

4 Reflections on the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Nottingham

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Abstract

It is widely believed that digitally-driven changes are not welcomed amongst academic staff in higher education. However, when in March 2020, the University of Nottingham went online in response to the UK government's COVID-19 lockdown, a different picture started to emerge. This contribution reflects on the initial steps taken to respond to the COVID-19 emergency measures, including the support required to implement these steps and ensuing staff feedback. It also reflects on the process of moving forward from a state of emergency to a more thought-through digital pedagogical approach. In this scenario, the ultimate goal of this reflection is to argue that, as a consequence of the educational turbulence caused by COVID-19, the portrait of academics prone to resisting digitally-driven changes needs to be replaced by one that emphasises the significance of making the pedagogical values of these changes meaningful to the staff who eventually implement them.

Keywords: emergency remote teaching, adapted remote teaching, institutional response, staff response, distance education.

It is commonly claimed that academics in higher education do not welcome digital changes and do not favour digital pedagogies, even though plenty of

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exceptions are to be found across all disciplines. Digital changes are often perceived as an imposition by management driven by a rationale that has little to do with the quality of teaching and learning. Common complaints regard the lack of time and training required to ‘do a good job’, which results in the perception that adopting technology for teaching is nothing more than a gimmick to meet students’ expectations. Hence, there is the belief that, with the exception of silos of excellence, academics are prone to resisting technology.

It is argued here that COVID-19 revealed a different picture. When, in March 2020, the University of Nottingham moved all its face-to-face teaching online to cope with the UK government’s COVID-19 lockdown measures, academics embraced the digital change, motivated by their awareness of the benefits of technology for responding to the new situation.

In my role as Digital Learning Director of the Faculty of Arts, I became involved in the decision-making process for moving face-to-face teaching to the online environment and for drawing up a plan to support this transition. This short contribution is a reflection on aspects connected to this process: the initial steps taken to respond to the lockdown restrictions; the levels of support required to implement these steps; staff’s feedback at the end of the first phase of COVID-19; the preparatory process for COVID-19’s second phase in September 2020/2021; and, finally, the ‘lessons learnt’ regarding the commonly-alleged resistance to digital changes by academic staff.

When, in March 2020, the university moved its teaching to the online environment, many academics were caught unprepared and became rather daunted by the unfamiliar parameters of online pedagogies.

The first step taken by the university was to clarify that staff were not expected to turn into expert online pedagogues; instead, they were encouraged to respond to the new situation with realistic goals. Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) – the quick unplanned response to the lockdown (Hodges et al., 2020) – took shape in sharp contrast with distance education in its true sense, i.e. teaching and learning planned and designed for online delivery.

A second step was to establish a package of digital tools that the university could support. Even though a mixed economy of third-party tools surfaced as the norm, the direction taken by the institution was to make use of the university-supported platforms to guarantee technical support to staff and students. As a consequence, many academics modified their practices further, adding uncertainty and workload to their ERT.

A package of platforms was recommended, reflecting directly the emerging ERT needs to:

- create asynchronous content, mainly in the form of recorded lectures (the video platform Echo360 or narrated PowerPoint);
- support student-tutor and student-student interaction (Microsoft Teams); and
- deliver instructions and host content (Moodle).

The most striking feature of ERT was the significant increase in the use of Microsoft Teams. Although its adoption had been slow in the past, academics across all faculties clearly saw the platform's high level of flexibility as an effective solution for engaging with students during ERT.

In terms of teaching structure, the Faculty of Arts prioritised the lecture+seminar format, familiar to staff and students. Thus, as a third step, academic staff adapted their teaching materials and practices to retain this structure in the digital environment.

As the lecture+seminar format does not suit language teaching – for which oral interaction, close monitoring by the tutor, and emphasis on practice, production, and performance are key – an ERT model specific for language teaching was devised. Juggling between synchronous and asynchronous delivery, a work plan was prescribed to replace the original weekly face-to-face contact hours with a weekly delivery of:

- asynchronous delivery: a video/audio file with accompanying tasks; a reading comprehension with associated tasks; a grammar point with explanations and exercises; and a writing task; and
- synchronous delivery: 30-minute live online language sessions for spoken practice.

The emphasis on asynchronous delivery proved effective in coping with the diverse and unforeseeable situations with which staff and students were confronted. However, it became apparent that a move from ERT to a more thought-through solution required a revision of the model to allow for more synchronous exchanges.

Regarding assessment, the language centre end-of-term exams were replaced by a five-day take-home exam for the lower language proficiency levels (A1-B1) – the five-day length was prescribed university-wide as an Equality, Diversity, Inclusivity (EDI) requirement – and a combination of a five-day take-home exam and a recorded oral presentation for the higher levels (B2-C1). While the oral recordings presented difficulties of technical nature, the take-home exams proved inadequate for language work, as the inability to supervise the students' performances remotely made it difficult to assess the authenticity of their work.

In spite of the generic, as well as the discipline-specific, challenges imposed by COVID-19, staff's response to ERT was remarkably constructive; academics were thrown in at the deep end, and they swam in style.

The ERT-related support began by offering technological guidance to enable academic staff to move their face-to-face teaching to the online environment. This phase was led by a team of faculty-based Digital Learning Directors (DLDs) and a centrally-based team of learning technologists, who looked for effective 'how to' solutions to ensure that teaching could continue in spite of the disruption. Little-to-no considerations were made about the pedagogy of online teaching, thus consolidating the claim that the highly instructional nature of ERT is not comparable to distance education in its true sense.

Soon, it became apparent that some academics responded positively to the centrally-led one-size-fits-all training programme, while many others felt the need for targeted instructions that matched their discipline-specific needs. Thus, a diversified multi-level model was required to provide different types of support.

A granular model was put in place to offer faculty-level, departmental-level, and on-demand individual-level training sessions, as well as daily virtual drop-in time slots to address unplanned requests.

The language centre is again a case in point highlighting the need for purposely designed support. The language teaching model outlined earlier entailed a drastic change in teaching patterns that required bespoke training on tools and practice; particular attention was paid to prepare language tutors and students to manage oral exchanges and presentations online.

In addition to granularity, all levels of training benefited from the academic expertise of the DLDs, who contributed to the planning and delivery of the support programme. In particular, the centrally organised sessions led by members of the central team of learning technologists were rehearsed with the DLDs to ensure that they met the needs and expectations of the academics, and to guarantee a joined-up approach consistent with the local training initiatives.

Three months into the COVID-19 lockdown, a Faculty of Arts unpublished staff survey report (Jarvis, 2020) was conducted in order to:

- identify features of staff's immediate response to the emergency lockdown;
- identify which platforms and tools were used for ERT delivery;
- elicit reflection on, and rate the experience of, transitioning to the online environment;
- rate student engagement, and identify methods to support it;

- consider ways to adapt assessment activities; and
- gather intelligence to inform future steps.

While it is beyond the scope of this reflection to present staff responses in detail, a few emerging themes are worth considering. A significant portion of staff was concerned with improving communication with students and accommodating their teaching to students' needs, bringing EDI concerns to the fore. In terms of level of difficulty related to ERT, on a scale 1 (easy) to 5 (difficult), 2% voted 1; 18% voted 2; 34% voted 3; 29% voted 4; and 16% voted 5.

The most common responses to the question *What worked well?* referred positively to the flexibility of the marriage between Teams and Moodle, and to the benefits of adopting a granular approach: small groups, short recordings, and shorter synchronous sessions.

To the question *What would you do differently?*, most responses mentioned the need to adapt teaching practices to increase student participation and engagement.

The most significant theme emerging from the survey, one that impacted significantly plans for the next phase of COVID-19, was the need for academics to continue to take a pragmatic approach; the need for exemplars, demonstrations of best practice, and practical guidance on how to construct suitable teaching units that combine face-to-face and online delivery scored very highly in the question related to future support.

Informed by the data gathered through the staff survey and building on the intelligence acquired through professional conversations that emerged from the multi-level support plan outlined earlier, a new approach was taken to facilitate new, flexible delivery solutions.

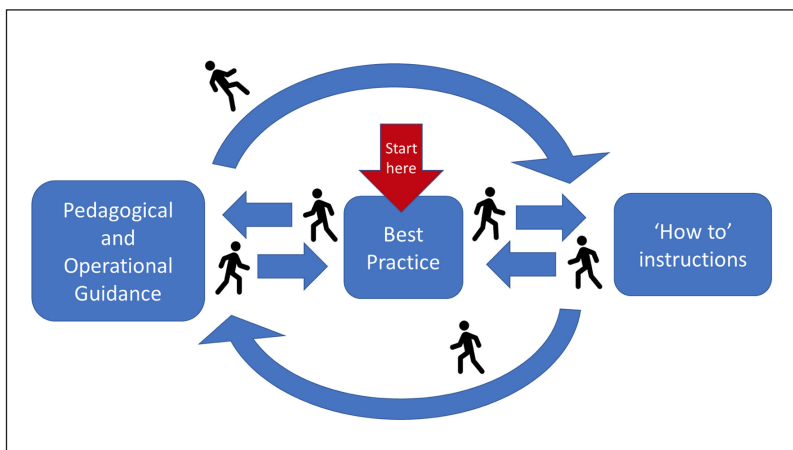
The measures related to the sudden lockdown in March 2020 were replaced by a much more planned transition from ERT to a pedagogically-sound

teaching delivery strategy, that, while still not fully comparable to rigorous distance education, was a step forward in the right direction; it was a strategy that addressed pedagogical principles and solutions for best practice alongside technical and technological considerations.

Thus, introducing a new acronym, COVID-19's second phase saw the emergence of Adapted Remote Teaching (ART) to promote the renovation of teaching content and practices for a mixed-mode delivery, and to set goals that are realistic and achievable in the timeframe within which academics are operating. The overarching objective of ART was to support academic staff in developing their teaching building on existing resources, instead of, as some colleagues put it, 'starting from scratch'.

To support ART, the Faculty of Arts provided academics with a portfolio of examples of best practice connected to 'how to' instructions. These were framed within a set of pedagogical principles concerned with the nature and quality of the online experience of the learners and a set of related operational statements to guide the implementation of these principles. [Figure 1](#) below illustrates the multiple paths onto which academic staff were led.

Figure 1. Support model for ART



The distinctive feature of this approach rests on the centrality of best practice and the significance of providing staff with concrete examples, demonstrations, and illustrations of teaching units constructed in ways that relate directly to their practice, address their concerns, and meet their needs in practical terms. Depending on their needs, individuals are able to follow flexible bi-directional paths to access the guidance that frames the practice and the ‘how to’ instructions required for building their own ART.

The challenge of this approach is to ensure that all possible paths are logically signposted and coherently joined up to ensure consistency and avoid the feeling of disorientation and resource overload. To address it, a website was created to aggregate resources and increase the visibility of the paths illustrated in [Figure 1](#).

In spite of the significant disruption, in COVID-19, as in every cloud, there is a silver lining; ERT revealed the need to review the widespread claim that academics are against change and, in particular, digital change.

The Faculty of Arts staff survey mentioned earlier and similar surveys conducted across all faculties of the university show that, under COVID-19 restrictions, academics embraced changes quickly, flexibly, and effectively. As technology became the only way to ensure the continuation of students’ learning, a remarkable degree of pedagogical and technological creativity came to light. For instance, in addition to the widespread adoption of Teams to deliver live lectures and seminars, most academics readily recorded their lectures, even those who had shown reluctance to do so in the pre-COVID-19 era. The majority of these recordings were then interspersed with different forms of interactivity to ensure student engagement and participation; an aspect of ‘going online’ that most academics claimed they were willing to explore further.

Other examples of pedagogical changes brought on by COVID-19 came from those colleagues who opted to actively involve their students in making the transition to the online environment happen. They established an open dialogue with their students, and empowered them to shape their online learning experience. Reports from these colleagues revealed that this unprecedented student-tutor

relationship based on transparency, communication, and participation facilitated the learning process and enhanced the quality of their own teaching experience.

With this in mind, I am led to reconsider the commonly-held view of change-resistant academics, especially with regard to digital change. My claim is that academic staff is open to adopting technology if and when they see its pedagogical values. ERT has shown that effective digital transformations must be based on the understanding that they bring pedagogical benefits to all constituents, students and staff alike. The error commonly made is to propose the digitalisation of education as a top-down mandate to which academics must adhere in order to satisfy students' needs and expectations.

The ART model illustrated in Figure 1 is consistent with this view; it is believed that taking best practice as the starting point for preparing academics for the second phase of COVID-19 facilitated the understanding of the pedagogical benefits of technology-enhanced teaching by speaking directly to the needs of the individuals.

To conclude, although COVID-19 has caused major disruptions in higher education, the response at the University of Nottingham has been constructive and encouraging, demonstrating the readiness of the institution and individual academics to undertake new pedagogical paths. In this light, it is hoped that this short reflection will contribute to the discourse around digital education during and beyond COVID-19.

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