



# EFOS

European Federation of Older Students in the Universities  
Europäische Vereinigung älterer Studierender an den Universitäten  
Fédération Européenne des Etudiants Âgés aux Universités



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## European Federation of Older Students

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**From the editor:**

The Corona pandemic had an impact on EFOS News too. In 2020, when the first lockdown began, all the articles were already gathered and the EFOS News could appear as planned in May without much hindrance.

In 2021, things were looking very different. EFOS meetings had not taken place since October 2019. Communication between members was only maintained with online meetings for the SeLiD project. As a result, there was no EFOS News in 2021. The first time since 2003!

When an EFOS meeting could be held again in September 2021 in Dresden, we seized the opportunity directly to ensure the continuation of the EFOS News in 2022.

I am very pleased that we succeeded with an issue of even larger size than usual. I would like to thank all the authors for making this possible in such a spontaneous way.

The articles mainly reflect experiences in Universities of the Third Age during the pandemic and show results of the survey and the project work under SeLiD.

Wolfgang Spitaler's article goes back to the project 'Virtual European Cultural Centre (VECU)', which we carried out in EFOS from 2008 to 2010. One of the project groups compared under his guidance proverbs from different countries and cultures.

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Peter Hug

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# Seniors Learning in digital spaces: Re-creating the spirit of the coffee break and the vermouth time.

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## 1. Introduction

This is a story of survival in the face of an international emergency, the COVID pandemic, by Seniors who wanted to go on talking with each other rather than being silenced by being locked down in their individual houses. In 2020, the pandemic was critical for Seniors as they were required to stay at home to safeguard their health but the regulations implemented did not consider the physical and psychological implications that prolonged isolation could provoke. For Seniors, forsaking outdoor activity, social relationships, social contact, and daily conversations created an impasse in their lives that denied the fundamental tenets of having a long and healthy life by engaging in physical, social and mental activities. This situation was especially terrible for the majority of older adults who generally had fewer means of staying in contact with others virtually than did younger members of the population. Nevertheless, some active Seniors resorted to technology to maintain social contacts and activities with their communities, despite the effort that was required.

In the case of U3A and university programmes for Seniors, the challenge was unprecedented. The pandemic lockdown forced us and them to adapt quickly to a new social, digital sphere with which Seniors had limited familiarity to avoid being left isolated at home. The situation challenged people to discard previous barriers and prejudices about technology.

This article summarises the experiences of some Seniors in the UK and Spain during the Covid lockdown. It explains how they managed to create online communities that helped them stay active, receive support from their peers and profit from technological advances. Seniors' experiences in both countries can help us understand how technology can become an ally and what strategies we can implement to lessen the digital divide between Seniors and younger people following the SELID Erasmus+ project objectives (<https://selid.efos-europa.eu>).

This paper aims to answer four significant questions related to Seniors' resilience and use of technology:

1. What were the opportunities that technology brought in during the pandemic?
2. What were the caveats and difficulties that Seniors had to overcome?
3. What were the advantages of using technology for social relationships in times of a pandemic?
4. What aspects of the experience could be maintained once the pandemic is over?

## **2. The UK Experience**

The UK part of this discussion is based on a small group of about 11 Seniors who regularly attended the U3A activities mostly lived in England and, during the Covid lockdowns, used Zoom to keep their conversations going. Two other Seniors had residency in France but attended irregularly the Zoom sessions. Before the Covid lockdowns the group had had about 15 Seniors who met weekly for a two hour face to face meeting, with a coffee break in the middle. During the lockdown and afterwards, the group met weekly to hold conversations in French using Zoom sessions that were one-hour long. There was no choice – meeting by Zoom or not meeting at all – because of national COVID regulations and members’ vulnerabilities. At some point during these sessions later in 2021, the group noted that they missed their coffee-break conversations but acknowledged that in health terms, it was safer to continue to meet virtually. Initially, the Zoom sessions were provided by one of the members through his own account, but later they were provided by the local U3A branch.

### ***2.1 Curriculum content in England***

During the lockdown, there was a loose agenda for the group: Each week involved reading and discussing articles about France in French, and/or having a quiz in French, and/or people recounting an experience/ story from their lives in French, which usually sparked off a discussion or questions. This agenda roughly paralleled, in a shortened form, the agenda of the face-to-face sessions that the group held weekly before the lockdowns. However, there was no coffee break, as members noted in one discussion in 2021. Coffee-breaks provided a useful time for people to socialise within the formal session of the French conversation group but outside the curriculum that was being followed.

The articles for reading each week were posted on the group Dropbox folder. During the session, the group decided in what order the varying weekly menu of articles, presentations and quizzes would be tasted. The articles varied in length between two and four pages A4 and were about France: history of places and people; geographical curiosities and areas of France; interesting people and people’s jobs. They also included short articles about French society that encouraged discussion. In addition, different group members volunteered their presentations or quizzes in French using their own materials in most weeks. These were posted on Zoom during the session by the second technical moderator.

### ***2.2 Promoting engagement technically***

Initially, there were two technical moderators for the group, the first of whom set up a group Dropbox folder and a weekly Zoom session. The folder allowed people to read articles and presentations in advance of each weekly meeting as the second moderator usually uploaded those articles the week before each session. The latter also set up a WhatsApp group that complemented the regular group email to help members stay in touch between sessions. As the first technical moderator had a residency in France, he attended meetings very irregularly, so the technical Zoom operations came to hinge on the second moderator.

Members were helped to get over their initial nervousness about the technology by the second technical moderator using Zoom simply – only using group conversations and sharing articles to read and not using the chat function, whiteboard, or breakout rooms. One experiment to use breakout rooms was generally thought to be unsuccessful, so it was not repeated. The second moderator operated Zoom with a sufficient level of competence from previous and ongoing experiences of other video conference platforms to make the sessions work relatively smoothly most of the time. Members were already

familiar with/ had laptops or tablets, and although some people claimed to have old-fashioned equipment initially, they all at least used mobile telephones and email. Gradually the members of the group learned to make their presentations on Zoom using their own materials, including their photographs and texts.

### ***2.3 Promoting engagement socially***

**CAMARADERIE:** People enjoyed sharing time together. This seemed to strengthen through time. People were not lectured at by a ‘leader’/ teacher.

**RESPECTFUL ATMOSPHERE:** When the group met face to face, people’s mistakes in French were gently corrected by some of the more proficient members of the group – there were several former teachers of French in the group. This continued on Zoom.

**HELP and ENCOURAGEMENT:** People were given help when they forgot words or grammar, not laughed at. People were encouraged to join in the discussions. Presentations and quizzes let people have time to empower themselves to tell their own stories and experiences and take ownership of their presence in the group.

**AGREED COMMUNAL AGENDA:** The agenda for the next week was developed communally at the end of each session. People were invited /offered to make presentations or quizzes. Although one person selected most of the articles that were read, this was by common request.

**FORMAL LEADERSHIP, EXTENSIVE PARTICIPATION:** It was not a formally leaderless group. It had a formally chosen treasurer and administrator, who often helped to guide readers’ sequence through articles. However, other people also took the lead in organising the reading of an article or creating and leading a quiz or presentation. The second technical moderator also helped to guide the weekly virtual meetings, uploading articles and presentations for members and actively inviting them to share their views on sequencing the agenda each week and constructing an agenda for the next week.

**CHATTER TIME:** Perhaps a sort of a substitute for a coffee break. People shared personal greetings and experiences alongside the agenda for the day, usually in French, at the start of a session. This helped people to greet each other personally and focus on speaking French. Chatter Time sometimes occurred ‘naturally’ when people responded personally to something that arose in an article, reminiscing about their own similar experiences. Chatter Time allowed people to take ownership of their being in the group, at least for a time, and to shape the group agenda for a while.

## **3. The Experience of the Permanent University at the University of Alicante**

At the University of Alicante, the activities for Seniors ceased a couple of days before the official lockdown started on 11th March 2020. The face-to-face subjects were discontinued, and although some lecturers offered the possibility of using technology to go on with the lessons, only a few did as few teachers were prepared to do so, and most students could not follow the lessons. The reasons were diverse but, basically, can be summarised as:

1. Seniors did not have the required technological devices.
2. Seniors did not have anybody to help them learn how to access the resources.
3. All the help available to Seniors was only online.

4. Seniors were not interested as they usually came to university to socialise.

In addition, the SELID project surveys had highlighted the fact that most Seniors had old-fashioned computers and only a few of them had tablets. In most households, their last investment in technology had been in smartphones as they did not feel the necessity to reinvest in other devices, for which they thought they had no use. Mobiles were useful for short connections but were not very practical for academic courses that required reading or writing online. Finally, the university was forced to postpone the academic courses until May when students and teachers were more prepared for online courses.

It was clear that both lecturers and students needed more support. A strategic plan was implemented with online lessons planned for May 2020. This only involved the most technologically prepared teachers and required students to engage in a training and information campaign to learn how to use the new videoconferencing platforms and learning management systems (mainly Moodle and the UA Virtual Campus). Most of the emphasis was on giving them information about the technical devices (tablets, pcs, phones, headphones, and microphones) they needed to connect to these platforms and systems and how to configure them.

However, in March we needed immediate action. Luckily, as well as the academic programme at the Permanent University, we also offered volunteering activities which were managed and carried out by Seniors in a section called *Incubator of Values*. One of these was the *Peripatéticos Club* (<https://www.universidadpermanente.com/iniciativas/en/peripatetics-walking-and-reflecting>), a group of students that gathered together to walk and to foster debate about society. This group thought that a 30-minute daily walking routine boosts brainpower, helps control weight, requires modest investments in time and money and, consequently, probably reduces health care costs. Although the pandemic put a stop to this activity, members resolved to avoid isolation by maintaining their debates and social engagement online. Therefore, the group decided to set up an online site where the students at the Permanent University could meet to have contact with other friends and partners. There were both methodological and technical issues to be solved, and concerns that some people with no technical knowledge or means might be left behind. However, the club facilitator, Mr. José Luis Casal, was determined to offer an option for those Seniors that were locked up at home and planned an online activity that enabled participants to maintain social relationships and preserved the tenets of the Peripatéticos. Furthermore, the experience taught us essential aspects of online learning methodologies for Seniors.

### ***3.1 Promoting engagement methodologically***

There were several principles that the Peripatéticos wanted to preserve from their original activity and others that were assumed to facilitate the members' online engagement:

- There was no need for prior registration.
- The activity had to be free of charge.
- Meetings should be open to all the students.
- There was no commitment involved.
- Participants were free to connect and disconnect whenever they needed.
- Some readings and materials were prepared in advance to encourage the debate.

In addition, it was necessary to decide the timetable and the duration of each session to make the activity attractive to Seniors, some of whom might not feel at ease in an online environment. Therefore, the leaders established a “Vermouth Time” meeting at 1.00 p.m. for people to meet and

maintain contact with partners and friends. In Spain, it is common to have an aperitif and light appetiser, often with colleagues and friends in a bar before going back home to have the main meal (which is eaten approximately at 2.00 p.m.). This timetable was deemed appropriate as:

- it was a limited time, as participants had their lunch afterwards;
- the chores of the morning were already finished;
- it maintained a Spanish pre-pandemic socialising tradition.

In the first sessions, the topics were open as the point was to share opinions, ideas or even anxieties provoked by the pandemic.

### ***3.2 Promoting engagement technically***

One of the first decisions was to choose a videoconferencing platform that was friendly to use to foster participation. In fact, although the University of Alicante recommended the use of corporate platforms, the Peripatéticos group opted for Jitsi (<https://meet.jit.si>), an open-code system that allowed for unlimited participants and offered various other advantages: participants did not need to be previously registered: they could easily enter the conversation, just with the room's name, "Peripatéticos"; it was free of charge; it could be accessed from a smartphone; and participants did not require previous training.



However, there were some early technical and methodological problems. Participants quickly realised they needed to use headphones and microphones to avoid sound feedback problems. They also had to manage speech turns and realised that it was challenging to maintain a conversation with more than ten speakers. Although the early meetings began with chit-chat, later meetings began by establishing a topic of discussion or some readings that could serve to initiate discussion. The experience was so positive that some members decided to establish another room for conversations in English where participants from other countries were also invited. The "Vermouth Break" was a success during lockdown but once the Peripatéticos walking activity resumed, the "Vermouth Break" ceased as there was no need to meet online. Nevertheless, the English group continued online, and still meets once a week with 6-8 people at 8.00 p.m., a more internationally adaptable time - after the evening meal for international participants and before the evening meal for Spaniards.

Overall, participants in the experience were glad to join together online when they could not meet in person. For them, it was a way of being connected, sharing ideas or problems and offering help to each other in a time of distress. It also helped us to test a methodology that we can use when no face-to-face interaction is possible, as was the case with participants from other countries.

## 5. Conclusions and lessons learned.

Although the contexts of the UK and Spanish experiences were different, their practices were similar as regards the commitment, effort and endurance of the facilitators and participants, as were their outcomes that alleviated the anxiety and isolation of Seniors during the lockdown. However, this positive experience was limited to small groups of participants, and Seniors with no technological equipment, preparation, support or access to online resources remained isolated.

However, technology proved an efficient ally for Seniors who demonstrated that they could learn and employ technology when it met their own purposes and necessities and, when given the appropriate support, could break down digital barriers and effectively use smartphones, computers, and the internet. Further, the experiences of Seniors were excellent testing environments to learn how to use technology with Seniors. They showed how technology can be used successfully to meet student needs, whether as a stand-alone solution to a problem or as part of a hybrid approach to teaching and learning. They also showed that in order to use technology successfully with students, teachers and ICT developers should adapt technology to Senior's needs and not the reverse. This can be summarised in a list of 10 principles:

- 1- Technology has to adapt to Seniors' needs and circumstances.
- 2- Technology has to be simplified and must become more user-friendly.
- 3- Technology cannot substitute human contact and should foster socialisation.
- 4- Technology should offer community spaces where participants can share and exchange.
- 5- The methodology employed should be centred on the users.
- 6- Knowledge is richer if it is constructed and debated in the community.
- 7- Online activities should foster participants' learning, autonomy and active participation.
- 8- Facilitators and moderators are essential to mediate the process without downplaying other participants' roles.
- 9- Participants should respect each other and maintain an atmosphere of mutual help and support.
- 10- Technology should offer opportunities that cannot be seized or profited in the same way in other contexts.

Nonetheless, Seniors also encountered difficulties and had to adapt their methodologies. For example, they had to look for more straightforward ways of using online resources.

After their experiences, participants felt more comfortable in online environments. Although they still preferred face-to-face activities, most of them dismissed their initial reluctance to use technology. As one member of the UK group noted:

*'I may be alone in this but as well as learning French this group gave me - a real techno dope - the confidence to persist with other Zoom groups and even give a Zoom lecture to a US group. I engaged - passively but not hopelessly - and helped the US group to learn something (about US short stories not French). So it has [had] knock on effects'.*

The UK group also learnt to use different aspects of Zoom, e.g. the Whiteboard – a group learning activity after one session - and how to upload pre-made material from one's own device to Share screen.

The strategies and applications Seniors learned were put into practice in other areas of their lives, for instance, their communications with distant family and friends. Their experiences also helped Seniors to be more open to other digital resources and activities that were available during the years 2020 and 2021, while face-to-face activities were still not advisable.

The experiences of Seniors showed the importance of presence in various forms. While virtual presence was acceptable when physical presence was not available, people missed the sociability of regular face-to-face meetings, and longed to return to it. Although the UK Chatter Time and the UPUA Vermont Times successfully overcame the isolation and disconnection that the lockdown brought, they were no substitute for people's physical engagement with each other. When the lockdown ended, the virtual sessions disappeared, except where they continue to serve a purpose for Seniors, such as online conversations with people from other countries.