

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Radically reconfigured or just broken? How emergency online teaching has altered staff and students' identities, wellbeing and conceptions of learning and teaching

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Abstract: The pace of this so-called 'pivot' meant that careful online curriculum design and evidence-based approaches were often lost in the urgency to replicate face-to-face teaching. What are the longer term implications of so much of education operating within a theory- or evidence-free zone? Academic developers, learning technologists and academics with experience in digital education practices and research were faced with the impossible challenge of facilitating conceptual changes in teaching practices, normally a slow process, almost instantaneously. But has the emergency response of higher education educators radically reconfigured their understanding of learning and teaching? Drawing on multiple data sets across a single institution with themes of equity, leadership, wellbeing and nostalgia, this paper will present the preliminary findings of a large research project and investigate the longer-term implications for how teaching and learning can move beyond 'emergency' teaching to slower, more theoretically-engaged and caring practices.

Paper: In light of the preceding 25 years of education technology in higher education (Weller, 2018), the rules of engagement were ripped up in 2020 with emergency online teaching becoming the norm across the world. The pace of this so-called 'pivot' meant that careful online curriculum design and evidence-based approaches were often lost in the urgency to replicate face-to-face teaching (Binks et al., 2021). What are the longer term implications of so much of education operating within what may be a theory- or evidence-free zone? Academic developers, learning technologists and academics with experience in digital education practices and research were tasked with supporting colleagues in an already emotionally heightened situation, compounded by unfamiliar tools and teaching environments where exposure and humiliation became common experiences. Instrumental approaches were driving pedagogical choices, and institutions fast-tracked procurement processes to buy licences for web conferencing software, so 'face-to-face' teaching could be continued online. Meanwhile, those supporting the educators in delivering this 'new' version of education were faced with the impossible challenge of facilitating conceptual changes in teaching practices, normally a slow process, instantaneously (Daniel et al., 2020). As previous research has shown, educators' theorisation of their online teaching is often based on 'folk pedagogies and pseudo-theories' (Drumm, 2019). Has the emergency response of higher education educators has radically reconfigured educators' ideas about teaching and learning or has perpetuated home-spun pedagogies? There is a danger that what was largely a pragmatic approach becomes the widespread

agreement on what online education 'is' or could be. It could be said that the emergency response in education to the pandemic has surfaced invisible structures within the learning and teaching that happens in campuses: the informal community building in corridors, the subtle feedback of understanding in the classroom, the precarity of student and staff identities, not to mention the vulnerability of everyone's health and wellbeing. The slow rituals have been replaced by back-to-back meetings where somehow everyone has become more productive, but at what cost?

This research project was conducted at a university where collective knowledge, partnership and trust were embodied in an evidence-based 14 month project to support staff and student wellbeing, and facilitate an engaging student experience throughout the academic year 2020-21 (Anderson, 2020). A year-long programme of dynamic responses to the uncertain context was driven by a partnership approach between central units and academic departments, professional services staff and academics, and between students and staff. Workstreams were initiated to lead on curriculum design and development, staff up-skilling and student engagement. As an institution with a long-established programme in blended and online education, many of whose alumni are members of staff, in addition to a developed distance learning suite of programmes and a staff body (including members of professional services) with a high literacy in pedagogy, the project resulted in a collective exchange of knowledges, based on a de-centralised concept of what 'good teaching' looks like based on disciplinary contexts.

The research project running concurrently to the above staff and student support project identified gaps in the literature which included the role of leadership in online teaching, the equality impact of emergency teaching on both staff and students (Shankar et al., 2021), and whether teaching online has altered academics' identities and understandings of how they teach. There was also a dearth of scholarship on how support of online learning outwith accredited courses, such as that led by professional services staff in areas such as libraries, academic skills, English Language support, Information Services and Disability and Inclusion. This led to the development of the overall research question: What were staff and students' experiences of online learning and teaching like during the pandemic and what is the ongoing impact? Sub questions focused on identifying challenges and opportunities, changing conceptions of learning and teaching, and future directions of learning and teaching. Data were collected from staff and students via surveys and focus groups, and interviews including visual methods. This paper will present the headline findings as the project draws to an end and will examine the challenges presented by the acceleration of techno-determinist understandings of online learning and teaching, highlighting the dangers of continuing this path where lack of critical and theoretically-sound understandings mean that educators are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

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