

6 Teaching and learning post pandemic

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Abstract

This article aims to offer one perspective on ways that Lancaster University supported its staff in the rapid shift to online teaching and learning in the midst of a global pandemic. The approach centred around the upskilling of staff, with mixed engagement across the suite of support tools and resources, which can be compared to similar situations in the wider Higher Education (HE) sector. A focus on the future of curriculum design and the associated requirements at an institutional- and sector-wide level is addressed in relation to the opportunities and challenges with which we are faced.

Keywords: digital teaching, pedagogy, online learning, digital curriculum.

When HE institutions (and effectively the entire education sector) went into lockdown, there was an immediate and emergency response to shift to an online delivery model for the remaining timetabled academic year. At Lancaster University, this brought about a dramatic shift in the traditional teaching and learning approaches that dominated the institution. The *COVID-19 Online Teaching and Learning Community* was set up using Microsoft Teams with the intention of being a rapid-response support mechanism for staff who would have a range of questions around both technical and pedagogic approaches to the new delivery model.

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With teaching and assessment being the most challenging scenarios to adapt in the emergency situation, my role as a digital learning facilitator placed me in a position to observe the disparity in the sector's expectations for current pedagogic practices and the level of digital capabilities attained by academic staff, who were expected to effectively shift to online teaching almost overnight. Much of the early research into digital capabilities in HE has focused on the skills and experiences of students with little emphasis on teaching staff, therefore leaving a gap in need of filling at a fast pace, given the unprecedented scenario.

Initially, the majority of queries and posts added by academic staff on the Teams *COVID-19 Online Teaching and Learning Community* group centred around the technical aspects of the technology with which they were being asked to engage. The university produced a Minimum Expectations document, which was intended to give staff a baseline to work from, directing them to institutionally supported technologies with a sound pedagogic underpinning, e.g. lectures broken down into 15-minute pre-recorded videos using one of three institutionally supported tools (Microsoft Stream, eStream, and Panopto). The intent throughout the early phases of the *COVID-19 Online Teaching and Learning Community* was to reframe the technical questions into a more pedagogic discussion to shift the mindset of teaching staff. This worked at times, with some staff taking on the pedagogy-first approach to learning design. Yet, the majority were still in fire-fighting mode, wanting quick solutions to the more technical aspects of their work with which they were unfamiliar. Who can blame them? The staff were thrust into a scenario where their day-to-day teaching practices and competence was completely turned upside down. [Jisc's \(2019\)](#) digital experience insights survey highlighted that 74% of HE teaching staff had never taught in an online environment, with only 27% suggesting they had received guidance about the digital skills they are expected to have as a teacher. Aware of the clear need for staff support, Lancaster University created and facilitated the *How to teach online* course, which was delivered over three weeks with live sessions, asynchronous discussions, and pre-designated reading and revision materials. 64 staff (5%) participated in the course over two cycles of delivery. When compared to the 1,190 full-time academic staff, 5% of the staff seems somewhat insignificant, especially when compared to the sector average of 74% who have

not experienced online teaching. The feedback from those participating in the two cycles was complimentary, yet the overall impact when looking at the scale of attendance is disappointing. Although the quick shift to online delivery meant that more, if not all, staff had now experienced online delivery, it remained more of a 'lift and shift' approach. Standard approaches were to be over-reliant on the virtual learning environment, which at Lancaster University is Moodle, placing the focus on students accessing reading and on a heavily asynchronous approach to their learning.

When the impact that COVID-19 has had on changing the immediate landscape of HE teaching, learning, and assessment is considered, it is difficult to ignore the levels of teaching staff's competence in both designing and delivering a more digitally-centric/enabled curriculum. The institutional focus of online self-study courses has historically been aimed at the administrative functions of the various tools available, with 31% of the 7,816 courses (circa August 2019) available at Lancaster University completed by staff. Additionally, teaching-specific professional development aligns with the Higher Education Act (HEA) fellowship routes and the institution's *Post Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice* programme, which are limited in their focus on digital education and TEL. My role as a digital learning facilitator is aimed at bridging the gap between the teaching and the technology, and allows me to have a holistic overview of skills and confidence levels when it comes to TEL and curriculum design. I have seen, first hand, the chasm of the digital skills gap and the disparity between those comfortable and innovative in their approaches to Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) and curriculum design for the 2020/21 academic year and those who, with weeks to go until the start of the academic year, were still lacking the basic design and practical skills to create an engaging experience in what is sure to have been a challenging time for students and staff alike. Although the institution created numerous support approaches to bridge the gap between the innovators and those more accustomed to traditional analogue approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment, the issue persists. I have been enthused by the engagement of some academic staff who really focused their summer on upskilling as much as possible, attending various development opportunities, and reaching out for support and guidance. Yet there are still large numbers

of staff who remain of concern, yet to engage with the resources afforded to them, potentially going into the new academic year with the mentality that the emergency remote shift may be considered an example of good practice and will only be accepted as a temporary measure for teaching students in the year ahead.

Is this then a watershed moment for digital pedagogy? I believe it can be, but only if we leave behind the ‘quick fix’ approach, and stop seeing digital education forevermore as the back-up when all else fails. What we have now is an opportunity to enter a prolonged dialogue with senior institutional figures and sector leaders to underline the importance of future-proofing our approach to teaching, learning, and assessment.

Entering an environment where the traditional lecture in a large lecture theatre is almost incomprehensible and logistically challenging, we may have missed a real opportunity to redefine what HE education can be. At Lancaster University, the guidance to staff for a successful transition to online or a blended delivery model was to have lectures pre-recorded and broken down into 15-minute bitesize chunks. It is agreed that this seems more suitable to digital learning than the longwinded 60-minute recordings; however, a fundamental rethink on the pedagogic purpose of the lecture was not engaged in. Assessment proved a particularly demanding issue, in which rapid decisions had to be made and assessment tasks revised and migrated online, which impacted the assessment methods used and the nature of feedback given. Longstanding issues surrounding the provision of timely and effective feedback to students prior to COVID-19 exist, yet students’ thinking is often dominated by assessment and marks, rather than feedback and developmental impact. Contemporary research points towards a need to change the educational practices to focus on assessment *for* learning, opposed to assessment *of* learning, which is prevalent in the sector; however, the fallout from the pandemic has yet to really impact this. Educators are often hesitant to alter formal assessments, such as examinations and summative tests, because changing these practices places demands on time, energy, and resources.

Reshaping teaching, learning, and assessment in the HE sector is no easy task, yet, with collective buy-in and a genuine focus on student development and

shift away from external metrics and league tables, I believe it can be done. A starting point for all new courses and re-validation of existing programmes should be a hybrid-first model. By this, I mean developing a type of curriculum that is multifaceted and effective across both online and face-to-face delivery. It is unlikely that this pandemic will be the only major hurdle we have to face as a sector in the coming years, so starting the process now is vital. The technology and digital infrastructure available now offer opportunities for authentic assessment and feedback practices to be embedded in the curriculum, connecting the digital classroom beyond the confines of the physical classroom or campus.

Technology in education is often seen as a management tool, serving a purpose of maintaining records, etc., but there is so much more to it. We now have the capacity to integrate 21st century skills and graduate attributes into the design of learning and really prepare students for the world after HE. To achieve this, a real determination is required to support teaching and support staff by equipping them with the relevant skills and training. Having self-help guides, tutorials, and short courses are a great start to this process, but digital pedagogy must be given the same prevalence and respect as traditional face-to-face teaching. An example to kickstart this would be for the UK Professional Standards Framework for supporting teaching and learning to progress on from asking for cases of the ‘use and value of appropriate learning technologies’ forming part of the HEA fellowship process and, instead, align this more throughout the criteria when discussing learning design, evidence-informed approaches, and the engagement with continuing professional development, which often leads to a subject-specific focus. Additionally, a rethink of assessment approaches that are more incremental throughout an academic year and not so summatively loaded would encourage innovation in learning design.

A shift in feedback methods which utilise the technological affordances beyond simply electronic text and upload is also a fundamental requirement. Audio and audio-visual feedback have been seen to have positive implications on students’ engagement and understanding, yet fail to be widely used in HE. Engaging students in dialogue and creating a rapport through technology is possible, but often avoided by staff due to the lack of digital skills or fear of the unknown.

Many institutions are trapped in a cycle of being ‘comparable’ and ‘benchmarked’ against similar institutions, but neglect their opportunities to innovate, lead, and develop. I believe that the most successful universities emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic will be those that reacted quickly to put measures in place to plan for a changed environment post pandemic. Those that are still hoping to return to the ‘old normal’ will be shocked and saddened at the realisation that the old normal does not exist; the sector and educational landscape have changed forever. Now they must decide if they will embrace or fight against that change.

In regard to the specific case of Lancaster University’s *COVID-19 Online Teaching and Learning Community*, its success as an efficient and effective method of dissemination and support has led to the community being rebranded the digital education network. It continues to offer support and guidance, as well as structured webinars and training sessions around digital teaching practices. In addition to this, the rapid creation of an ‘embrace digital’ website has offered staff a range of guidance and support for digital practice in the short- and medium-term future starting from 2020/21. A core feature within this is the creation of ‘teaching formulas’ which are guides of effective pedagogy, practices, and resources with step-by-step instructions for self-directed learning. In the current situation, the beliefs of post-digital scholars (Bayne & Jandrić, 2017; Feenberg, 2019, p. 8; Jandrić et al., 2018) that there is no longer a binary separation between the digital and physical world, with the two entwined in our everyday lives, is becoming ever more real.

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