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Editorial: Learning from Lockdown Special Collection

SPECIAL COLLECTION:
LEARNING FROM
LOCKDOWN

EDITORIAL

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ABSTRACT

In this collection, after almost a year of the Covid-19 pandemic, authors reflect on its impact on higher education, world-wide; including, amongst other topics, challenges for staff and students; new approaches to teaching; accessibility and the support provided by communities.

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As the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in early 2020, it ushered in disruption to educational systems worldwide on an unprecedented scale. The urgent need for public health measures and social distancing forced the closure of campuses and the suspension of in-person educational provision. Educational institutions across the board – from schools, to further and higher education – were forced to respond quickly to the challenges of providing continuation of education at short notice, with varying levels of preparedness. Some higher education institutions were already providing blended education and needed to scale up; others operating principally through face-to-face provision had to act quickly to innovate and improvise through what can be regarded as ‘emergency remote education’ (Bozkurt & Sharma 2020). Educational technology was frequently relied upon in order to continue educational provision; however, this shift also brought with it concerns about equity (Bozkurt et al. 2020), and potentially setting up commercial relationships between education institutions and technology vendors which could persist into the future (Williamson, Eynon & Potter 2020).

Through the call for papers for this special collection of the *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, we invited authors to reflect upon the ways in which educational technology has been used to support continued higher education provision during this time. Submissions were open to explore various aspects of this unprecedented crisis, their challenges and successes, and how this shift might affect higher education in the longer term.

The ten papers which make up this special collection represent a range of perspectives and experiences of higher education during the pandemic. The 41 contributing authors are based at locations across the globe; the studies utilise a range of different research methods and approaches, to explore the impact of the pandemic from student, lecturer, and leadership perspectives. In terms of the topics addressed, common threads emerged in relation to using educational technology as a medium to promote care and community – principles which deserve to be foregrounded and embedded into practice as we look to the future, post-Covid.

The need for care is reflected in papers which have shone a light on the lived experiences of academics during the pandemic, and the pressures they have faced as their professional and personal lives were suddenly upended through the shift to working at home. Littlejohn et al. examine this through survey and interviews with academic and professional service staff at University College, London. The findings show how the pandemic exposed tensions in relation to digitalisation, and highlight the nuanced ways in which the shift to home working was challenging. Belikov et al. explored the emotional impacts of the pandemic through interviews with academics from higher education institutions across Canada. The analysis reveals insights into professional and personal sources of increased emotional impact, and recommendations for how to support staff with this.

The importance of community and supportive networks is a common thread across papers which focused on professional development for academics and teaching staff. Ulla and Perales conducted interviews with English as a Foreign Language teachers at a university in Thailand, reflecting on the constraints of the move to online teaching, but highlighting the importance of being part of a community of practice, as “a support group, a source of a solution to online teaching issues, and a learning community”. Olney and Piashkun present a paper on the use of a learning design workshop as a teacher professional development (TPD) activity for staff at six higher education institutions in Belarus, demonstrating the benefits of using “team-based, reflective and experiential TPD pedagogy”. Learning design is also a focus of Funk, in an example of redeveloping a unit on Cultural Capabilities at Charles Darwin University, Australia. Reflections on this experience have implications for practice in the pandemic and beyond; “successful OEP [open educational practices] can be cultivated with cognitive compassion as a focus instead of a panic-induced care narrative for more sustainable caring academic and professional capabilities as we continue to learn online”. Pedagogy of care and critical digital pedagogy were key considerations when Universidad de la República, Uruguay, implemented a course for academic staff on “Teaching Online in Emergency Conditions”, which is reported upon by Rodés et al.

Three of the papers within this collection explore student perspectives on the shift to emergency remote education. Ulzheimer et al. present findings from a study of students at RheinMain University of Applied Sciences, Germany, focusing upon the range of barriers students have encountered. The findings highlight the need for openness, and recommend “low-barrier

learning design and financial or technical support measures”. While exacerbating inequality is often cited as a risk associated with moving to online or technology-mediated provision without planning in advance, Williams and Werth describe how a liberal arts college in the USA has been tackling inequity, through moving all courses to free materials such as open educational resources (OER) and open textbooks. Gourlay et al. report on student views in relation to online engagement during the pandemic, at University College, London. The authors note that the student views which emerge around “student ‘inclusivity’, academic ‘community’ online, and teaching which encourages ‘questioning’” challenge established assumptions about online education, with implications for how this is conceptualised in the future.

All the contributions include practical recommendations in relation to the topics they address, for the ongoing pandemic and future practice. Varga-Atkins et al. present a paper from an academic leadership perspective, drawing upon experiences across five higher education institutions in Australia and the UK. Striving for student-centred decision making was a key part of pandemic responses. The paper identifies key drivers and themes to consider when seeking to implement student-centred agile leadership, both during the pandemic and looking to the future.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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