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Creating playful spaces for collaborative development of online teaching capacity

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ABSTRACT

Transition to online learning presents technological and emotional challenges. Lack of attention to staff-student relationships, coupled with limitations in technology can be demotivating. Losing face-to-face contact has left academic staff with the hard work of reinventing themselves, finding new ways to assert their presence and humanity in what can be experienced as soulless and sometimes soul-destroying online environments. Professional development in online teaching can be reduced to top-down skills training in using specific tools. In this paper we argue for a more playful, collaborative approach to professional development, creating spaces for exploration, risk-taking, enjoyment and participation.

Ongoing changes in technologies and a shift to almost entirely online learning in the Open University has required us to work differently with students. Most OU tuition is done by associate lecturers, on fractional contracts when this project was carried out, who work closely with students but rarely create curriculum, assessment or strategy. This reflects a wider trend within the HE sector towards casualised, precarious labour, with those closest to students often lacking power.

This paper reflects on a scholarship project focused on the lived experience of four associate lecturers, negotiating the transition from blended to entirely online tuition, working with two full-time academic staff. Each of us differed in experience and enthusiasm for online learning; some keen 'early adopters', others closer to the 'reluctant majority'. Using action learning sets, online spaces and pedagogical practices were explored through collaborative reflection. Building strong relationships between colleagues created space where we could safely experiment. We argue that such "playful learning" (Nørgård, Toft-Nielsen & Whitton, 2017) is key for professional development. It can address reluctance to embrace new technologies and empower participants to reclaim their professional identity and expertise. We were all challenged to re-consider perspectives of online learning as an obstacle, to seeing new opportunities to create democratic, inclusive, and collaborative learning spaces.

Keywords: online pedagogy, playful learning, collaboration, participation, professional development

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic forced educators across the world to move their teaching online with very little warning. While this allowed some form of study to continue safely, with both teachers and students impressively meeting unprecedented challenges to learning, it was also a cause of widespread anxiety, increased workload and dissatisfaction for teachers and learners (García-Morales, Garrido-Moreno & Martín-Rojas, 2021). Many staff were confronted with unfamiliar tools and technical problems, feeling that their professional expertise had not prepared them for this landscape, and the skills of working with students face-to-face did not easily translate online.

Online learning has for some time been central to the 'supported open learning' teaching model of the Open University, the UK's largest distance learning university (The Open University, 2015): study materials are either entirely online, or a mixture of printed and online. However, until fairly recently, the majority of synchronous tuition took place face-to-face. The pandemic has required all tuition to be delivered online and whilst we will see some return to face-to-face contact with students, there are parts of the curriculum which will continue to be delivered entirely online.

This paper is a reflective analysis of a scholarship project centred on the lived experience of four associate lecturers at the Open University, negotiating the transition from blended to entirely online tuition, working with two full-time academic staff who had writing and management roles on the same module. The associate lecturers differed in experience and enthusiasm for online learning; some keen 'early adopters', others part of the 'reluctant majority', or questioning (Hixon, Buckenmeyer, Barczyk, Feldman & Zamojski, 2012). Using action learning sets, we explored our use of online spaces and pedagogical practices through collaborative reflection (see Canning & Callan, 2010). The overall aim of the project was to capture and reflect upon the experience of associate lecturers responding to the challenges of tutoring online specifically within the subject area of childhood studies. Involving a

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central academic and manager also allowed us to critically reflect on pedagogical issues in their wider context and take forward our learning.

This paper outlines the ways in which building strong relationships between colleagues created spaces where teachers could safely experiment. We extend the notion of “playful learning” from literature on student learning (e.g. Ayling, 2012; Canning, 2010), arguing that creating playful spaces for collaborative professional development can improve teachers' confidence and capacity in online teaching and learning. These spaces allowed participants to reclaim their professional identity in the online environment. Throughout, we argue that taking seriously the emotional and relational aspects of online pedagogy and making space for experimentation in a space of mutual support and vulnerability, can be enabling and empowering for educators, as well as for students (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones 2014; Zembylas, 2008).

Context: online teaching as the new normal?

The Open University (OU) is the UK's largest distance learning university, with 168,000 students, offering a wide range of qualifications with no entry requirements. Its widely respected and imitated teaching model (see Tait, 2018) is based around two phases: production and presentation. In the production stage, modular curriculum is developed, led by 'central academics' (working at the Milton Keynes campus) in collaboration with learning designers, media specialists and others. Module teams spend between one to three years producing high-quality teaching materials for each module. In the presentation stage, which lasts for seven or more years, curriculum is delivered through module websites guiding students through material that may include online text, books, audio visual materials and interactive activities, and providing links to a wide range of other academic sources and study support.

Students engage with module materials and complete continuous assessment throughout each module, supported by an Associate Lecturer (AL—known to students as their tutor) as part of a tutor group of around 20-25 students. Tutors work in a variety of online spaces including synchronous online classrooms, asynchronous forums, email and some use of social media. The relationship between students and their tutors is at the heart of the OU model. However, at the time of the scholarship project discussed, they were not permanent staff, but employed on modules on a part-time, fixed-term basis. ALs give group tutorials, mark assessments, teach through extensive personal feedback on assessment, and provide individual support, but are not usually involved in curriculum development, assessment design, or strategic decision-making.

While the OU's model of central curriculum development and dispersed tuition differs from that of most universities, the division does mirror a wider trend within the HE sector towards casualised, precarious labour, seen in the UK and across many other countries (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Holmwood & Marcellino Servós, 2019). As the massification of higher education has seen student numbers greatly expand, full-time staff numbers have not increased accordingly. Instead, a great deal of teaching is now carried out by academic staff on fixed-term or piece-rate contracts (such as graduate teaching assistants). In addition to a lack of job security, these staff often have limited structural opportunities for career progression or professional development (Hitch, Mahoney & Macfarlane, 2018). As in the OU, those who have the most contact and closest relationships with students often have the least influence over strategic decisions about the direction of teaching and learning.

The scholarship project discussed here took place in the context of a successful and popular, but fairly dated, second-year undergraduate level 60-credit childhood studies module. The module was primarily delivered through four textbooks, including readings and pedagogic activities, with limited supplementary online material. Tutorials were originally designed to be face-to-face, with ALs given significant autonomy over the content of tutorials, and correspondingly little guidance from the central module team.

However, partway through the module's life and two years before we began this project, the OU brought in a new tuition policy, which shifted the emphasis of the tutorial. Previously tutorials were organised around tutor groups and delivered by a student's own tutor. The new policy was designed to increase student choice, shifting the focus to an offer of a variety of tutorials at different times, given by a range of tutors. The central module team was given greater control over the content of tutorials, with the expectation that each tutorial would provide a similar 'learning experience' in terms of content, rather than each tutor tailoring their own tutorials towards an understanding of their own student group's needs. While this afforded more flexibility to students, tutors experienced a fracture in their relationship with their tutor groups, and a sense of diminished autonomy and control over their own pedagogical practice. During this time, the OU also changed its online classroom software to Adobe Connect, which offered a greater range of tools, but an unfamiliar interface. It is worth pointing out that Adobe Connect, unlike some videoconferencing facilities widely used for online teaching in the pandemic such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, has a good range of tools for teaching and conferencing but poor support for video. Within OU tutorials, students almost never use cameras and tutors rarely do, so rapport must be developed through voice and text.

Tutor response to this digital innovation and the changes to the interface with students was mixed. While it was embraced with vigour by a few, it was resisted or met with suspicion by others. At the heart of the resistance were two main issues: a sense of loss of the relationship with students that face-to-face contact enabled even in distance learning; secondly, the loss of professional identity, and the need to reinvent the professional digital persona. Tutors talk of the loss of interaction, creativity and fun in their tutoring spaces leaving them at a loss to be the teachers they want to be (Clayson, 2021).

As such, the associate lecturers in this study were experiencing a moment where their pedagogical practice, developed in a face-to-face environment, was largely shifted online. While this context differs from the emergency situation of the pandemic, many of the

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challenges faced are analogous: unfamiliar tools, limited training, technological obstacles. This paper emphasises the affective aspects of these changes: the feelings of uncertainty and loss, anxiety over not appearing proficient to students, and lack of control over one's own teaching choices.

Playfulness in education and professional development

The role of play for enhancing and enabling learning is a key tenet of early childhood studies, and early years education and care (Goouch, 2008; Smidt, 2011). Of course, play is intrinsically linked with childhood, and sometimes considered out of place in adulthood. Recently though, research has explored the potential of play and games for learning in higher education, with examples including using play-based activities for skills development with social work students (Ayling, 2012), and teaching postgraduate research methods through playful tasks (King, 2018).

Some of this literature focuses on specific techniques for teaching through play (such as games or gamification), and has emphasised outcomes and extrinsic rewards (e.g. Boyle et al., 2016). However, Nørgård et al. (2017) argue that this is a limited vision of the benefits of playful approaches to education, which does not foster deep learning. Instead, they put forward the concept of "playful learning" as a "signature pedagogy" (Shulman 2005), arguing for a broader approach to higher education that emphasises curiosity, risk-taking and the potential for failure.

Nørgård et al. (2017) draw on the concept of the "magic circle" proposed by Huizinga (1955) to theorise a play space as somewhere that is separate from the world outside and constructed mutually by those inside and around it. The "magic circle" is not a rigidly defined space but is socially constructed during play; it allows a space of safety for different norms and ways of interacting to emerge, allowing for experimentation, risk and reflection. They develop a model for using playful learning as a signature pedagogy in higher education, emphasising the implicit structures of values, habits, ethics, and requiring a democratic environment of co-learning. The creation of such an environment is, of course, a challenge. Although this is not explicitly discussed in Nørgård et al's (2017) work, education is charged with hierarchy and power relations (e.g. Freire, 1996; hooks, 2014), with the teacher generally exercising power in the learning environment. Such power relations persist in online learning spaces (Valcarlos, Wolgemuth, Haraf & Fisk, 2020). Creating a democratic environment in which students are free to explore and experiment requires noticing the power dynamics of the learning space, taking steps to mitigate these to the extent it is possible, and sharing power with students.

As researchers and teachers, we recognise the value and potential of playful pedagogy for working with students. However, in this project, we focused on extending the concept of playfulness into the arena of professional development and critical inquiry, which has not received significant attention. This extension was considered particularly appropriate given the basis of "playful learning" in (early) childhood education. Macdonald and Campbell (2012) demonstrated the contribution of disciplinary approaches to professional development which harness the power of disciplinary pedagogies. Seeing a professional relevance and experiencing a resonance with professional practice is more likely to engage participants in exploration on online pedagogy than a focus on technology alone.

Opportunities for professional development are often limited for staff not on full-time permanent contracts. McComb, Eather and Imig (2020) have argued for the importance of training and development for the workplace needs of casual staff (as well as arguing for wider institutional change in employment structures). In the Open University, ALs do have some limited time specifically allocated for professional development. However, a substantial amount of that time is self-directed and spent undertaking online compulsory training modules on legal responsibilities such as safeguarding.

Within the context of online learning, the importance of pedagogical training has long been recognised, to enable teachers to continue developing their professional skills (Baxter, Callaghan & McAvoey, 2018; Stickler & Hampel, 2007). However, in our experience of the move towards online tuition, and the introduction of new online learning platforms, we have found that training – in particular training that is compulsory and compensated – tends to focus on the technical aspects of using new software. A degree of technical knowledge is vital – indeed, tutors' anxieties around online teaching often focus on lack of confidence with the software, as well as technical problems. But such training often fails to address deeper pedagogical challenges. There has been an over-emphasis on technical know-how in favour of the relational. It has neglected the relationship between students and their tutors, between tutors and tutors, and indeed the relationship between teaching and learning in online spaces. In Baxter's work on distance learning tutors' teaching identities in the context of increasing online teaching, she powerfully sums up the greatest challenge faced by her respondents: "How to replicate this feeling of life changing learning, in an online situation" (2012, p. 6).

There are some opportunities within the OU for a more collaborative and reflective approach to professional development. For example, the Peer Associate Lecturer Support team (PALS) offers a space for ALs to share and develop their skills and interest in education technology and pedagogy of online learning through forums and workshops. Dialogical opportunities for development arise through the tuition observation process undertaken by staff tutor managers. ALs are also encouraged to be part of scholarship projects as inquiry into their teaching and learning practice and contribute to evidence-informed innovation. In this scholarship project, we aimed to build on peer learning initiatives, peer observation and reflective practice (Jones & Gallen, 2016), and the regular line management practice of tuition observation for development (Douce, 2018), by creating a safe and supportive space for reflection, experimentation and development of practice.

Methodology

The overall aims of the project were threefold:

- To capture and reflect upon ALS' current experience as they develop approaches to online tutoring
- Identify and articulate ways in which ALS are responding to the challenges of tutoring online specifically within childhood studies
- To engage in critical reflection on related pedagogical issues, working with and contributing to relevant theoretical resources

We received ethical approval for this scholarship project from the Open University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

We used action learning (McNiff, 2013; Somekh, 2005) to address these objectives. Action learning has been widely used in fields such as nursing, social work, management and education (e.g. Albers 2008; Abbott & Taylor 2013). It allows practitioners to address problems or concerns within their field, enabling profound personal development through critical reflection and inquiry focused on their own practice, and make changes within their work. Action learning allowed us to foreground the practice-based expertise within our team, who came from varied disciplinary backgrounds – nursing, early years, children's services, sociology, psychology and youth work. We were aware of potential power imbalances within the group, with Kate and Naomi both full-time staff members in positions of some authority over the AL members. The collaborative nature of action learning sought to diminish the impact of these differentials.

The project began with an online planning meeting at which we negotiated four online Action Learning Sets (ALS) – a small group of people (six in this case) who are concerned with an issue and take responsibility for organising themselves – which were held at two-monthly intervals. This model offered opportunities to identify, reflect and act on critical moments as they arose during the academic year. Each ALS was 'led' by a different AL identifying and reflecting on one aspect of tutoring on-line using a 20-20-20 model: 20 minutes presentation, 20 minutes discussion by rest of group, 20 minutes discussion including the presenter.

A process of collaborative reflection continued in the asynchronous forum, between each ALS, and continued after the final meeting. We reviewed the ALS data (in the form of audio recordings and notes) and undertook an iterative process of identifying themes that emerged from the project. The result was a collective, critical exploration of online pedagogical practice.

Throughout this paper, we have attributed quotations by name, with consent, to different members of the research team in order to recognise the contributions of particular individuals. The remainder of this paper presents key themes that emerged from our collaborative reflective analysis of the action learning sets and asynchronous discussions, focusing on learning from the process itself and its relevance to professional development practices.

Bringing the “magic circle” to collaborative development of online teaching capacity

Throughout the following sections, we present key findings that emerged from our collective analysis. We outline the ways in which we built, as a team, playful spaces for collaboration, and the experimentation, reflection and development of online teaching capacity this enabled.

Establishing democratic spaces

Establishing working relationships that allowed for open discussion, sharing of vulnerability, and a collaborative approach was vital in the early stages of the project. The associate lecturers reflected on their role as one that is often isolating—working largely alone from home. As a staff tutor (who manages ALS) and module team chair (responsible for overall leadership of the module) we (the authors) were in positions of structural power. We had to find a way of working together which would foreground the ALS' practice knowledge and expertise whilst using our positions to ensure effective dissemination and actioning of outcomes.

In the introductory planning meeting, Kate facilitated discussion through posing a series of broad questions about the focus of the scholarship, and our own pedagogical priorities. From this the four action learning sets were agreed. As Dorothy reflected:

Given that we only knew each other through the [module tutor forum], I thought we formed a team very quickly. One key contribution to this was Kate's democratic approach to the project so that the first meeting became a discussion of how to proceed

This was a key factor in establishing a “magic circle” (Huizinga 1955) – a physical or imaginary space of safety mutually constructed by participants, that is separated from the world outside, has its own norms and codes of practice. This magic circle allowed for experimentation and lusory approaches in the project going forward. The implicit playful structures outlined by Nørgård et al. (2017) were constructed between us: a democratic environment of co-learning, and a passion and enthusiasm for teaching. Although we emphasised a respect for different points of view and approaches, and had differences of opinion, we shared similar pedagogical values in terms of a commitment to student-centred learning.

Creating online space for discussion and experimentation was also a key theme throughout the project. The differing technological affordances (Hutchby, 2001) of different kinds of online spaces recurred frequently throughout our discussions of working online

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with students, and was reflected in how we worked together. The online Action Learning Sets allowed each participant to establish their own leadership over a session, lead a reflective investigation into an area of their own practice, and for us to come together as a group to explore how each of these investigations related to shared practice and wider pedagogical themes. We all found these synchronous meetings invigorating and intellectually stimulating. As Dorothy commented, "I came away with my head buzzing with ideas." They valued the opportunity for a geographically dispersed group (from Scotland to the South-East coast of England) to meet together regularly in the online teaching spaces that we used to work with our students.

However, we also found the asynchronous discussion forum beneficial, and emphasised the value of time to consider and consolidate the insights from the synchronous meetings: as Allyson said, "I think the spaces in between the meetings allowed time for reflection." This reflects Akyol and Garrison's (2011) assertion that asynchronous forums work best in tandem with synchronous activity. Having a forum space gave us all time to think, develop individual reflection, build collective perspectives and theories and share resources. We experienced the need to develop confidence as a group and in sharing ideas in writing, confidence to question one another, and experienced the waxing and waning of participation driven by deadlines and relevance of discussion threads.

Experimenting within safe and creative spaces

Creating the democratic spaces outlined in the previous section afforded a safe space which allowed participants to experiment with technologies. A theme running through the project was the fluctuating sense of confidence in technology. All of us shared anxieties (and experiences) about the prospect of technologies failing while teaching. As Allyson asked, "do we (as tutors) feel safe online? If we don't feel safe and if we are worried how might the students feel?" Tutors knew the online teaching software offered many options for diversifying how they worked with students but were not necessarily confident in using them. For example, they regularly used small group discussion in face-to-face tutorials, but not in online tutorials, as they were not confident about how and whether the breakout room features would work.

As Dorothy said:

The use of the software is something I need to make myself more familiar with but how do I do this when as a tutor, I am so busy 'fighting the forest fire'?

The 'forest fire' is an apt metaphor for the frequent changes in software running alongside changes in tuition practice, discussed previously, as well as the technical challenges caused by software bugs, and varying qualities of internet connectivity for both tutors and students. The online pedagogies project allowed backstage spaces to rehearse, experimenting with uses of technology developing a shared theory of practice (pedagogy).

Dorothy presented changes she was making to her use of PowerPoint in tutorials departing from its use as presentation tool, to how it can be combined with other features of the online room and writing tool to develop participation. Ideas and comments can be added to a slide, can populate simple tables, and students can collaboratively build an interpretation or critique of theory using PowerPoint as an interactive space, encouraging student out of a passive to an active role in tutorials. The ALS provided Dorothy with a space to think out loud, to evaluate and receive feedback on her tutorial plans. The asynchronous forum then provided an opportunity to reflect on how the changes to her tutorial practice had gone.

The power of participation

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the scholarship project, and the most unanticipated, was the impact it had on tutor colleagues who were part of the reluctant majority in making the shift from face-to-face to online tutorials. As Shiho put it, the project touched her through "imagination and empathy". Whilst the action learning sets began with a focus on practical application of ideas and tools, our last session, our only face to face contact, focused on the process of energising, motivating and empowering tutors through participation in scholarship in these playful spaces.

Other experiments were shared across the group which addressed the power dynamic between tutor and students. The discussion of shared vulnerability and a commitment to student-centred learning resulted in tutors questioning the extent of control they needed to exert over the online classroom. While tutors were theoretically committed to centring student participation, and confident with approaches in face-to-face learning that did this, they found it difficult to translate this into practice online. Online tutorials tended to centre the teacher's presence as the content is controlled by the presenter; the starting point for many tutors being the use of PowerPoint to guide students through a presentation. Tutors often encouraged students to turn on their microphones and participate but felt frequently discouraged that they were met with silence, with students contributing (if at all) only through typing in the text chat. By default, the small chat box appears in the corner of the screen - the 'geography' of the online environment therefore reinforces the teacher's authority, relegating the students' contributions to the margins.

Instead, Allyson experimented with the positioning and size of the chat box to rebalance the power dynamics in her online classroom. It is an idea that we all took up and found it transformational in allowing tutors to foreground student ideas and contributions. The physical presence of the chat box in the middle of the classroom proved to be much more empowering and

successful in encouraging interaction than the dogged determination to get students to use the microphone. This was a simple but effective example of a pedagogical intervention building on the technological affordances of the online learning environment, but also grounded in a theoretical commitment to student participation in learning.

Reflecting on professional identity

The model of each participant leading on an ALS focusing on their own practice allowed us to examine and explore our own professional identities and how to negotiate them in the online teaching space, highlighted as a key challenge in the literature on moving to online teaching in higher education (McNaughton & Billot, 2016; Richardson & Alsup, 2015). Through the project, the safe spaces, participation and experimentation outlined above enabled us each to develop our professional online identity.

Shiho emphasised the development of her online identity as one of the key consequences of the project through “learning to be myself... being present... listening... speaking up spontaneously and asking questions”. She described “feeling safe as a result of sufficient time and effort, meaning, interaction and care invested.”

Shiho's thoughtful elaboration of the elements enabling her to 'be herself' online indicate that the social interactions, care and sense of safety developed through the action learning sets were central to her developing a more confident and capable online teaching identity. This resonates with literature highlighting the importance of care, empathy and relationships in education (Aquarone et al., 2020; Clegg & Rowland, 2010; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Shiho's experience mirrored that of many of our students' online tutorial experience and, for her, captured learning through empathy.

Shiho's identification of her different roles within the group – "recipient/presenter/team member/collaborator" – highlights the importance of embodying different roles within the online space, which allowed us all to experience the online relationship from different positions. Val also commented on the "ups and downs of putting oneself out of the usual tutoring boundaries, which is quite challenging". This element of stepping out of one's comfort zone is both enabled by and constitutive of the “magic circle” space.

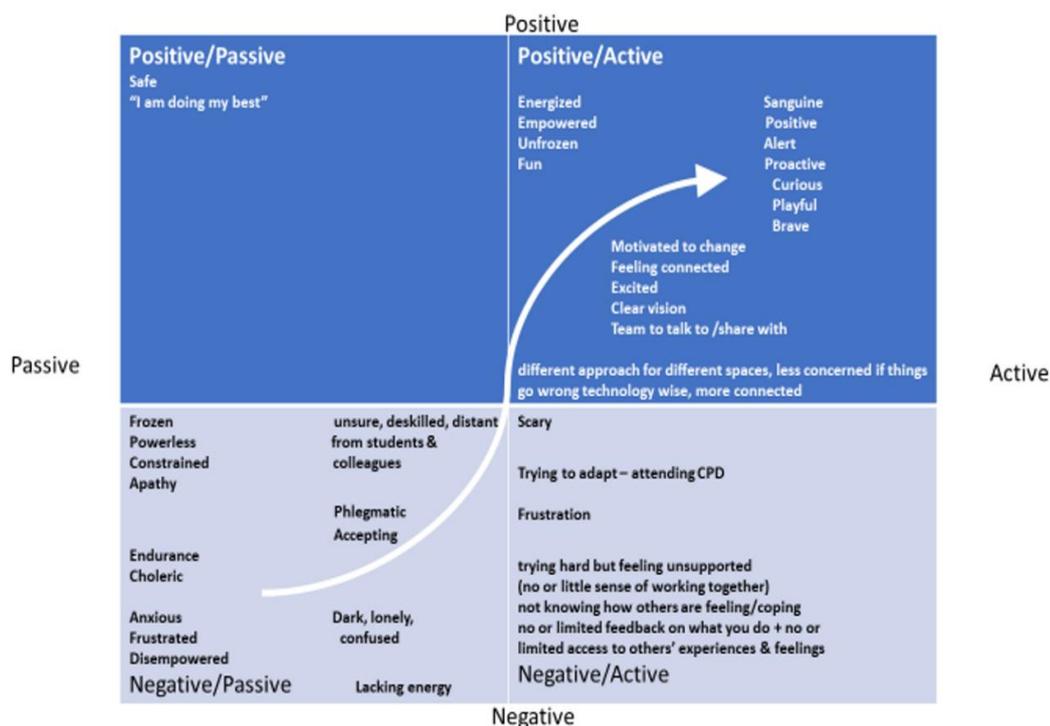


Figure 1: The activity/emotion axes in online teaching

The shift in our professional identity and emotional approaches towards teaching online across the project is summarised in Figure 1, which was developed by Allyson from our collective discussions and reflections. The model presents two axes of orientation towards teaching online – passive/active and negative/positive. We all added the more detailed descriptions of emotions and behaviours we personally identified with each quadrant. We suggest that an 'active' orientation towards online teaching, and towards one's own practice and professional development more broadly, is not inherently positive: trying to be active in isolation, within structural constraints and unhelpful environments, can be frustrating and stressful. In such environments, it may seem

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easier for educators to remain passive, which can provide a space of safety. However, it is notable that the positive/passive quadrant remained quite empty, perhaps indicating limited possibilities for maintaining a positive approach towards online teaching while staying passive in a constantly changing environment. Instead, passivity was frequently experienced negatively, as the constellation of descriptions in the bottom left-hand quadrant suggests.

Identifying their trajectories, participants felt that the scholarship project had enabled them to move from a negative and often passive place, as indicated by the 'learning curve', to a more active and positive orientation towards online teaching. We also considered the relationships between the axes of participation and emotion. Shiho emphasised the effect of participation in the collaborative space:

Positivity started to grow in me when talking to you all and trying things out with you, in a space where I felt safe and there was purposeful continuity. This is nothing like how I was feeling when I thought I was doing the right thing: taking up training sessions and trying things out on my own.

However, these trajectories were not unidirectional. As Kate said:

I'm not sure there was a before and after for me as such as I still shift between states. For me, the important thing is that sharing and the encouragement of others can shift me from one state to another.

Contributions to practice

This project has been impactful on a number of further levels. By design, it has informed the production of the replacement module. The creative space and collaborative relationships that were opened up during the scholarship project continued with three AL participants working together with Naomi to produce teaching resources, activities and ideas for online tuition.

The project was supported by the PRAXIS Centre for Scholarship and Innovation, based in the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, and our scholarship project has driven a move to open up scholarship possibilities for ALs in the faculty. Usually employed on day contracts as consultants within central academics' scholarship projects, this project has advocated for ALs as leaders in scholarship affirming their academic equality and unique expertise in pedagogical development. It has created a collaborative space for AL professional development through critical enquiry into their own teaching and learning practices contributing to the generation of knowledge rather than being the passive recipients of training and pedagogy removed from the realities of online tutoring spaces.

Conclusions

Moving from face-to-face to online learning is an ongoing process fraught with technical and emotional challenges. We contend that while it is vital to learn from 'early adopters' who have the expertise and passion to pursue excellence in online teaching, top-down 'digital leadership' from a few that focuses solely on the positives and potentials of online learning is insufficient to enable the institutional cultural change to support meaningful, high quality online teaching and learning. This is especially so in a context where teaching is increasingly carried out by casualised staff who are reacting to, rather than affecting, policy changes.

Instead, effective digital leadership requires taking seriously the concerns and professional identities of those who are working most closely with students. It is vital for professional development to offer spaces for the 'reluctant' – or questioning – majority to explore their own pedagogical practices and identities, recognising their concerns and anxieties. Such development should build from the strengths and expertise of these staff, and the pedagogical expertise developed 'on the ground' can and should contribute to decisions about the direction of teaching: bringing the "periphery" into the "core" (see Kimber, 2003). Following Bryson (2013) and McComb et al (2020), we argue that quality professional development is vital for sessional staff – and that such development should recognise and work with their professional expertise.

The OU has led the way in distance, part-time higher education. The last decade, however, has taken us on a journey from distance to online learning, and for students a shift from distance to digital learner. In the development of the student digital journey, the task of critical digital pedagogy needs to develop in parallel with digital frameworks and interfaces. At the centre of this change is a continued need to attend to relationships. As Morris (2018, p. 138) summarises:

Learning on line still needs – really really requires – human teachers. Because what it comes down to is, we are the most important technology involved in digital and online learning

The scholarship project outlined in this article brought together a small group of experienced higher education educators with a range of expertise and confidence in online teaching. Building from a collaborative, democratic foundation allowed the group to establish a "magic circle" – safe, playful spaces within which participants could share, evaluate, receive feedback from colleagues, experiment, and develop new understandings of practice. This enabled the development of technical skills, tutors' ownership of their own developing digital pedagogy, and a reimagining of professional identity in the online environment: all critical for a successful cultural change to online learning that enables teachers and students to flourish.

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Naomi Halford is Lecturer in Childhood and Youth Studies at the Open University, a sociologist specialising in children and young people's gender and identity, foregrounding children's perspectives, agency and participation. She has developed core curriculum in childhood and youth studies and is responsible for a number of distance learning modules.

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