Pivoting in a pandemic: Promoting socially critical learning in virtual delivery of a large introductory social psychology module

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Restrictions on in-person teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic severely challenged higher education practices worldwide. While didactic delivery of course content is easily achievable with virtual teaching technologies, promoting critical engagement with this material can be more difficult, particularly with classes of larger size and lower experience. Yet despite these practical challenges, for teachers of social psychology the pandemic context offered an unprecedented pedagogical opportunity to highlight both the relevance and limitations of social psychological research for tackling societal challenges. This paper outlines a strategy developed to sustain socially critical learning objectives within remote delivery of a large introductory social psychology module. This revolved around establishing asynchronous, peer-led online discussion forums wherein students independently considered how the concepts they encountered in weekly pre-recorded lectures could be applied to understand societal responses to the pandemic. The present article describes the structure of this pedagogical activity and the benefits it offered to students, teaching staff and the wider community.
Keywords: *Covid-19; pandemic; virtual learning; remote learning; critical engagement; social psychology.*

Introduction

RESTRICTIONS on in-person teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic severely challenged higher education practices worldwide (Izumi et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2020). While remote online lectures may be sufficient for didactic delivery of course material, the key index of an effective curriculum is not mere knowledge transfer, but student engagement (Barnett & Coate, 2004). Cultivating and monitoring critical engagement with course material can be difficult via virtual instruction, particularly with classes of larger size and lower levels of experience. This paper outlines a strategy developed to sustain socially critical learning objectives within remote delivery of a large introductory social psychology module.

Background

Module structure and content

PSY10080 Introduction to Social Psychology is a five-credit module that runs over one 12-week semester in University College Dublin, Ireland. The module has capacity for 190 students. Approximately half the class are 1st year B.A./B.Sc./H.Dip. Psychology students for whom the module is mandatory; the remainder come from programmes across the university, who select PSY10080 as an optional or elective module. The module is a Stage 1 offering, meaning most students are in their first year of university study. Moreover, as the module runs in the Autumn semester, for most students PSY10080 is among the very first university classes they experience.

PSY10080 introduces students to key topics, theories and methods in the field of social psychology. The module syllabus covers (in order): attitudes, persuasion, person perception, attribution, social influence, group processes, social identity, intergroup relations, improving intergroup relations, crowd psychology, prosocial behaviour, attraction and relationships, gender, language and communication, and cultural psychology. Prior to the advent of Covid-19, this content was delivered in 20 bi-weekly 50-minute lectures and assessed via a formative

(ungraded) online multiple-choice quiz, a mid-semester 1000-word essay (worth 40 per cent of module grade) and a final one-hour exam (60 per cent of module grade).

Teaching objectives and approach

While PSY10080's primary function is to familiarise students with seminal and contemporary studies in social psychology, it is also designed to achieve the overarching aim of fostering a 'socially critical' style of student thinking. The socially critical mode of curriculum design 'seeks to develop a critical consciousness in students so that they become aware of the present ills of society and are motivated to alleviate them' (Toohey, 1999, p.63). The goal is that students leave the module with not just an understanding of core social psychological concepts, but an ability to marshal this knowledge to analyse and intervene in real-world societal challenges – in other words, that students are taught not just 'what to think' but also 'how to think'. This is particularly urgent in a world of increasing environmental and socio-political instability, witnessing a global turn to populist and authoritarian movements, where citizens who can think critically about the social psychological processes that form our societies are vitally important. The module aims to release a cohort of students with conceptual and analytical skills that can help them make meaningful contributions to ongoing societal challenges.

In PSY10080, the overarching aim of promoting socially critical thinking is operationalised into two interlinked learning objectives: (i) fostering independent critical evaluation skills, and (ii) encouraging application of academic concepts to concrete real-world contexts. These two objectives are mutually reinforcing. Cultivation of students' critical thinking skills – defined as 'purposeful, self-regulatory judgement that results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanations of the considerations on which that judgement is based' (Abrami et al., 2015, p.275) – is a well-established goal across higher education generally (Facione, 1990; Halpern, 1999) and in psychology programs specifically (Dunn et al., 2008). Meta-analysis of the educational evidence base confirms that critical skills can be measurably increased by targeted educational strategies (Abrami et al., 2015). One effective route towards promoting students' ability to critically evaluate the quality of scholarly arguments involves exposure to authentic problems and examples (Abrami et al., 2015). This is particularly appropriate when teaching social psychology, whose research programmes inherently engage societal challenges such as conflict, discrimination and inequality. Application of social psychological theories to relevant real-world cases facilitates critical appraisal of these theories' scope, validity and explanatory power. Moreover, this applied thinking galvanises informed critical appraisal of societal events, as well as of the academic constructs themselves. Driven by an ethos of scholarship as citizenship, and conviction in the relevance of psychological knowledge for tackling cultural, political and environmental challenges, PSY10080 aims to empower students to be critical consumers and producers of social psychological ideas.

Challenges and opportunities of the pandemic

Due to national restrictions and persistently high Covid-19 case-rates, University College Dublin was unable to facilitate in-person teaching in the 2020/2021 academic year. As a result, I as module coordinator was obliged to redesign PSY10080 for exclusively virtual delivery. After balancing a range of considerations including institutional guidelines, instructor and student convenience, accessibility and inclusion, and safeguarding against further Covid-19-related interruptions, I selected pre-recorded lectures as my primary form of content delivery. Two pre-recorded lectures were uploaded to the university virtual learning environment (VLE) each week, punctuated by intermittent live-streamed sessions to address student questions. I was confident that this approach

preserved the ability to achieve the module's basic learning objective of familiarising students with seminal and contemporary studies in social psychology. However, I was less certain that virtual lectures alone could effectively achieve the module's secondary aim of cultivating a socially critical style of thinking. In previous years, I targeted evaluation and application skills through in-class discussion that unpicked the strengths and limitations of research presented and its relevance to topical real-world examples. This is consistent with meta-analytic evidence that critical skills are best developed by providing opportunity for dialogue and exposing students to relevant problems and examples; moreover, the effectiveness of these two approaches may be amplified when they are combined (Abrami et al., 2015). In redesigning PSY10080 for virtual delivery, I was not confident that in-class dialogue would be successful in live online sessions with ~200 participants, most of whom were new university entrants ending a six-month hiatus from formal education (since Irish secondary schools were closed in March 2020). Moreover, I was concerned that concentrating learning opportunities within live classes would compound inequalities of internet or computer access, and further disadvantage any students with Covid-19 symptoms or caring responsibilities.

Despite the practical challenges the pandemic posed to dialogically-based learning, I was conscious that the ecological context of the pandemic offered an unprecedented opportunity to cultivate skills of critical evaluation and real-world application. As many have noted, social psychology is highly relevant to understanding individual and group responses to the Covid-19 crisis (Bavel et al., 2020; Jetten et al., 2020). Indeed, almost all topics covered in the PSY10080 syllabus raised immediate implications or questions related to the pandemic, for example:

- What factors determine people's attitudes to government restrictions?
- How can health authorities use techniques of persuasion to promote social distancing?
- What attributions do people make when explaining the behaviour of those who break public health guidelines?
- Might social influence processes influence people's likelihood of wearing facemasks in public places?
- Has the pandemic affected intergroup relations between groups defined by (for example) age, nationality or ethnicity?
- What factors may have prompted (or inhibited) demonstration of prosocial behaviour during the pandemic?
- How did processes of attraction and relationships change during lockdown periods?
- Have the restrictions introduced to deal with the virus impacted people differently depending on their gender?
- Can cultural psychology help explain regional differences in compliance and incidence rates?

Thus, the pandemic context offered an excellent opening to highlight both the relevance and limitations of social psychological research for addressing real societal challenges. To capitalise on this opportunity and compensate for the paucity of real-time contact, I developed a new learning and assessment activity to complement virtual lectures: weekly online Discussion Groups. The Discussion Groups facilitated asynchronous, peer-led discussion about how the concepts students encountered in the weekly lectures could be applied to understand the evolving public health crisis.

Discussion groups

Discussion Groups took place on Brightspace, University College Dublin's VLE. At the start of the semester, I used Brightspace's 'Discussions' functionality to randomly allocate students into 20 Discussion Groups of nine to 10 members. Within each Discussion Group, I created seven forums corresponding to seven weeks of lectures. Each forum was scheduled to become available at 9.00am on the relevant Monday and close

at 11.30pm the following Sunday. Students could only view the threads generated within their own Discussion Group.

In the first week of online classes, students were introduced to the structure of Brightspace Discussions and told that their contributions to their Discussion Group should consider how the concepts they encountered in each week's lectures might be relevant to the Covid-19 pandemic. Students were expected to make one substantive (~100 words) contribution to their group each week. Students were told that their contributions could be informal (i.e. no need for academic references) and could either introduce original ideas or respond to threads raised by other students.

To ensure broad participation in the Discussion Groups, I made them a graded assessment component. However, I was concerned that 'raising the stakes' of this activity would undermine the Discussion Groups' intended function of providing a relaxed, non-judgemental space for students to collaboratively digest and reflect on that week's module content. Therefore, I minimised the weighting of this assessment component in the overall module grade calculations (10 per cent) and informed students that Discussion Group grades would be based on individuals' frequency rather than quality of contributions. Thus, every student who produced a contribution in all seven weeks would receive an A+ in this assessment component, irrespective of the quality of ideas they generated.

Benefits to students

As most students were in their first semester of study, this cohort entered the module largely unfamiliar with the general expectations of university education, as well as virtual learning tools specifically. In the first live online class where the module structure was introduced, students expressed some trepidation around the Discussion Groups task, particularly in relation to the degree of independent thinking necessary to self-generate connections between lecture material and the specific real-world context of the pandemic. To allay concerns, I produced a clear guidelines document (see Supplementary Material) that included hypothetical examples of the form and style of contributions that were expected. At the end of each week, I sent an encouraging all-class email that highlighted good examples of ideas that had been introduced in forums that week. This weekly email validated the effort students had invested, helped students calibrate their understandings of the type of content that was expected, and exposed students to high-quality ideas produced by peers in other Discussion Groups.

The Discussion Groups afforded numerous benefits to students:

1. Pre-recorded online lectures make students entirely responsible for managing their own learning. This can be challenging for new university entrants, particularly when learning needs must be balanced against the stressors of a global pandemic (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Mishra et al., 2020). The Discussion Groups embedded accountability for engaging with course material each week, since viewing that week's lectures was a pre-requisite for writing a contribution. VLE records showed student access of pre-recorded lectures occurred relatively continuously throughout the semester, in comparison with other modules which showed sharp peaks in lecture access around mid- and end-semester assessments.
2. Requiring students to think beyond the material provided in lectures helped these new university students develop their academic independence. Student-centred learning requires encouraging the proactive construction of knowledge by the student, rather than passive reception of information imparted by the teacher (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). The Discussion Groups supported students in thinking independently and collaboratively, in a low-stakes and non-judgemental space, about how the scholarly concepts they were encountering might

relate to real-world problems. In accordance with the principle of assessment for learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005; National Forum for the Enhancement Of Teaching and Learning In Higher Education, 2017), the Discussion Groups helped propel students into new, self-identified frontiers of knowledge beyond that delivered in the course material.

3. The Discussion Groups served a scaffolding function by affording students a 'sandpit' space to develop their skills in drawing links between academic concepts and real-world phenomena. Encouraging students to connect scholarly material with concrete topical examples rooted in personal and collective experience facilitates deeper engagement with and understanding of otherwise abstract concepts (Chew et al., 2018). There was thematic continuity between the Discussion Groups' focus on Covid-19 and the final essay (worth 50 per cent of overall module grade), which required students to explore how three concepts from the module can explain societal responses to the pandemic. This 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 1996; Cohen, 1987) meant that students were supported in germinating ideas and practicing written communication skills, in preparation for their higher-weighted final assignment.
4. Maintaining a consistent thematic focus throughout fostered critical evaluation skills by affording students a common yardstick against which to compare different concepts. The pandemic functioned as a 'test-case' to appraise different concepts and theories. As the semester progressed, students did not restrict their contributions to discussing isolated concepts from that week's self-contained lectures, but began spontaneously contrasting the relative explanatory value of different concepts encountered across the module. For example, students initiated lively debates about whether implementing stronger punishments, such as fines or criminal convictions, would deter people from breaking Covid-19 rules via operant conditioning, or whether punishment would have the opposite behavioural consequence by inducing reactance effects. As learning is stimulated by cognitive conflict (de Grave et al., 1996), considering how different social psychological perspectives can posit competing predictions about the same phenomenon should provoke meaningful engagement with the material.
5. For students, one challenge in virtual learning is benchmarking progress relative to one's peers. Peer feedback is a valuable learning opportunity that can complement teacher evaluations (Reinholz, 2016). Usual processes of peer-to-peer learning, which may include informal conversations about individuals' assessment approaches and resultant grades, are less available when students are denied casual on-campus interaction. The Discussion Groups exposed students to the range of conceptual skills and written expression displayed by their peers, allowing students to infer standards against which they could self-evaluate their own progress (O'Neill, 2015).
6. An important casualty of virtual learning, particularly for new university entrants, is the ability to forge friendships and group identities. Beyond the importance of social connections for student welfare and adjustment to the university environment (Awang et al., 2014; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001), stronger student social identities are linked with deeper approaches to learning and higher student performance (Bliuc et al., 2011).The casual and collaborative conversations of the Discussion Groups provided a space for students to develop familiarity and relationships with a small subset of their peers. Though the initial guidance document (see Supplementary Material) established some basic 'ground rules' for the forums (e.g. to be polite and respectful of peers), it was interesting to see each Discussion Group develop its own distinctive communication style as

relationships between members progressed, with some retaining formal letter-style writing conventions and others more light-hearted and humorous. Universally, students were encouraging and appreciative of their peers' contributions.

Benefits to instructor

The redesign of teaching materials that is necessary in 'pivoting' to online lectures involves a substantial time commitment from instructors (Izumi et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2020). Many solutions developed to sustain student engagement in remote delivery, such as scheduling multiple additional small-group meetings or increasing points of assessment with personalised feedback, further compound the demands on staff resources. In my experience, facilitating structured Discussion Groups for PSY10080 proved a simple and time-efficient complement to online lectures. For the instructor, they added value in several ways:

1. As previously mentioned, it is difficult to ensure consistent engagement with pre-recorded lectures (particularly during a global pandemic that places many other demands on student time and attention). The Discussion Groups afforded an efficient means of tracking meaningful engagement with (rather than merely downloads of) the two online lectures on a weekly basis. Wide participation (95 per cent of the class) in the Discussion Groups was achieved by making them a graded assessment component.
2. Reading students' weekly contributions helped me continuously evaluate the degree of understanding of module material and identify concepts with which students were struggling. An effective basis for curriculum enhancement is to seek out sources of 'troublesomeness' or impasse where students become 'stuck' (Meyer & Land, 2005). The real-time monitoring afforded by reading Discussion Group material revealed specific areas of difficulty in the curriculum, which had not been apparent in my previous three years of in-person teaching of this module. For example, in the second week of Discussion Groups I noticed that numerous students independently alluded to difficulties understanding attribution theory. This new insight prompted me to reconsider the way that I present this topic. For instance, I have opted to provide more concrete examples of attribution processes and to move this lecture to a later stage of the module, so it can be scaffolded by earlier social psychological concepts that are easier for students to grasp.
3. The Discussion Groups facilitated reciprocal learning, with students volunteering new ideas, perspectives and examples that contributed to the ongoing development of my teaching. Barnett and Coate (2004) argue that an optimally effective curriculum is one that is constantly 'in action' in bidirectional engagement with the different stakeholders, rather than a pre-determined entity that is immune to stakeholder feedback. Ideally, the teacher should learn from the student, as well as vice versa. This is difficult when there is no opportunity to meet students face-to-face. The Discussion Groups' content served as an informal and timely source of student feedback that helped me appraise student experience of the module as it progressed throughout the semester.
4. Reading students' contributions offered some sense of the individuality and personalities of this large class who I had never met in person. Many students drew links between lecture concepts and events from their own lives, for instance examples of responses to the pandemic in their workplaces or friendship groups. I found that this increased my own personal engagement with the module by humanising what were otherwise mere names on a computer screen. Additionally, anecdotal insights into the variety of experiences of the pandemic among students, many of

whom mentioned shielding vulnerable family members or working in front-line service jobs, afforded me greater sensitivity towards the difficult contexts in which students were attempting to meet learning requirements.

5. Grades for this component, weighted at 10 per cent of the total module grade, were efficiently and transparently calculated (7 contributions = A+, 6 contributions = B+, 5 contributions = C+ etc.; letter grades were later converted to grade points for overall module grade calculation using University College Dublin's standard Grade Point Average conversion scale, which assigns a calculation point of 20.5 to A+, 17.5 to B+, 14.5 to C+ etc.). While participation-based assessment may have led to some grade inflation, with 58 per cent of the class receiving an A+ and 14 per cent a B+ for this component, I judged this acceptable given the detrimental effects that pandemic-related stressors and restrictions could have on academic achievement. Converting overall letter grades to grade points (using the institutional grade conversion scale) reveals that the 2020 class average for this module (M=3.31, SD=.39) was equivalent to the previous year (M=3.24, SD=.5), $t(354)=1.47$, p=.14.

Benefits to wider community

Society has a stake in ensuring the university education that it supports produces graduates with the skills necessary to contribute to social, cultural and economic development. The Discussion Groups exercise raised awareness in this cohort of how social psychology offers an evidence-base to inform critical appraisal of and intervention in real societal problems. Behavioural science has been repeatedly invoked in political and public discourse during the pandemic, but numerous scholars have castigated the frequent misrepresentation of psychological knowledge – for example, use of the concept of 'behavioural fatigue' to justify delays in implementing lockdown policies (Reicher & Drury, 2021). By embedding a structured focus on linking peer-reviewed research with Covid-19 applications, the Discussion Groups offered a platform to counterbalance such distortions of psychological principles. As approximately half of the class were non-Psychology students, this introductory module represented a particular opportunity to build 'psychological literacy' (Hulme, 2014; Mair et al., 2013; McGovern et al., 2010) in the university community.

Furthermore, concentrating the Discussion Groups on Covid-19 offered an opportunity to reinforce student awareness of the importance of public health guidelines. While the module was running in Autumn 2020, national public discourse had portrayed young people as key agents of viral transmission. As the academic year resumed in September, reports of house-parties or large outdoor gatherings of students sparked widespread condemnation in national media (McGrath, 2020). Yet in the Discussion Group contributions, accounts of disregard for pandemic guidelines were extremely rare: any disclosure of personal non-compliance was volunteered in the context of self-reflection on the contextual and psychological factors that may have contributed to negatively-valued acts of rule-breaking. By focusing student discussions on Covid-19, the Discussion Groups exposed students to norms of compliance among their peer-group. Social norms are a key mechanism promoting Covid-19 preventive behaviours (Goldberg et al., 2020; Tunçgenç et al., 2021). Moreover, students in the Discussion Groups frequently expressed frustration with their portrayal in public discourse as irresponsible rule-breakers, with intergroup relations research affording them a language to construe their experience of being targeted by stereotyping and prejudice. The Discussion Groups arguably offered students an outlet in which they could elaborate a more positive minority identity, which may have both protected their self-esteem (Porter & Washington, 1993) and encouraged protective behaviours such as mask-

wearing (Jetten et al., 2020).

Risks and challenges

While my experience of incorporating Discussion Groups was largely positive, it was not without challenges. Mandating a consistent focus on Covid-19 throughout the Discussion Groups had certain drawbacks. Students found that some topics lent themselves more to the Covid-19 pandemic than others. For example, several students indicated they found difficulty drawing links between the pandemic and the topics of gender and attraction, and felt that their contributions on these topics were forced or contrived. While encouraging creativity in drawing non-obvious connections is a good pedagogical exercise, some students may have benefited from more freedom in the scope of the Discussion Groups. Moreover, one student expressed that they found the mandated focus on Covid-19 to be demotivating at a time when the pandemic had monopolised almost all areas of life. Affording Discussion Groups more flexibility beyond a single topic may help students adapt their contributions to suit their personal interests and emotional needs.

A further risk of Discussion Groups is the possibility, common to all unmoderated online interaction, that they may become a forum for misinformation, profanity or abuse. Access to the Discussion Groups was restricted to VLE accounts formally enrolled to the module, anonymous contributions were not possible, and students were given ground-rules that specified a code of appropriate communication. While I undertook regular audits of the contributions and detected no inappropriate content, I did not have capacity to screen every contribution in real-time (though this may be feasible with smaller classes or greater teaching resources). Those considering incorporating discussion forums into their own teaching may need to consider likely risks, resources available for content moderation, and institutional advice on liability within the VLE.

Conclusion

Following years of under-exploitation of technology in delivering higher education (Bates & Sangra, 2011), the Covid-19 pandemic has forced educators worldwide to 'pivot' to virtual learning methods. The lessons learned are likely to motivate sustained interest in blended learning approaches, even after in-person teaching becomes once again possible (Mishra et al., 2020). The Discussion Groups exercise described in this article offers a simple, resource-efficient means of pursuing a socially critical approach to teaching social psychology when faced with the challenges of remote delivery, a large class size, and a diverse introductory-level cohort. While the Discussion Groups proved particularly useful in adapting to the unique conditions of teaching a pandemic, they would undoubtedly retain much of their value in a post-pandemic blended learning context. The thematic focus on Covid-19 may be distinctive in the degree it engages almost all social psychological concepts, but there may well be other topical examples (e.g. climate change, race relations, or populist political movements) that have similar scope. The Discussion Groups structure outlined here may have continued utility for instructors seeking to promote critically engaged learning in a pandemic and post-pandemic world.

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