96 Imaging the pandemic: Higher Education tutors' narratives and photographs of precarious online living and learning

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Abrupt transitions to online-only teaching during the uncertainties of the early weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK exacerbated precarities in the role of HE teachers which are only now being considered. This study uses narratives and photographs to reveal a series of emotionally-charged responses and ensuing behaviours at the micro-level of teaching during the first phase of lockdown life. Extending frames of liminality and extremity, we draw upon visual and narrative methodologies to explore individual perceptions of the challenges, ambiguities, and opportunities in digital teaching and learning practice. Three themes of precarity and security, perceptions of time in pandemic life and work, and communication between lecturers and their university are investigated. Our paper reports on the outcomes of changed routines, enforced autonomy and possible new independencies with an emphasis on perceptions of precarity in the sector during this liminal phase.

Full paper

This case study focuses on a UK faculty of Business and Law with participating academic staff experienced in face-to-face, hybrid and online teaching. Data was collected in real time during the first phase of lockdown in March-May 2020. Widespread confusion and the disruption of the pandemic crisis saw a 'momentary crumble' (Goffman, 1959) of social expectations at the macro level. Micro-level included rapid adaptation of routines and roles for teaching staff, the abandonment of assessment strategies with communication noise between the University and teaching staff, and fading management control as we all rapidly pivoted online. This is counter to pre-pandemic HE contexts where gradual moves online had produced diminishing conditions and freedoms for digital roles (Collins et al, 2020).

Whilst respondents had digital and pedagogical expertise for this pivot, abandonment of existing, long-standing prescriptive work delivery and expected assessment schedules were a major element in provoking significant emotional responses. This study explores the varying reactions and behaviours through the lens of respondent generated narratives and photographs. We used these to capture everyday encounters of value (Kelly, 2020) during the initial 'critical period' of lockdown crisis (Stein, 2004). The narratives provide important insights capturing a liminal moment of change and contextualise impacts of managerial decision making on pedagogic strategies and delivery.

The data was collated into three themes; the first of which was precarity and security. Respondents all experienced forms of precarity and emotional vulnerabilities as they pivoted online, despite previous 'assimilation' (Littlejohn, 2023: 367) with digital teaching methods. Fear was invoked through unpredictability and the 'socially constructed chaos' (Ettlinger, 2007: 322) of the stay-at-home order and crisis footing.   One participant stated that 'Early March was categorised by worry…. what alternatives and possibilities were being put in place', while another reported 'quickly' being 'at breaking point'.

In terms of perceptions of time, analysis of photographs and narratives showed time manifesting in unexpected and challenging ways; what Turner describes as a 'moment in and out of time' (1969: 360), as 'normal' social expectations ceased. Alongside Reitan et al (2022: 10) we noted recurring ambiguities in and around how time was experienced, both generally, in relation to impact as days became (un)structured, and specifically in relation to management 'ownership' of academic staff time. Respondents adopted coping strategies through a 'temporal

template' (Ybema, 2010: 483). One respondent reported that 'perceptions of control reappeared'. This supports Ybema (2010: 484) who posited that we 'construct a linear sense of self-continuity' during a 'precarious, ill-defined context'. This was evidenced through active measures of 'trying to stick to work hours' and even deliberate scheduling in what would previously be considered extreme hours. One participant commented on altering their work pattern 'from 3am to 9am…when no one else was up'. Respondents' photographs, such as one of garden design, also asserted control, illustrating mitigating work stress in 'exchanging commuting hours' for 'little projects' of value.

In relation to communication, Pradies et al (2021: 155) explore pandemic tensions. Their discussion investigates difficulties for leaders 'tasked to provide a clear vision…while themselves immersed in fog'. This was borne out in our respondents' comments where they highlighted that messaging on cancelling classes, exams and meetings was seemingly 'not-thought-through' and often contradictory. One emotionally-charged example of such communications was when notification of assessment changes were sent out at 5pm on a Friday, 'who else was going to be there for the students…!'. This resulted in 'angst, panic, frustration and consternation' from students as online forums 'buzzed' with questions in a way 'never' previously experienced. Line management from faculties was considered by some as 'invisible or at least inconsistent', they described 'a world off kilter' as evocative of the confused and noisy communications characterising early lockdown life and work.

Findings evidence a nuanced picture of multi-dimensional responses. Whilst some participants found work in lockdown challenging or damaging, others welcomed the becoming of alternative selves through new independence, responsibility and release from tired teaching routines and managerialism. In these cases, positive identity framings emerged, encouraging the development of future resilience.

Reflecting on pandemic teaching, these findings contribute to understandings of our journey to where we are now. At the micro level we consider this through the lens of Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly, (2014: 68) who define a liminal period as a self-constructed time with a sense of 'who I was' moving to 'who I am becoming'. In some senses academic engagement has been refreshed because of this phase of 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1969: 359) as tutors grasped the reins of teaching.

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