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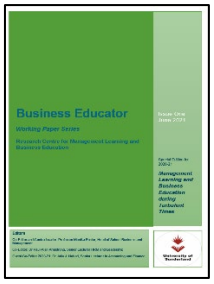

Letters of praxis: A metaphorical journey through the challenges for business and management education during turbulent times.

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Abstract

This paper presents a reflexive dialogic collaborative auto ethnographic lifeography of the challenges facing a Business School during the Covid-19 global pandemic. This lifeography is in the form of letters between a Head of School who coordinated the effort and a Digital Learning and Teaching Lead (DLTL) who have reacted, supported and designed strategic and operational practices in response to the challenges facing the School since the change to online delivery in March 2020. This has informed the transition to hybrid delivery in September 2020. These challenges have included; upskilling of digital skills for staff and learners; developing online delivery through instructional design; dealing with digital poverty, anxiety and apprehension; the diverse range of learner needs at undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral stages; the support for commuter home students and international students. This reflexive conversation draws out the challenges from the perspective of a Head of School concerned with the wellbeing of staff and students and ensuring the consistency of experience for diverse groups of students, and a DLTL supporting this transition to hybrid delivery. This conversation also explored identity and pedagogy which informed the strategies and interventions used to support staff and learners within the School of Business and Management.

Keywords:

Reflexive dialogic

Lifeography

Hybrid delivery

Digital upskilling

Identity

Introduction

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The impact of the Covid-19 global pandemic on higher education cannot be underestimated. This paper presents a conversation in the form of letters between a Head of a School of Business and Management and a Senior Lecturer in HRM and Leadership who became the Digital Learning and Teaching Lead. The global pandemic took hold in March 2020 and HEIs like all parts of society had to change the way they function overnight. HEIs closed campuses and shifted learning online and this was a significant cultural shift which presented numerous challenges. Through the letters, this lifeography (Janesick, 2019) presents a reflexive account of the challenges facing the School of Business and Management in this paradigm shifting approach to delivering the pedagogy of their learners.

The use of letters as a reflexive account gives an insight into the strategic decisions made by the University, the Faculty and the School Management Team, plus the account of an experienced teacher who applied and was appointed the Digital Learning and Teaching Lead.

Literature Review

The global pandemic COVID-19 has changed the landscape of Higher Education and how HEIs operate as places and space for learning. In March 2020 delivery of learning went solely online and this caused anxiety, apprehension and challenges for students, teaching staff, university support services and university management at all levels. One of these challenges was translating and transferring the performative art of teaching to online spaces using VLEs and learning technology tools (for example, big blue button and later in the transition Microsoft teams). This digital transformation of higher education is not new (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). The process required strategic oversight in terms of trust through collaborative and organizational knowledge of digital and online learning (Cameron and Green, 2019).

This digital transformation is required to be contextualised as online learning which is the use of technological devices, learning technology tools (LTIs) and the internet (Means *et al,* 2009; Tallent-Runnels et al, 2006; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). The online learning experience is framed around the interaction of the teacher with the virtual learning environment (VLE). It has been suggested by Farrelly, Costello and

Doolon (2020) the following metaphors describe the types of VLEs; *the straitjacket, the behemoth, the digital carpark, the safe space, the smorgasbord and the pathfinder*. We argue these metaphors can be used to describe the interactions of staff with online learning and the challenges they have faced in this new landscape of designing online pedagogic practices.

We proposed the '*straitjacket*' is the teacher who sees the VLE as a fixed storage device which cannot be used for interactive and performative teaching, therefore leading to resistance and they seek reassurance the 'old ways' will return post pandemic. The *'behemoth'* is a teacher who see the limitations of the VLE due to the offering of learning technology tools (LTIs) available where they have no choice of what they use in their pedagogic design. The '*Digital Carpark'* teacher see the VLE as a storage bin and like the *'straitjacket'* do not see potential for interaction and engagement, they view engagement as verbal interaction and expect the material within the VLE to be for convenience. The *'Safe Space'* teacher adopts interactive approaches within the VLE including their choice of communication and collaborative tools which cannot replace the performative nature of teaching face to face, however, they design pedagogy which is framed around online discussions, debates and interactions using the LTI tools available. The '*Smorgasbord'* teacher recognises and embrace the variety of functionality which a VLE offers. These teachers are agile in their pedagogic design and responsive to different learner needs so design online delivery to take into account a range of learner needs rather than a 'one size fits all' approach. Finally, the *'Pathfinder'* teacher is aware of the future developments of online learning, the potential for VLEs to change and reshape pedagogic practice and curriculum design.

The metaphorical conceptualisation of teacher interaction with online learning pedagogy has allowed for understanding and consideration for the challenges during these turbulent times and brought to the 'surface' the support, guidance and change in ways of working for teachers in HEI. These challenges have been met with anxiety, apprehension and uncertainty. We suggest this is a pedagogic challenge as teachers within HEIs are familiar, comfortable and 'used' to face to face classroom settings for teaching where the teacher and the learner can observe non-verbal cues and body language (Nambiar, 2020, p784). This is one of the main challenges as

this is difficult to replicate online through interactions with learners who are apprehensive and demonstrate this by not turning on their cameras or speaking to the teacher. They will ‘talk’ and interact using the chat function however this has to be taken into the type of learner (age, nationality, experience of higher education, personality, motivation to study).

This should also be considered in terms of inclusion and the challenges for learners with invisible and unseen disabilities (Barkas, Armstrong and Bishop, 2020) or learners who join the education through diverse paths (Foster, Mulroy and Carver, 2020) as they absorb explicit knowledge and tacit skills (Barkas and Armstrong, forthcoming). This should also take into account ‘Place’ (Nobari and Armstrong, 2020), the value of learner relationships in the internationalisation of Higher Education (Killick and Foster, 2021) and the empowering nature of cross-cultural relationships in both face to face and online diverse settings (Foster, 2017).

We propose and recognise the challenges facing teachers in HEIs moving from a physical classroom on campus where their craft and art of performance as a teacher is accessible to a virtual online learning space.

We consider these in the support which can be provided for this digital transformation of pedagogy from a strategic perspective led by a Head of School and the operational support provided by a Digital Learning and Teaching Lead.

Methodology and Method

This study was framed within a critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2017) as a lifeography (Janesik, 2019). This qualitative interpretation of reflexive accounts allowed for agency and voice of the authors as they through a collaborative autoethnographic approach (Blalock and Akehi, 2017) expressed their perceptions and perspectives of their position of managing the digital transformation of online learning as a reaction to Covid-19 global pandemic.

The conversations were in the form of letters of praxis (Janesick, 2019) as this gave us ontological permission to reflect on and consider how our roles were impacted by

the covid-19 pandemic and how we responded to the challenges. These letters expressed the practical wisdom and dialectics (Eikeland, 2012) of the authors. Table 1 below outlines the purpose of these letters of praxis:

Letter	Author	Purpose
1	DLTL	The 1st letter was a reflection from the DLTL in terms of their perspective and perception of the challenges facing staff with the School of Business and Management.
2	Head of School	The 2nd letter was a response to the 1st letter and this provided the strategic and managerial insights of the Head of School.
3	DLTL	The 3rd letter was a reflection by the DLTL taking into account practical wisdom and dialectics
4	Head of School	The 4th and final letter was a reflection from the Head of School in terms of strategic support for hybrid delivery.

Table 1: Letters of Praxis Purpose

This has been framed as a metaphorical account as the letters act as a device for reflexive dialogue and discussion as a critical incident analysis (Ripamonti et al, 2016). This is conceptualised as the '*teacher interaction with online learning delivery'*. Within the analysis, we position ourselves within our distinct organisational roles (Head of School; Digital Learning and Teaching Lead), so this provides the ontological position of this study. These challenges for teachers are framed using the metaphorical conceptualisation, see Table 2 below:

Metaphorical Representation	Description	Located
Straitjacket	A teacher who sees the VLE as a fixed storage device which cannot be used for interactive and performative teaching, therefore leading to resistance and they seek reassurance the 'old ways will return post pandemic.	Letters 1 and 2
Behemoth	A teacher who see the limitations of the VLE due to the offering of learning technology tools (LTIs) available where they have no choice of what they use in their pedagogic design.	Letters 1 and 2
Digital Carpark	A teacher sees the VLE as a storage bin and like the *'straitjacket'* does not see the potential for interaction and engagement, they view engagement as verbal interaction and expect the material within the VLE to be for convenience.	Letters 1 and 2
Safe Space	A teacher who adopts interactive approaches within the VLE including their choice of communication and collaborative tools which cannot replace the performative nature of teaching face to face, however, they design pedagogy which is framed around online discussions, debates and interactions using the LTI tools available.	Letters 1,2 and 3
Smorgasbord	A teacher who recognises and embraces the variety of functionality which a VLE offers. These teachers are agile in their pedagogic design and responsive to different learner needs so design online delivery to take into account a range of learner needs rather than a 'one size fits all approach.	Letters 3 and 4
Pathfinder'	A teacher is aware of the future developments of online learning, the potential for VLEs to change and reshape pedagogic practice and curriculum design.	Letters 3 and 4

Table 2: Metaphorical Representation and Analytical Frame for the Study

We recognise and appreciate the 'subjective' nature of the letters, they have been written through the lens of the authors and as these are framed within a critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2017) they are not intended to be an account of the experiences of everyone who works with an HEI. They are intended to present the perspectives of two actors who have found themselves with distinct roles and challenges of digital transformation by moving online during the Covid-19 global pandemic.

Findings

Background to Study

The context for this study is based on the acceleration of digital transformation within the School of Business and Management due to Covid-19. Before Covid-19 the learning and teaching approaches were mainly face to face through lectures, workshops and seminars (as synchronous learning where the learners could receive feedback ‘live’). The virtual learning environment (VLE) Canvas was used in a range of ways to support the face to face teaching sessions. There were examples of digital learning where colleagues had adapted innovative and creative methods of using digital in their pedagogy. In March 2020 the learning and teaching landscape changed which included a change in the language of learning; online learning instead of face to face; asynchronous (learning happened at a pace suitable for the learner and this was facilitated by online approaches and especially the use of the VLE) and synchronous learning; hybrid learning (mixture of traditional face to face and online); instructional and content design; storyboards for learning design. There were numerous challenges for the School and the teaching staff, and this are reflected in the lifeography. These acted as reflexive accounts is in the form of four letters of praxis between the Head of School of Business and Management and the Digital Teaching and Learning Lead.

Letter 1: Straitjackets, Behemoths, Digital Carparks and Safe Spaces (Part 1)

Dear Monika,

I reflect back on moving online in March 2020, it was chaotic and stressful, however, once I decided how I was going to support the students on my module it became clearer. As I delivered a postgraduate module online in the summer, I was able to experiment and practice instructional design, this was also supported by my links with The HEP project.

During this time, I was notified I was appointed as Digital Learning and Teaching Lead (DLTL). The role was due to start in September 2020; however, I attended the DLTL meetings every two weeks before I started my annual leave. This group started to discuss how we could support our colleagues. There were also priorities from the School Leadership Team (SLT).

It was not entirely clear what this role was meant to be. this confusion did present challenges. I wanted to move ahead and start to make sense of the role, as well as developing my online pedagogic practice for semester 1 for 2020-21.

Once objectives were agreed and with looking back, reflecting on what worked due to experimentation and practise I was able to explore how online delivery could enhance the learning experience of my students.

As DLTL I have faced challenges which include;

- *the range of digital skills of colleagues*
- *Setting boundaries for this role*
- *Exploring how to support colleagues*
- *Recognising anxiety, apprehension from students and colleagues*
- *Recognising the range of digital poverty which existed for our learners*

As we approach the end of semester 1, I am starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel, this transformational learning at a personal, and organisational level is started to take shape.

So, as I move forward with my role, I ask what would you like the DLTL to do for the School of Business and Management to support online learning?

Yours sincerely

Paul-Alan

Letter 2: Straitjackets, Behemoths, Digital Carparks and Safe Space (Part 2)

Dear Paul-Alan

Thank you for the letter and your reflections on our transition to online and your role as DLTL.

My reflections on the early days of the transition are that as a Head of School my main concern first was to provide support especially wellbeing and pastoral support to students and staff to face the immediate challenges of such a big change in how we interact, how we engage with the students.

There was a sense of the team coming together very quickly to support one another and so we have gradually moved from chaos and unknown to taking each day and each week together, supporting one another. The main priority for me as the Head and for all Colleagues has been student experience, to ensure it is as good as we can offer with the change to online not affecting it, perhaps even enabling it to be better. My second priority was and remains to this day to ensure we look after our staff; we support them and look after their wellbeing.

Gradually we have moved from the short term, just to get on top of the chaos and to be in control, to the longer term starting to plan ahead, using lessons learned and providing training and support to prepare for the longer-term solutions online.

When the role of DLTL was created, I was delighted that you have applied, as I was aware about your expertise online but also how respected you are amongst colleagues and how well you work with the team. This role appointed to 'one of us' who knows the team, strengths and weaknesses, was a very good move.

The objectives we have agreed fitted very well with our immediate needs and also looking forward. However, the pandemic has meant we have to constantly review and evaluate our priorities as they change based on the external factors. I think you have developed your objectives very well. your guidance and expertise were well appreciated by the Colleagues.

Yes, I agree there have been challenges for the DLTL role as for everyone in this very fast-moving transition to online whilst constantly facing the unknown and new developments. I would say the challenges you have faced are still with us and we have to work together to address them where we can. But we have also learned an awful lot, from the initial appetite for all things online and your assistance required a lot, to Colleagues now picking up more and more skills and also starting to get used to how the relationship with DLTL should work i.e. you provide guidance and advice

not a 1:1 tutoring function and that Colleagues need to take some responsibility for their own development needs by engaging with the available solutions and training.

Going forward, I think we need to continue to support Colleagues as you have done first of all by being a point of contact, sometimes to help with a solution or sometimes to remind Colleagues where to find a solution. Beyond online, we are going to be working on the Curriculum Transformation implementation in semester 2 which has an aspiration to include digital in all modules and programmes. The new Director for Digital First in the University will be our excellent contact for this, but I also hope you can assist Colleagues working on the modules how to include this either as a skill, as a topic to explore in relation to the subject etc. Finally, we also need your support to develop the new modules using the ID approach.

I hope this helps point you in the right direction but happy to discuss this further. Thank you again for all your hard work supporting the School and looking forward to further work together.

Best wishes

Monika

Letter 3: Safe Spaces, Smorgasbords and Pathfinders

Dear Monika,

As we move towards the end of semester one and we consider the challenges ahead there are still challenges for the School, the DLTL and all colleagues. We have learnt a great deal and have made significant changes to the way we teach, deliver our material and interact with our learners. There is still a sense of apprehension as we start to grapple with this new way of delivery.

There have been the early adopters who have embraced this change and found ways of making it work for them; there have been the experienced teachers who have grappled with technology and with support have found ways which they are comfortable with; and the final group are the guardians of the old ways who have been professional, supported their learners and have been looking forward to the way it was before the global pandemic.

The DLTL is in an unusual situation as they are an early adopter and they have objectives to fulfil, however they are not part of the existing structures, processes and practices of the University. This does present challenges! I know there are discussions ongoing about the role of DLTL and how this can support instructional design of curriculum, modules and programmes and looking beyond 2020-21. There has been digital transformation and numerous examples of 'good online learning design'. We still have challenges in support the learner who is isolated and does not have the digital skills, software and hardware to be able to interact with the online delivery. Was also have challenges with the upskilling of teachers and the routines we have developed since March 2020.

The use of instructional design (ID) will frame and support this and can be translated and transfer to transform blended learning, hybrid learning and online learning. It is the role of the DLTL to work in partnership and collaborate with Instructional and Content Designers and act as a pathfinder for their colleagues. We need to make sure we continue to share practice and share ideas from the DLTL group within the members of the School. We need to co construct meaning with the learners and appreciate there is not one way of delivering our teaching material.

We still need to support those colleagues who are apprehensive and provide opportunities for development and bespoke pedagogic design within a culture of inclusivity for all learners.

There is so much potential for technology enabled learning which offers agility for the teacher and the learner, it represents the characteristics of the commuter student, those from a widening participation background, international backgrounds and mature students. However, we have to be mindful of the barriers including;

- *Need for experiential learning and practice which is difficult to translate the tacit skills developments online*
- *Need for social learning and cohesion which is more difficult to translate online*
- *Recognition of a diverse range of digital skills from learners and teachers*
- *Access to software, broadband, study space, hardware and online learning familiarity which can be impacted by digital poverty*
- *Space and time to design and develop online learning pedagogies*

I look forward to reflecting on the successes and the areas for development from semester 1 as we move into semester 2 and beyond 2020-21.

Yours sincerely

Paul-Alan

Letter 4: Smorgasbords and Pathfinders

Dear Paul-Alan

You have captured so well the spectrum of change and the journey we are on as a School and as a group of individuals, each with a single story, but together being a strong team, supporting one another for success.

I couldn't agree more that we are not there yet, our journey continues into the new year 2021 but we are so much stronger, we have learned about the digital spaces as enablers to learning and we have also searched hard and found so much strength in the team. With your lead as DLTL joined by the Instructional Designers joining the School, I am optimistic that our learning will continue but now in a more structured way, our path clearer with the Instructional Design now embedded in what we do, our tools tried and tested and our skillset so much more prepared to face the challenges of the online and hybrid delivery. Our students too now have developed the skills and confidence to engage with us in the blended learning spaces. They still face many barriers and challenges, but I am confident we are well equipped to support them to become confident navigators of the digital learning spaces.

I wish to thank you for your support for Colleagues and students, guiding us in the labyrinth of new skills and spaces, the early days of unchartered waters and then moving to feeling safer and more confident, we couldn't have done it without your guidance! I look forward to working together in the months to come to ensure our students have a fulfilling experience and that we draw on each other strengths to help support it.

With best wishes

Monika

Discussion

The accelerated pace of digital transformation in the guise of online learning, hybrid learning due to the Covid-19 global pandemic should not be underestimated. This new labyrinth of learning has presented challenges for the un-learning and re-learning of routines for both learners (students) and the teachers. This interaction of the teacher with online learning pedagogic practice, curriculum development and instructional design has been presented in this paper as a metaphorical epistemological journey through the liminal space of co construction of meaning between a Head of School and a Digital Learning and Teaching Lead.

The letters of praxis have illuminated this co construction of meaning as the authors have identified the unlearning and relearning required for digital transformation;

Unlearning for Straitjackets, Behemoths and Digital Carparks

The challenges for digital transformation have the cultural and paradigm shift within HEIs. The challenges to be responsive, upskill, reskill and deal with the complexity and messiness of digital transformation in the form of online and or hybrid learning. Changing routines is required to transform using digital platforms (including a VLE) and the tools located within the VLE. The Covid-19 global pandemic has quickened the digital transformation process which has impacted on the teacher. The confusion, anxiety, overwhelming feelings of this transformation cannot be underestimated. To move away from being straitjackets, behemoths and digital carparks requires un-learning and this requires the School community to come together with the support at managerial levels and through change agents (role modelling, for example, a Digital Learning and Teaching Lead) through conversations, staff development, drawing expertise from instructional designers, content designers and learning technologists.

Un-learning will only happen if teachers are supported in this digital transformation landscape. There is a need to recognise the human in this shift towards online and hybrid blended approaches. The concern with the wellbeing of teachers at the frontline of the transformation continues to be a primary concern.

Unlearning and relearning for Safe Spaces and Smorgasbords

This digital transformation requires space, support and time and this is difficult as teachers are reacting to every changing landscape. Practice sharing, working as communities of practice, being open is how teachers can relearn and develop pedagogic practice and practises. The reflexive approach to pedagogic design and through communication and conversations with the learners as a collaborative approach can overcome some of the challenge's teachers face.

The learners we interact with have their own challenges including digital poverty, caring and work responsibilities. This adds to the digital transformation landscape both at regional, national and international levels. Inclusive pedagogic approaches are also part of this digital transformation landscape and this will require staff development, managerial support, support from experts in online learning design.

Re-learning and lead by Pathfinders

The lived experience of teachers during this digital transformation during a global pandemic cannot be a short-term reaction, we should be aiming to be pathfinders and be proactive in developing online, blended technology enabled pedagogic practices. The global pandemic has hastened this digital transformation and there are still challenges including replicated informal social space which happens in physical classrooms and on campus. This is an existing challenge and pathfinders will explore how technology can provide safe social learning spaces to replicate informal parts of university life.

Conclusion

This paper presented a small scale critical qualitative inquiry as a reflexive dialogic collaborative auto ethnographic lifeography in the form of letters. These letters aimed to draw out the perspectives of a Head of School and a Digital Learning and Teaching Lead. We are not generalising these letters, we are presenting this as lived experience as qualitative observation, interpretation of lived experience.

We framed this as a metaphorical representation of teacher interactions with virtual learning environments to suggest the range of digital transformations at individual level and as a School community. This included personal reflections as insights and challenges this learning community are facing during this global pandemic. It also presents a framework for future discourse and debate as we make our ways through the digital transformation landscapes as we unlearn, relearn and upskills and reskill online and hybrid blended approaches which will become part of the fabric of HEIs beyond the global pandemic.

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Professor Monika Foster (ORCID ID: 000-002-224-1003) is the Head of School, Business and Management, working with students as partners, Monika has had a transformational impact on student experience including enhanced transitions for mature and international students in the UK, and the development of internationalized curriculum in the UK and internationally. Monika's external profile includes the award of Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, and advisory role with HEA to develop a national Framework for Internationalisation, and a title of Visiting Professor from Shandong University of Finance, People's Republic of China. Monika's research interests lie in cross-cultural management, employability, internationalization of higher education, intercultural aspects, and leadership and change management. Furthermore, her research interests lie in international mobility, study destination choices and internationalisation of the curriculum. Monika has published her research internationally and in the UK. She has been an Editor for a selection of academic journals.