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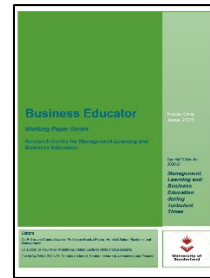
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## Business Educator

### Working Paper Series of the Centre for Management Learning and Business Education



## An academic journey from disruption and discomfort to a digital curriculum by transforming professional disposition.

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### **Abstract**

#### **Keywords:**

Discomfort,  
Disjuncture,  
Reflection,  
Transformation

The speed and significance of change affecting all aspects of life over the past year has been unprecedented. Within an educational environment, this turbulence, disruption and discomfort has resulted in a changing mindset for both academic staff and students. By taking a collaborative autoethnographic approach, this paper captures four reflections from academic staff on their experiences of teaching and learning during the COVID pandemic. Themes emerging from the analysis highlight the experiences of academic staff looking for and experimenting with different approaches to module delivery and changing module content, exploring the use of technology to enable shared learning for staff and students together.

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## **Introduction**

The pandemic caused by Covid-19 has had a huge impact on all industries and sectors, and education is no exception. Since December 2019 a new lexicon has crept into our everyday language. Words and phrases such as Covid-19; transmission rate; regional tiers and lockdown to name but a few are in regular use around the world. A common vernacular has also crept into our academic lives. Much debated terms such as blended learning, hybrid delivery and the flipped classroom have been around for some time however they are now supplemented with notions of students in self isolation rather the classroom, special (emergency) assessment regulations, and the need for no detriment to the students due to the pandemic. The common theme to these scenarios is speed. Speed of transmission and the speed of transition is reciprocal to both the pandemic and the 'New World' of University education. Although not a new concept in HE (see Berg and Seeber, 2016, 2013; Land, 2013), the inevitable consequence of this speed has, for some, been an academic journey of disruption and discomfort through a landscape of digital delivery and transformational learning for both the student and the academic.

Considering the COVID-19 pandemic it is highlighted that the most significant internal challenge for Business Schools has been adjusting to their new learning environment (Wanot, 2021), which provides the backdrop to this paper. More specifically, this paper presents and analyses short reflective accounts concerning experiences of working at a time of increased isolation and significant disruption to not only learning and teaching practices in the classroom, but also interactions with colleagues.

## **Literature Review**

Nolan and Molla (2018) write about professional learning through a pedagogy of discomfort, focusing on teacher professional learning and positioning that learning in the context of reflective practice. This in turn focussed on Boler and Zembylas' (2003) idea of a pedagogy of discomfort which is concerned with critical thought on a present situation which is moving individuals out of their comfort zone. In this paper, we suggest that this is exactly what we have gone through during the last twelve

months as we have continued our professional service to our students at a time of considerable turbulence. Building on the propositions of Nolan and Molla (2018) we examine the interrelated processes of disjuncture, deliberation and disposition through the lens of four vignettes. Each account draws from our experiences of teaching modules on an MBA programme to an audience of mainly international postgraduate students who themselves at various times have experienced their own journey of disruption and discomfort whilst attempting to study a programme which was not designed initially for the delivery format they were required to endure.

According to Nolan and Molla (2018), 'disjuncture' refers to a situation where there is a disharmony or disconnect between what is currently happening and our values, providing an opportunity for learning through a process of reflection. This reflection is the second part of Nolan and Molla's (2018) process which requires critical reflection on the disjuncture, referred to as 'deliberation'. The third phase of this reflective process concerns the transformations of professional dispositions, encouraging the consideration of whether values or professional dispositions have been altered in light of the reflection on disjuncture. This approach to critically reflect on professional practice provides a useful framework, particularly when we consider the events of the past year, which is also advocated by Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2013).

## **Methodology and Method**

Four colleagues, who teach on different branches of the same postgraduate programme, came together during an online session which was aimed at supporting research and writing. Sharing the experiences of teaching on the same programme, we agreed that we would like to undertake a piece of writing between us, rather than alone, and so a mini 'research group' was established. Our discussions and individual comments led us to the conclusion that our experiences can be linked to Nolan and Molla (2018) in terms of the ideas of disjuncture, deliberation and disposition we shared. Whilst initially these terms may not have been clear in our minds, conversations led us to these views and the usefulness of recording our thinking, on an individual basis, to enable themes for further discussion to be established.

The reflections provide anecdotal vignettes from four business educationalists who were keen to share their experiences of supporting and teaching postgraduate students in the current pandemic environment. Owing to the multiple professional reflections and the individual and emotional nature of the writing on which this paper is constructed, a collaborative autoethnographic approach is an appropriate research design (Lapadat, 2017; Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 2013). More specifically, Lapadat (2017, p.590) posits collaborative autoethnography as an approach whereby multiple researchers 'share personal stories and interpret the pooled autoethnographic data' which is the approach taken to construct this paper. This approach has been used elsewhere to not only frame research into teaching practice (Hains-Wesson and Young, 2016), but also to facilitate collaborative research during the isolating and socially distanced times of the global pandemic (Roy and Uekusa, 2020).

More specifically, the four accounts have been written with the COVID-19 pandemic in mind, providing reflections on aspects of the learning and teaching environment from this past year. Furthermore, we draw on our experiences and initial discussions and build on the common ground of working within the same faculty and on a shared programme of study. Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2013) acknowledges collaborative autoethnography as a powerful method of teambuilding which enhances not only trust relationships among co-researchers but also promotes creativity and collegial feedback and mentorship. This collaborative approach is particularly timely when colleagues are experiencing feelings of disassociation and working in isolation.

Having each written a reflective account, the first stage of analysis was for one member of the group, who has experience of qualitative analysis, to identify codes within each account and then create themes, from initial codes (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). For the second phase of analysis, each writer worked through their narrative and used the existing themes to code their narratives. Where there was no match between data (narrative) and existing themes, additional themes were suggested. Thereafter, the group came together to undertake a discussion of emergent themes from the accounts, entailing processes of reviewing the vignettes, categorising themes and regrouping themes (Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez, 2013).

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Reflection 1**

It felt like from disjuncture to deliberation in the space of a month! The first lockdown in February 2020 resulted in fervour and discomfort which was not envisaged just a few weeks before during the Christmas vacation. Semester one teaching had progressed well and assessments were eagerly anticipated. Looking back the classroom was a safe and professional environment for both student and teacher where discussion and debate could flourish. We could physically see one another and hear clearly what was said whilst looking directly at each other. In this context, my view was that the needs and aspirations of our student community are key to the development and delivery of any successful programme and the MBA teaching team pride themselves on responding positively to those needs and aspirations. Yet within the space of a few weeks in the new year, I/we completely transformed what and how I/we taught.

As a teaching team, we needed to work together to ensure that those needs and aspirations were met whilst as an individual, I needed to ensure that what was on the Canvas site was not only correct in terms of learning outcomes and relevance to the curriculum but that it also met the requirements of a digital platform not originally set up for the online delivery of all the material present. This was my disjuncture. Looking back and deliberating after the delivery of the first Semester of 2020/1 my overriding emotion was one of relief. Yes, I am sure it could and will be better, but it worked. The students listened, commented and asked questions and the assessments were submitted. My disposition is now one of continuation.

Continuation of my learning of the skills required for the digital arena, a continuation of the interaction with my colleagues to ensure a programme that meets the needs and expectations of our students and above all the continuation of my sense that all will be well at some point. How I long for the day when all my students turn on their cameras and wave! The day that happens the first day of the rest of my journey will be complete.

## Reflection 2

Every so often there is a historical event of such magnitude that it challenges business 'prac-ademics' to re-think teaching contexts. The credit crunch, 2008 challenged us to rethink our practice; a global economic crisis on a global scale. COVID was just as immediate however the gravity with its instant impact on everyone's lives and well-being was incomprehensible. I reflected on how we had to adapt and find new ways to achieve even the simplest of everyday tasks. Our student community, many still acclimatising to living in the UK, were assigned to lockdown and immediate and total immersion in this changing world. In the marketing classroom, this pushed my focus on how to teach the 'delivery of value' much further into the spotlight.

I felt an immediate disjuncture at the start of term; it appeared the case studies were being rewritten around us! We quickly witnessed new patterns of media consumption, rapid shifts in buyer behaviours, everyday innovation, new models of value delivery to meet new customer needs, declining sectors, agile technologies reshaping business ecosystems... too much to summarise. A key reflection; how do we as educators embrace technology and deliver effectively to satisfy the needs of our students!

My deliberation: how do I close the gap between where we were and where we are now. I worried would the students challenge me with an expectation that I had appraised our new world.

I reflected on what contextualisation means, '...to put (a linguistic element, an action, etc.) in a context especially one that is characteristic or appropriate, for purposes of study. I soon realised that whilst this had come upon us rapidly my class were very quickly self-evaluating their personal environments, their daily 'social media' lives, their interactions with brands and businesses. As a result, I have enhanced focus on 'contextual learning', whereby students construct their own meaning based on their own experiences. There was no need to over think the currency of contexts! Together with the students we created a learning environment whereby the original vignettes would and did serve to support debate, contrasts leading to a new strategy, platforms for the evaluation of change; engendering problem solving and solution



seeking. We shared the disjuncture due to the current environment; not only from the textbooks, current news; particularly the lived experience of having to embrace new technology in the classroom which has, in turn, provided an appreciation for the lived experiences facing the new global workforce.

My cohort have since submitted their semester one assessments, in which they map the customer journey in support of a new business challenge posed by the external environment. Many have sought the opportunity to address the challenges posed by COVID with original thinking around the deployment of new and exciting technologies and innovative marketing.

### **Reflection 3**

The pandemic has decreased the number of Chinese students studying in UK universities, Covid and the lockdown changed the composition of my MBA class silently resulting in online teaching being a disjuncture which meant effective communication during online teaching only happened with greater language competence together with students' clear learning motivation and engagement. This disposition is therefore one of constant adjustment and deployment of engagement strategies alongside the motivation of students.

Academics and students were involved in this intensive change curve during the 1<sup>st</sup> lockdown, but their motive and initiative of participating in the changes led to variations of speed and level of coping and adaptation themselves during this process. In this fast pace of transition and transformation, human factors, such as cross-cultural understanding and discourse on mutual needs and expectations become an indispensable foundation for effective communication and even became the prerequisite and key driver to student engagement.

Having high-level online engagement from international MBA students who come from different parts of the world whilst they may be remaining in their home countries is a critical issue. Developing relationships is crucial, so to create collaborative engagement opportunities I encouraged my MBA students to form groups of 6,7 with varied cultural backgrounds, using social media, which students reflected was beneficial for their studies during the lockdown. Informal or social engagement opportunities with instructors is also important for student learning, both online and face-to-face. An example of emotional engagement is from a student from India who shared her profile with other classmates online during the 'alternative CV' session. She shared her love of writing poems and spoke of her published album. The student was very excited and motivated, becoming highly engaged and cooperative. After the lesson, the student wrote to me expressing her feeling of inclusiveness and was motivated to learn more. This practical experience verified that social engagement involves building rapport, respect, and trust to create a sense of belonging and group cohesion within a learning community. I believe the pandemic brings about an excellent opportunity for stakeholders to re-think and even re-design an effective risk-

management plan to increase the sustainability and resilience of our sector in the future. Students from different backgrounds require different levels of support in online communication. I believe a cultural gap exists between individuals in online education and communication, and that “participation rates differ by cultural grouping”. I think it is crucial to explore the concerns of our international students and to continue learning their characteristics while engaging in online study and develop strategies to reduce those concerns.

## Reflection 4

The disjuncture was having to design and teach a module wholly online. Preparing the module was challenging as although I have experience in planning and designing teaching materials, this has centered on face-to-face teaching. Having to design a module to be delivered online prompted me to think very differently. Having had the experience of teaching the first semester my overall reflection is one of pleasant surprise at the engagement of the students with the various activities, through post-semester feedback.

To give students an opportunity to not only engage with the module but also cultivate a sense of community, one of the activities I experimented with was to ask students to present an 'alternative CV'. The intention was to provide students with a space in which they felt comfortable to articulate aspects of themselves. A collaborative feedback sheet was available for everyone involved in the module (including myself) to offer reflections on each alternative CV. Beforehand I was anxious about the levels of engagement, technological issues, and students' perceptions of this activity. However, attendance was high and all students participated in the task. Some students had prepared a slide to present whilst others spoke freely. There were some students whose devices did not allow them to activate their video, but where the technology allowed, and students were happy to, cameras were switched on. However, I was less concerned with the use of cameras and more concerned that students felt comfortable to engage with this activity and took something away from the experience.

As the semester progressed, it became apparent from engagement levels, evidence from in-depth discussions and anecdotal feedback that breakout rooms were important to students as a place to 'go' and a space to talk with peers to articulate thinking and share ideas. The breakout rooms were used for students to share their understanding of pre-released materials and capture their 'group think' about directed questions. From my perspective, the use of breakout rooms provided a whole range of exacting considerations, including how many rooms to open, whether to assign students manually, whether to give students screenshots of the activity in the chat or attach a word document with the activity and space for them to collate

their thinking and to ask if additional time was needed. Therefore, a challenge for me has been gauging subtle aspects of learning and teaching interactions.

On reflection, the previous semester was a significant learning experience. Rather than shifts having happened, I believe that shifts in my professional disposition are *happening*; the focus being a process of learning rather than highlighting an end product of learning. I am noticing my increasing comfort with experimenting with aspects of professional practice and communicating this to students, therefore taking students on the journey with me. For instance, the functional process of opening and managing breakout rooms was communicated to students as 'let's give this a try and see how it works; I talked about taking a risk and seeing what we learn from the experience, and the student feedback was encouraging as overwhelmingly they commented on the value of being able to connect with peers and share ideas. Where there have been technical issues faced by students not being able to use their microphone or having a poor network, students helped each other out by communicating through written chat functions and passing on hints and tips around connectivity, evidencing a turbulent yet shared learning experience.

## Discussion

From the analysis undertaken, seven themes emerged from the reflective accounts concerning the altered environment, the speed of change, the use of technology, cultivating a sense of 'community' online, sharing practices and experiences, educators experimenting and learning from the experience of working in an altered environment, and the affective dimension of this.

Not surprisingly, the collective disjuncture centers around the challenges faced concerning the significant changes required when teaching in a fundamentally altered environment, from face-to-face to wholly online.

'Preparing the module was challenging as although I have experience of planning and designing teaching materials, this has centered on face-to-face teaching' [reflection 4].

Another facet of the collective disjuncture is, not surprisingly, the speed at which these changes have had to happen. The use of vocabularies such as turbulence, disruption, and trauma within the reflections connect with Mezirow's (2018) concept of disorientation. More specifically, reflections such as 'immediate impact' and immediate disjuncture' [reflection 2] and 'it felt like disjuncture to deliberation in a month' [reflection 1] resonate with Mezirow's (2018, p118) epochal transformation, characterised by 'sudden reorientations' rather than more cumulative or gradual change. Whilst Mok et al (2020) write about the pandemic providing opportunities to re-think and re-design higher education, the impact of such significant and rapid shifts should not be overlooked.

A third theme emerging from the reflective deliberations is the use of technology to enable continuous learning for staff and students:

'...within the space of a few weeks in the new year, I/we completely transformed what and how I/we taught' [reflection 1]

'...how do we as educators embrace technology and deliver effectively to satisfy the needs of our students!' [reflection 2]

‘I think it is crucial to explore the concerns of our international students and their characteristics while engaging with online study and develop strategies to reduce those concerns.’ [reflection 3]

‘... Having to design a module to be delivered online prompted me to think very differently’ [reflection 4]

However, there is recognition that the learning being undertaken by the four academic staff concerns not only the technology but also how it can be used to facilitate student learning and cultivate a sense of community which Redmond et.al (2018) notes are significant for effective online learning environments:

‘...to create collaborative engagement opportunities, the week before the first lockdown, I encouraged my MBA students to form groups of 6,7 with varied cultural backgrounds by using social media’ [reflection 3]

‘As the semester progressed, it became apparent from engagement levels, evidence from in-depth discussions and anecdotal feedback that breakout rooms were important to students as a place to ‘go’ and a space to talk with peers to articulate thinking and share ideas’ [reflection 4]

Whilst it is emerging that we were keen to cultivate a sense of community through activities which were designed into the curriculum, it would be worthwhile to gain students’ experiences of these designs.

There is also an emerging sentiment of sharing experiences across staff and students:

‘We shared the disjuncture due to the current environment; not only from the textbooks and current news; particularly the lived experience of embracing new technology in the classroom. This has, in turn, provided an appreciation for the lived experiences facing the new global workforce’ [reflection 2]

‘This example in practice verified that social engagement involves building rapport, respect, and trust to create a sense of belonging and group cohesion within a learning community, which is especially

important at this time for international students coming far away and leaving their family and home country' [reflection 3]

From these extracts (above), there is a sense that we are conscious of the change happening around us and the impact that this is having not only on ourselves but also on the students both academically, personally and socially.

Another theme emerging from the reflective deliberations concerns academic staff looking for and experimenting with different approaches to module content to ensure parity of experience.

'I needed to ensure that what was on the Canvas site was not only correct in terms of learning outcomes and relevance to the curriculum...' [reflection 1]

'...it appeared the case studies were being rewritten around us!' [reflection 2]

'To give students an opportunity to not only engage with the module but also cultivate a sense of community, one of the activities I experimented with was to ask students to present an 'alternative CV'' [reflection 4]

When considering Nolan and Molla's (2018) concept of transforming professional dispositions, the reflections convey a sense with which we are operating with a shared mindset of professional *learning* - with an emphasis on this being a current process that we are still experiencing:

'My disposition is now one of continuation. Continuation of my learning of the skills required for the digital arena, a continuation of the interaction with my colleagues to ensure a programme that meets the needs and expectations of our students and above all the continuation of my sense of humour that all will be well at some point' [reflection 1]

As a result, I have enhanced focus on 'contextual learning', whereby students construct their own meaning based on their own experiences [reflection 2]

'...to continue learning their characteristics' [reflection 3]



‘Rather than shifts having happened, I believe that shifts in my professional disposition are *happening*’ [reflection 4]

There was also recognition of the outcomes of professional learning and experimentation which was taking place:

‘Many have sought the opportunity to address the challenges posed by COVID with original thinking around the deployment of new and exciting technologies and innovative marketing’ [reflection 2]

‘Having had the experience of teaching the first semester my overall reflection is one of pleasant surprise at the engagement of the students with the various activities, through post-semester feedback’ [reflection 4]

Interestingly, these two extracts mention more positive emotions despite the initially recognised discomfort and disorientation of the wider situation. Having experienced the discomfort and worked within this disorientating context, both extracts highlighting the affective outcomes of these episodes of professional learning.

Although observed as an area which has been typically neglected in UK-based literature concerning learning and teaching in HE (Quinlan, 2016), learning is an emotional process and there is the acknowledgement of the affective dimension within reflections:

‘I worried would the students challenge me with an expectation that I had appraised our new world’ [reflection 2]

‘Beforehand I was anxious about the levels of engagement, technological issues, and students’ perceptions of this activity’ [reflection 4]

## Conclusion

Within the dramatically altered HE environment of the past year, this paper is the result of four colleagues sharing their experiences of teaching and supporting students online, and collaboratively reflecting on aspects of professional practice. Moreover, collaborative autoethnography provides a suitable framework for the approach taken in not only sharing professional and personal stories but also analysing their contributions to a shared understanding of the experiences of four colleagues.

Whilst making use of the technology is an aspect which emerges across the reflections, there are also other issues of significance, such as ensuring relevant and up-to-date module content, and providing opportunities for students to feel a sense of belonging to the programme with their peers and academic staff and feeling the pressure to create parity of experience in a new world. Therefore, within the current turbulent environment, this paper evidences the collective stories of academic staff who are not only navigating the new environment but also experimenting with ways of providing opportunities for students to continue learning with their peers. Whilst the initial assumptions of the paper were generally the speed of change and the notion of discomfort, interestingly analysis of the four reflective accounts have highlighted other dimensions of this pedagogical discomfort in addition to that of speed.

Whilst this paper highlights perspectives of four academic colleagues, the reflections have hinted at our observations of and anecdotal feedback from students. Therefore, more detailed insight into students' experiences of learning in a COVID environment would be a valuable addition to these initial reflections. Additionally, as we reflect back on these experiences and begin looking ahead to a hybrid model of learning and teaching, it will be interesting to continue to capture the professional learning gained and how these feeds into our module planning and curriculum design going forward.

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