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Community, adaptability, and good judgement: Reflections on creating meaningful, sustainable pedagogy in uncertain times

This reflective piece details aspects of pedagogic good practice prompted by our experiences of developing online learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the exceptional circumstances experienced by universities globally, and given the unprecedented challenges continuing to face educators, new, distinctive methods of delivering a high-quality student experience, to tight time constraints were required. We reflect upon our experiences of engaging in COVID-19 planning, drawing from our substantial knowledge of delivering postgraduate education in the online environment, offering three aspects of good practice (establishing community, adaptability, and good judgement), sometimes taken for granted or overlooked, relevant not only in exceptional circumstances but, as we also suggest in the paper, important to university educators seeking to deliver high-quality, sustainable pedagogy more broadly. The aspects of good practice we outline are mutually reinforcing, unlikely in their own right to deliver the beneficial, sustainable outcomes apparent when embedded in combination.

Keywords: community, adaptability, judgement, uncertainty, sustainable pedagogy

Introduction

This reflective contribution is a distillation of our reflections on aspects of good practice as educators in higher education over the course of both regular, and recent, exceptional times. We consider three aspects of good practice in particular, each of which reinforces or extends the scope and impact of the other: 1) establishing community; 2) adaptability; and, 3) good judgement. The areas of good practice outlined are currently under-explored in the higher education literature or approached as largely technical or procedural concerns where the focus remains predominantly on the technique, skillset, or tools of the educator in a prescriptive mode. The paper is a call for greater consideration of more conversations in the literature about and, ultimately, more and better research into the *process* of delivering high-quality, responsive, and sustainable education suitable for any mode, platform, or societal conditions.

Establishing community

Mutuality and shared understanding are necessary to develop a learning community where students feel confident in sharing ideas, where anxiety or fear of the learning process are minimized (Koziey, 1987; Deed et al., 2014). A significant implication of the COVID-19 lockdown response for students was reduced opportunity for community, with considerably less or no opportunity for physical interaction. Many higher education institutions responded to COVID-19 by implementing hybrid learning modes, providing additional orientation or induction processes to prepare students for changes in delivery, often bespoke to the exceptional conditions. Setting the tone in induction was critical, as was signalling the same in subsequent interactions with students. For us, expressing empathy in the virtual environment (in announcements, discussion posts, synchronous and asynchronous video), and reflecting on similar personal learning experiences, proved highly beneficial in encouraging mutuality amongst our cohorts. Mutuality was also facilitated by, for example, sharing general details about other members of respective cohorts, explaining that others in a cohort are likely to be experiencing similar difficulties, such as where other international students were required to remain in the U.K., isolated from family, and where other students found it challenging to learn given what were unexpected and personally destabilizing circumstances. Mutual and shared understanding of others (Ranson, 1995) facilitated early in a new learning experience began to reduce feelings of isolation or separateness, giving students a sense of commonality or familiarity, which were important resources in re-establishing their place in learning communities.

Effective learning also required a shared or communal understanding not only of the new learning required of students but also of any pedagogic mode underpinning learning. Students need to enhance understanding both of what to learn and how they should engage in learning when entering a new or different learning context (Macaskill & Taylor, 2010). The mode we adopted is somewhat atypical in emphasizing high levels of student-owned learning *and* making targeted attempts to reduce the power relations typical of many university learning contexts (Morley, 2003). With regard to the former, providing learners with opportunities to shape their own learning within a well-considered and clearly communicated pedagogy, allowing them to decide how to examine and explore thematics within curricula, was crucial (Moore, 1973). In terms of the latter, it was important that as learning facilitators we took steps to de-emphasize the inevitably hierarchical relationship between us and students.

Adaptability

Creating a truly sustainable pedagogy requires an educational process flexible enough to respond to unanticipated change. In light of enforced lockdowns due to COVID-19, all educators across the globe were forced to quickly adapt to continue delivering programmes and classes from home (Crawford et al., 2020). Many found this challenging, especially those institutions relying on more traditional, rigid, and inflexible pedagogy. Our experience has shown that accepting unanticipated devel-

opments will occur in education, and being flexible enough to respond effectively to them, is fundamental to creating a sustainable learning environment.

Flexible pedagogy can be considered in terms of the teaching environment and location of learning (Jandric & Loretto, 2020), the introduction of new technologies, the variability of ways in which education is consumed (Burge, Gibson, & Gibson, 2012) and the adaptability of resources to suit multiple learning styles (Mainemelis, Boyatzis, & Kolb, 2002; Shamsuddin & Kaur, 2020). It may also encompass institutional changes, impacting the learning outcomes such as those arising from educational accreditations or quality assurance principles. A hybrid learning and teaching approach allows for adaptability in many of these areas. Using online learning tools in addition to face-to-face interaction has been invaluable in difficult times and will undoubtedly become the 'new normal' of education delivery. Hybrid design allows modules and classrooms to be set up more flexibly, and value to be added from new forms of face-to-face interaction. While human contact is not essential for learning to take place, without it students are not provided with a positive experience or an engaging environment; moreover meaningful human interaction is the foundation stone of all positive educational practice. As such, materials which are flexible enough to be used remotely, interactively, or in person are essential to allow for changes in circumstance.

Good judgement

Working on how and when to invest in community or building flexibility into our pedagogy requires good judgement.¹ Facilitating community or being responsive to student needs in an unworkable or tactless manner, insensitive to cultural or personal circumstances facing learners for example, and/or at an inappropriate time, is likely to create additional barriers leading to learner disengagement, undermining what may otherwise appear to be effective learning strategies. From experience, good judgement requires genuine attentiveness to student experiences, remaining willing to reorient pedagogy as a result, arranging regular interaction with learners, seeking to receive and respond to tactile, timely feedback from them. It also requires that we remain attentive to the impact of our pedagogy on students, working to enhance their learning experience and to improve their futures (Biesta, 2015).

Good judgement is also required with regard to adapting resources and making them more manageable and accessible, not just in the present but as they evolve in future. Innovations in technology mean how we consume knowledge will continue to change, with students accessing educational resources in a variety of locations and times (Abdulqader & Almunsour, 2020). Understanding the nature of online learning is important when considering how to leverage virtual learning environments for fully online, hybrid, or on-campus learning whether during unprecedented periods of change or otherwise. This can be either in person or through cloud platforms with live, interactive video discussions and lectures to explain and debate topics. Good judgement in this area can be aided by tailored feedback mechanisms to understand how specific cohorts of students are engaging with the materials and tasks. This is impor-

tant for continuous improvement or future proofing, to ensure that learning outcomes are being met, but also to fulfil our commitments to diverse cohorts of learners.

Conclusion

The three aspects of good practice outlined in this paper, stimulated by unprecedented circumstances, are intended to provoke a different way of thinking about our engagement with communities of learners, to strive for vibrant pedagogy with a student-led ethos. Recognizing the importance of and seeking to enhance the community of learning, being responsive and adaptable, and remaining cognizant of the need for good judgement, we have argued, are necessary pillars. Subsequent questions arise for us including:

- how do we know when community, adaptability, and good judgement have been achieved in a learning context?
- to what extent can we develop the professional traits necessary for educators to establish community, adaptability, and good judgement?

These and other related questions are important in any context but there is particular urgency in addressing them now given the complex nature of higher education in the U.K. and indeed globally, and in light of the fact that the scene before us is characterized by the unanticipated, unpredictable, and increasingly intense.

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Notes

- 1 When the question of judgement is considered in the learning and teaching literature, it invariably centres on procedural judgement, typically in respect of assessment of student learning (e.g. Sridharan, Tai, & Boud, 2019). Our concern is with a broader understanding of good judgement, in pedagogic design and implementation generally, whereby educators reach decisions on learning that are contextually and temporally appropriate for their cohorts of learners in the circumstances experienced.