post uLearn to continue to debate, share or trial new ideas. Educators can collaborate and lead learning in different ways internally; but they can also be invited to see themselves as thought-leaders and encouraged to submit abstracts and for future uLearn events.

Anne: I'm on the same page as Tessa. What an incredible opportunity right here in Aotearoa for teams to connect, collaborate, learn and grow in their own space. Teams can come together and join in discussion leading up to, during, and after uLearn20. Feedback from our recent Deep Learning Lab spoke of the growth of communication within and across teams. Your teams can design a uLearn20 experience to meet your needs. All of this without the expense of travel, accommodation and more. And for an absolute 'wild card' why not have a school sleepover to truly maximise the blend of an online conference with a face to face team building time.

Chrissie: Awesome. I can also see that a virtual space offers anyone flying solo a worthwhile space to learn too. Sometimes going to a big conference by yourself can be pretty overwhelming. But an online conference creates different opportunities to connect that are supported by the online facilitation. You can also dip in and out in ways that work for you, get involved in the kōrero or just choose to watch and observe from your kāinga.

But here's the last question: Surely being online for a whole day will be exhausting? What will it be like?

Anne: Yes, it will be exhausting, beautiful, enriching and exhausting. It is also likely to be nurturing, nourishing and challenging. You are in control to an extent, and you need to take and make time to fill your kete. You need to tune in when you are at your most focused and take time to step away from your device, walk around the garden, breathe and then reconnect for another burst. Your kete, brain and your heart are likely to be full to the brim, and I would highly recommend planning a couple of device free days after ulearn20. Take time for you, time to relax and reflect.

Tessa: We all know what happens when you enjoy learning too much... before you know it you haven't left the couch and everyone is wondering what's happened to the dinner. The uLearn team is also aware of online fatigue and have designed a programme to support you getting the most out of uLearn with a variety of live and on demand options, including interactive and immersive experiences, research-based and presentation style sessions as well panel discussions; around 10 to 55 minutes in duration. All of Anne's other advice for

virtual and real time balance is gold! This is your learning – you decide how you want to get the most out of uLearn20.

Chrissie: That's a pretty strong endorsement from you both. My own take on a virtual conference is from a very recent experience over lockdown (the first time round). I attended the virtual [UDL Summit](#) based in the US. To be honest, I was initially a bit skeptical. I really love being with people kanohi ki te kanohi (face to face) and have found that much of the gold happens in the incidental conversations round the edges. But the UDL Summit was great. It felt like I was part of something for those couple of days and connected and plugged into this community of educators passionate about innovating for equity. The chance to view the curated content after the event and continue conversations with colleagues was also a real bonus.

So next stop uLearn 20. Thank you Tessa and Anne for sharing your experience and insights. I know you both will be very present both front-of-house and behind the scenes over October 7 and 8.



Chrissie Butler

Chrissie Butler works alongside schools and education facilitators supporting strategic planning and blended professional learning in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), e-learning, and inclusive practices. She is also the lead writer and content developer on the Ministry of Education's new Inclusive Education website. Chrissie supports the development of CORE's internal capability in inclusive learning design and provides consultancy to New Zealand and overseas schools and agencies. She brings her life-long arts practice to all aspects of her work. She has a particular interest in exploring the relationship between creative work, education, digital technologies, and social change.