Navigating pedagogical challenges through authentic pedagogy during the transition to online learning amid COVID-19

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Abstract COVID-19 has required a significant and abrupt shift in the way we teach and learn in the field of Higher Education (HE). This paper explores an innovation in pedagogy in HE as lecturers and students transition from learning on campus to learning online. The transition to online learning, in this context, is problematised within the broader context of digital exclusion and the significance of foregrounding students' needs. The reflections presented in this paper derive from a re-envisioned undergraduate final year research project module delivered to a large diverse cohort of students (100+). In this module we applied premises underpinning authentic pedagogy, bringing the challenges faced by learners to the foreground whilst privileging student agency, autonomy, and competency. An element of the module previously delivered through in-person group supervisions was reconfigured into one-hour on line workshops structured through a cycle of opportunities for participation. In our reflections we identify that students' agency, the promotion of social interaction, and continuity in pedagogy were key elements in enabling the formation of a community of learning.

Key words COVID-19; Higher Education; authentic pedagogy; undergraduate research dissertation; academic skills; emergency remote teaching.

The problem

The global pandemic both revealed and exacerbated the many social injustices of our social living (Blundell et al., 2020; Barnard, 2021). In academia, the pandemic has disrupted the experiences of students and staff in different ways, with some common denominators. Pre-existing inequalities have been amplified and relate to the first order digital divide: the access to devices and connection for online scholarship (Dewan and Riggins, 2005). COVID-19 led to 'emergency remote teaching environments' (Whittle et al., 2020: 311) in which institutions,

lecturers and students found themselves repositioned into the digital space beyond the teaching and learning of in person participation on the campus (Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021). Emergent knowledge from empirical research gives some insight into the problematic aspects of this new situation for students; they reported being overwhelmed by the expectation of autonomy in learning, an absence of social contact, insufficient internet access and issues arising from the concurrence of the learning and the home space (Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021).

As lecturers in Early Childhood Studies, we have co-delivered the final year undergraduate research project module together for four years, also in collaboration with other colleagues. Our pedagogy is informed by action research focused on different elements of the teaching and learning (Robson, 2021) and is conceptualised on the theoretical grounds of community of practice (Wenger, 1998) where students become members of a community of researchers.

Module leadership in the context of face-to-face delivery provided a legacy of knowledge, consolidating specific expectations and assumptions on what would constitute students' engagement and participation. Faced with the need to redesign elements of the module for online delivery, we remained aware of the necessity to consider factors that would impact on our and students' capacity for engagement. This process revealed the need to disrupt not only our pedagogy, but also our understanding of how students engage in learning. This has generated a critical awareness of what we have come to understand as a void in knowledge specifically on the forms of participation adopted by students in online learning.

Higher Education (HE) institutions in England are required by statutory regulations to devise an Access and Participation Plan for the period 2020/21 to 2024/25. This plan includes targets to reduce gaps between different groups of students relating to access, success and progression (Office for Students, 2018). The diverse cohort of students on our final year undergraduate module are the focus of our institution's targets to close the attainment gaps that exist between White and Black full-time undergraduate students as well as White and Asian full-time undergraduate students (University of East London, 2020).

Beyond this institutional plan our knowledge of students also indicated that most had multiple roles – they were parents or carers and in employment. Significantly, emerging analysis on the impacts of the pandemic have revealed the multiple negative impacts of COVID-19 on Black and Minority Ethnic communities in England (Campbell, 2020). Previous studies have highlighted the complex ways in which students from disadvantaged groups already experience challenges in navigating their learner journey, including, for example, adapting to new social groups and being an independent learner (Farenga, 2018) or the legacy of negative past educational experiences (Burnell, 2015). Some analysis suggests (Traxler, 2016) that previous initiatives to apply Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in HE (e.g. lecture capture or the flipped classroom via virtual learning environment) have been used uncritically by institutions and not acknowledged the emotional, social and cultural factors of learning on campus that are valued by students and central to their academic formation.

The undergraduate research project module was originally structured with four elements: lecture, group supervision, consultation, and guided independent learning. Most elements were sustainable through online delivery with minor adjustments. However, the group supervision was problematic as it aimed to support the formation of students as autonomous researchers through a process of in-person social participation within a community of practice (Robson, 2021). The online learning environment inhibited opportunities for the application of research skills through peer learning. In reconfiguring an alternative to the group supervision, we adapted our pedagogy so that it was relevant and realisable to the new social environment of the online delivery, where social interactions in learning were impacted by the digital divide (Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021).

The solution

In the repositioning of pedagogy, we were informed by a critical awareness of how COVID-19 had affected students; we understood that as lecturers we conceptualise our work in a specific context and that approaches to teaching are not static

(Lindblom-Ylänne et al., 2006). Openness to a change in our teaching forms part of an authentic pedagogy where students are positioned as collaborators and self-authors within an evolving community of researchers, rather than recipients of knowledge. Kreber (2010) cites Baxter Magolda's (1999) three premises of a pedagogy that supports self-authorship: 'students are validated in their ability to know, learning is situated in students' experience and the concept of learning underpinning it is one of mutually constructing meaning' (Kreber, 2010: 173). According to Kreber, authentic pedagogy provides opportunities for students and lecturers to explore knowledge within their academic community. Such a pedagogy is student focused and requires the lecturer to take action that is in the students' interest. In order to implement this change in our teaching in the shift to online learning, seven workshops replaced the group supervisions. They provided opportunities for peer engagement with the parallel goal of developing academic skills and research practices. Each workshop focused on skills relevant to a specific research practice or a section of the dissertation (see Table 1). The workshops lasted one hour and were delivered via an online teaching platform to a large group of students (50+), following a structure (see Figure 1) guided by the premises of authentic pedagogy (Kreber, 2010).

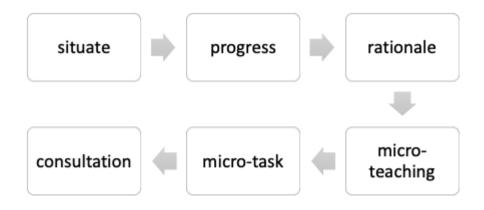| 1	Structuring the literature review chapter
2	Engaging with research methods literature
3	Searching for sources
4	Conducting and writing up analysis
5	Undertaking comparative analysis
6	Reviewing your positionality: reflecting on how my understanding has changed
7	Structuring your abstract

Table 1: Focus of each workshop

Figure 1: Sequence of activities in the workshop

Each workshop followed a consistent sequence of activities tailored to specific academic skills or research practices (see Figure 1). At the beginning of the workshop, we situated the skill/practice within the research process (*situate*). This was followed by an invitation to the students to reflect on their progress and identify achievements *(progress).* After this moment of sharing and reflection, students were re-introduced to the familiar structure of the dissertation, mapping the workshop learning outcomes against specific chapters and consolidating conceptual knowledge of research practice gained from the lectures (*rationale*).

During the in-person group supervisions, the direction of teaching would often travel from the macro (knowledge of research theory and practice) to the micro (application of theory in the individual project). For example, in discussing the literature review, we would introduce brief extracts of prior students' works and invite students to identify features (e.g. analysis, synthesis) which we had previously discussed in lectures. During online workshops we reversed the process, starting from the introduction of a small component of applied research skills to support individual engagement with research practice. The micro-teaching segments provided opportunities for lecturers to model research skills and practice through bitesize components (*micro-teaching*). In the closing segment of the micro-teaching, students were invited to trial the application of the skills or practices on a

small scale with the intention that they would reflect on their learning in their research journal (*micro-tasks*). Each workshop was accompanied by supplementary resources for students to action the task independently in their own time and was followed by the opportunity of bookable individual sessions, where students could seek clarification and guidance on the research skills or practice (*consultation*).

Critical reflection and learning

In this section of the paper, we explore themes emerging from our initial evaluation of the workshop as an intervention reflecting on our pedagogy as we adapted to the online environment.

Social interaction within the community

A key aim of the workshops was to actively engage students in applying research skills in practice; this was informed by the authentic pedagogy premise of students and lecturers mutually constructing meaning (Kreber, 2010). Initially we intended not to record the workshop sessions, but we soon realised that this decision was mostly informed by our own assumption and expectation that students would be able to engage synchronously. However, this did not reflect the reality of students' circumstances, as many had caring responsibilities (Górska et al., 2021) or no access to IT equipment for personal and exclusive use (Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021). A further expectation we held related to student usage of the video, audio and break out room features in the online platform. Many students exercised their agency in choosing not to participate via these functions. Factors affecting students' ability to participate included the lack of access to an individual device, the quality of internet connection and a private study space in their home. Students' limited use of the video feature in the sessions also left us in a position of vulnerability as we did not have access to visual or gestural feedback from students, a crucial element constituting our void of knowledge on students' preferred forms of participation in the online space.

Consequently, we reconfigured opportunities for students to engage actively and interact with one another in the workshop, informed by the recent work of Byrne (2020) on students'

engagements on online forums. We encouraged the use of the chat feature on the online platform as space for peer dialogues and interactions, both via messaging and the use of emojis. In workshops, students' contributions to the chat provided opportunities for formative assessment. Students shared their understanding of research concepts via brief written tasks and engaged in peer review exercises. However, our reflection shows that we became dependent on the chat function as an indicator of students' willingness to participate, and reveals our exclusion of other forms of participation, such as silent reflection.

Continuity in teaching and learning

In response to the continuous sense of uncertainty for students in Higher Education in England during the pandemic and in relation to their novel experience as undergraduate researchers, we aimed to promote feelings of containment (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1983) through anchoring our teaching on familiar and recurrent themes in the module. Continuity was provided for students through our messaging, our boundaries, in the structure of the workshop and in the repeated emphasis on their development as independent scholars. For example, the structure of the dissertation, presented as a graphic at each workshop during the *rationale* segment, provided continuity. Students also had the option of revisiting the micro-tasks at their own individual pace. Our emphasis on continuity reflects the process discussed by Whittle et al. (2020) of redesigning teaching and learning in an educational crisis. We observe that such pedagogical practices provided familiarity to students, whilst also valuing their existing knowledge, their progress, and their achievements (Bozalek et al., 2013).

A pedagogical feature in the workshops was the sharing of our own experiences as researchers, highlighting both challenges and learning opportunities from our practice. Our aim was to destabilise the concept of lecturer-expertise, relocating the focus on the significance of reflection on learning and the celebration of individually paced achievement and progress (Alexander, 2017). Students were invited in each workshop to celebrate and share their non-linear, individual progress.

Students' agency

One aim of the module was to enable students to develop as autonomous researchers; this aligns with an authentic pedagogy premise of validating students' existing knowledge (Kreber, 2010). By conceptualising students as competent and capable we enabled them to exercise agency in the construction and authorship of their own research journey. Each workshop provided opportunities for students to apply knowledge in making informed choices in relation to their individual research project. In the workshops we encouraged students to use a research journal as a reflective tool, providing specific questions to support reflections on their individual journeys into research. Mindful of students' different access to and confidence with technology (Eberle and Hobrecht, 2021), we introduced a range of possible modalities of engagement with the research journal.

We remain mindful that we privileged synchronous interaction with students, in the absence of knowledge of their asynchronous experience. Our evaluations revealed fragmentary knowledge of the ways in which students' access to learning was impacted by the digital divide. Through weekly reflections on student feedback and our observations of student engagement we extended our knowledge of students' experiences of learning. This required dedicated space for our individual and shared reflection and for revisiting resources, to take account of both the absence of knowledge and the presence of emergent knowledge of our pedagogy. In our reflections, we identified the importance of remaining mindful of the ways in which students exercised agency and how the process of listening to students challenged our assumptions.

Conclusion

We argue that pedagogy to sustain students' participation and engagement must be responsive to the complex ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic affected learners (Whittle et al., 2020. Engaging with the new format and the new platform meant that as lecturers we were often positioned in a space of vulnerability

resulting from our incomplete knowledge of students' preferred forms of participation in the online environment. In our reflections, we identified the role that continuity plays in supporting students' engagement.

The premises underpinning authentic pedagogy (Kreber, 2010) guided us in the development of workshops that foregrounded opportunities for students to both exercise agency and facilitate their participation. Co-construction of knowledge about teaching remained a complex ground as it was dependent on the reconfiguring of the learning community and modes of social interaction within the online environment. Engaging with authentic pedagogy helped us connect with the vulnerabilities we experienced, acknowledging these and at times discussing them with students.

We conclude that reflection centred on the premises of authentic pedagogy facilitated the possibility of forming a community of learning for undergraduate researchers in the context of online teaching and learning during the pandemic.

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