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EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT DURING THE “DIGITAL PIVOT”: SUPPORTING TEACHING STAFF TO SUPPORT ONLINE LEARNERS

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Abstract

This session reflects on the digital pivot, with contributions from several lecturers who will share their experiences of the support they received through a formal accredited teaching programme delivered by the educational development team at a UK university.

In spring 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic led to the suspension of face-to-face teaching at universities around the world. Many staff had to adopt what was called ‘Emergency Remote Teaching’ and shift face to face learning online [1]. This caused a variety of challenges as prior to this many were using technology in relatively limited ways [2]. At our institution, three groups of staff have now completed the module EDM116: Technology Enabled Academic Practice since the pandemic broke out. Meanwhile two cohorts have completed the module EDM122: Digital Literacies and Open Practice. These modules are part of the MA in Academic Practice.

In this paper we will explore the role that these modules played in supporting staff in the rapid shift to online learning. We will share insights from staff who completed the modules and who will discuss how their experiences studying on the modules shaped the way they developed online learning for their own students. We will share some of the resources, theories and approaches discussed in the module that participants have found helpful in planning online teaching, such as Laurillard’s Conversational Framework [3], and the importance of concepts such as open education practices (OEP) and ‘visitors and residents’ [4] that shapes their own and students experience of the digital environment. We will also consider the role other types of support played in helping manage the shift to online teaching, for example, educational technology workshops, online guidance and informal support from peers.

Finally, it will be a chance to share good practice with peers in designing online and blended learning and any strategies used to develop online teaching during the crisis. Participants will reflect on their own experiences and also discover useful resources to improve the quality of online or blended learning.

Keywords: Educational development, digital education, staff development

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the support given to teaching staff at City, University of London (City) to help manage the shift to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. It focuses on the role that the modules on technology enabled academic practice played and reports on the experiences of three staff who completed this module during the academic year 2020/2021 as well as reflections from the module tutors. The modules are part of the Masters in Academic Practice (MAAP) offered at City which is a teaching qualification in higher education accredited by AdvanceHE. In the paper we share some of resources, theories and approaches discussed in the module that participants found helpful in planning their online teaching. We also consider the role other types of support played in helping manage the shift to online learning, such as workshops, guidance and informal support from their peers.

1.1 The Masters in Academic Practice

The digital pivot at City took place in mid-March 2020 shortly before the UK went into a national lockdown when all face-to-face teaching was suspended. This meant that in addition to teaching for our campus-based students, the MAAP programme also had to be shifted online. Three cohorts of staff have completed the module EDM116: Technology Enabled Academic Practice since the pandemic broke out. Meanwhile two cohorts have completed the module EDM122: Digital Literacies and Open Practice. These modules had been taught in a blended learning method prior to the pandemic, with dedicated teaching days where staff came onto campus to take part in workshops and support available in Moodle. The modules already included webinars and had some online activities that needed to be completed between teaching days. However, the pandemic led to both modules being shifted to be taught fully

online from March 2020. They have remained in this online format since this date as feedback from students and module tutors suggests this works well.

This paper focuses primarily on the experience of teaching EDM116 which is a 30-credit module typically taken by approximately 20 staff each year. In March 2020 the module was underway, with 18 members of staff enrolled - one face to face teaching day had taken place in January 2020 before the UK's national lockdown. The model used to shift the teaching days online was developed as part of the Emergency Remote Teaching provision adopted by the programme team. It included live teaching delivered on Teams and Zoom and replacing some classroom activities with online activities. As dedicated teaching days were already in people's calendars, these became days where synchronous online teaching took place in two blocks, 10-11.30am in the morning and 3-4pm in the afternoon. Some of the content was delivered ahead of the teaching day, for example as pre-reading, a video to watch or a short activity to undertake. Some activities were scheduled to be undertaken during the middle part of the day, either as individual, pair or group activities and some were to be undertaken after the teaching day. This allowed the existing learning activities and content from a day to be delivered in manageable chunks and to minimise the amount of time staff needed to be online.

1.2 Overview of the module content

EDM116 was designed as a blended learning course from the outset, so shifting it online was relatively straightforward, once the format for replacing the face-to-face teaching days had been determined. The design of the module meant that a number of the topics covered were particularly pertinent during the pandemic. These included:

- The concept of building an online community, establishing ground rules for online behaviour and expectations and using icebreakers - principles used in this module were also repurposed and used in educational technology and online teaching workshops run by City during the spring and summer of 2020.
- Teaching and learning theories related to the use of technology enabled practice – the module had always had a strong link to evidence and theory, with staff expected to provide a rationale for any technology they introduced into their own teaching and to underpin this with literature and evidence. This remained a core part of the module and allowed staff to plan the introduction of a new technology with a sound theoretical underpinning.
- Learning design principles – learning Design had always featured significantly in the module, however we adapted the approach to encourage staff to adopt the more simple model from Geoff Petty [5] – Present Apply Review, for shifting their teaching online rapidly but other staff found the more robust ABC model (based on Laurillard's [3] work) was particularly helpful.
- A focus on broader educational technology issues including digital accessibility and the value of learning analytics to help evaluate any teaching interventions continued to be important.
- Open educational practices are discussed in some detail in the module EDM122 however finding and using open educational resources became the topic of a popular educational technology workshop for staff delivered during the pandemic.

Theories and approaches discussed in the module that participants seemed to find helpful in planning online teaching, included Laurillard's Conversational Framework [3], and Salmon's Five Step Model [6]. Meanwhile in the module EDM122 the concept of 'visitors and residents' [4] was helpful for staff, shaping their understanding of their own and their students' experience of the digital environment. A particularly important theme in this module was around challenging the assumptions that all students were 'digital natives' and understanding this was a spectrum of engagement with tools and technologies for different purposes (personal and professional) helped staff a lot.

The module assessments also helped support staff in the shift to online teaching. The main assessment in EDM116 was a project to introduce a technology and reflect on its impact on their teaching. For many, their project was an opportunity to shift an aspect of their teaching online and reflect on this process. In EDM122 staff are expected to make a short video and this assignment provided practical skills in video making which were useful during the pandemic and involved reflecting on this process.

2 METHODOLOGY

The paper is a case study drawing on the experiences of three members of staff who completed the module EDM116 and who reflect on the role the module played supporting their shift to online teaching

during the pandemic. It also includes reflections from the two module tutors, as well as feedback from the formal module evaluation.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Student perspectives

The students who complete the Masters in Academic Practice are teaching staff at City. New staff are strongly recommended to complete the introductory certificate, and it is mandatory for graduate teaching assistants. This involves completing a 15-credit module on teaching, learning and assessment. Many staff choose to continue their studies to gain a postgraduate certificate, diploma or masters. This gives them the option to take the 30-credit module EDM116: Technology Enabled Academic Practice (TEAP). The module is popular, but during the pandemic requests to join the programme increased 50%, so that an additional iteration of the module ran in the academic year 2020/21. The following are reflections from three members of staff who completed the module during this year who briefly outline their TEAP final project and the benefits of the module to them.

3.1.1 *Lecturer in journalism*

A lecturer in the Journalism Department was teaching video creation and editing for undergraduate students. His project was to test out a tool called Flipgrid for group workshop sessions for developing practical filming and editing skills. This technology allows students to upload their videos and to collaborate and share best practice. He found that the module helped him to build a theoretical understanding of the role technology can play in teaching and learning. It was also a valuable way of sharing experiences with peers. He also reflected on how technology can shape and develop learning experiences, partly through both studying and teaching online during the pandemic.

3.1.2 *Teaching assistant in engineering*

A teaching assistant in the Department of Engineering was looking to shift their lab sessions online and found two models particularly useful to underpin their approach: Present, Apply, Review by Petty [5] and Salmon's Five Stage model [6]. They reflected on how the module helped them to become more open minded to a variety of technology-enabled teaching methods and tools. They also found they were able to review teaching theories and apply their knowledge as part of the final assessment. For this member of staff, the module was a valuable peer learning experience, being part of an online learning community.

3.1.3 *Lecturer in organisational psychology*

Finally, a lecturer in organisational psychology developed an asynchronous short online course for students as her final project on quantitative research methods and statistics. Taking the module was a chance to find out about new technologies including some of the advanced features of Moodle, including the Moodle Wiki and H5P, which allows interactive videos to be created. She found herself reflecting on aspects of using technology in teaching she hadn't previously considered such as accessibility. She also explored how to build a community in the classroom within an online environment.

3.1.4 *Module feedback*

At City, formal module evaluation takes place at the end of the module and provides an opportunity for students to feedback on their experiences against a set of statements common to all modules. The module evaluation is completed online, and students are asked to rate each criterion on a scale of 1 (definitely disagree) to 5 (definitely agree). They also have the option to provide written feedback about the module delivery and anything else they wish to comment on.

EDM116 Technology Enabled Academic Practice

Module evaluations for Spring 2020 modules were cancelled, so only two of the three iterations of EDM116 received evaluations. The results are presented in Table 1. The scores for both modules are excellent and show the value of the module to participants. It should be noted that the response rate is less than half of participants.

Table 1 Module evaluation results for EDM116

Criterion	Average score September 2020 cohort Response rate 46.7% (7/15)	Average score February 2021 cohort Response rate 38.5% (5/13)
Teaching for this module	4.8	5.0
How to do well in this module	4.9	4.8
Academic support	4.8	5.0
Learning resources	4.9	4.8
Student Voice	4.7	5.0
Module overall	4.9	5.0

Qualitative feedback from the participants demonstrated that the module was beneficial in helping them to move their teaching online, for example one member of staff said:

“This module has been a great opportunity to explore online teaching. Taking the module over the past few months has provided me with a space to reflect on my experiences teaching online in the pandemic and helped me to plan the online components for my new blended modules.” (February 2021 participant)

3.2 Module tutor reflections

Reflecting on teaching during the pandemic using Gibbs’ model [7] helped us to evaluate the experience and to plan for future iterations of the programme. Gibbs’ model involves starting by describing the experience (as above), noting our feelings and thoughts, our evaluation of the experience, an analysis to make sense of the situation, a conclusion about what we learned and what we could have done differently and then finally creating an action plan for the future.

Both module tutors were involved in teaching on the MAAP in addition to running a range of other staff development activities. An overwhelming feeling while teaching these modules in 2020 was one of trying to manage a crisis, responding rapidly to an evolving situation and managing our own and our students’ stress levels caused by the global health crisis. Many academic staff taking the programme were clearly worried about their own health and extremely worried about impact of the overnight shift to online learning on their students. This meant many staff were looking for a practical, one-off workshop to help them get up to speed with all the technical skills they needed during the pandemic. This was clearly impractical, and some of the sessions run by the educational technology team involved managing staff expectations and explaining how they may need to attend several sessions and try out a range of options in order to be successful. It was clear that those staff who completed the technology modules benefitted more deeply and felt more supported and confident about teaching online. We were keen to provide people with practical ‘tips and tricks’ but to ensure everything we did was underpinned by the theory.

This approach of combining theory and practice influenced the way that one off educational technology workshops were also structured. However, it also meant we needed to approach our teaching and training with a high level of compassion, patience and be prepared to deal with unexpected events. Inevitably some staff had to withdraw from the programme during 2020/2021, sometimes unexpectedly if they or a family member became unwell. Very sadly we lost one member of the staff who passed away in December 2020, which was upsetting for the rest of the cohort. In light of the high level of personal trauma both the tutors and students on the programme were experiencing, the fact most staff were able to complete their studies was a testament to the importance they attached to the qualification. We also received formal and unsolicited feedback that suggested our approach to teaching and supporting their learning was successful which was in itself very rewarding.

Reflecting on what should be retained from the pandemic experience, feedback from academic staff on the programme was that they wanted their modules to remain online. Currently all our modules remain in this format and will do for the foreseeable future. Staff found it was a positive experience to study online, it gave them greater flexibility, but also helped them empathise with their own students. As tutors we reflected on how we could spend less time “spoon feeding staff” by delivering content and allow more time for discussion and sharing of experiences. The sense of community on the modules intensified considerably and at the start of every live teaching session we spent time checking in with the staff to see how people were feeling. Although we used some pre-recorded content, our experiences suggested being present and teaching synchronously benefitted the cohort to feel connected to the programme and to each other. Sessions delivered live provided a chance for questions and discussion, which staff really seemed to appreciate. Live teaching also helped the tutors to focus on the most relevant content and include additional resources for those who wanted to explore the topic more deeply. It was also clear that staff benefitted from being part of a cohort experiencing the pandemic and digital pivot together and the course became a learning community, where staff supported each other.

3.3 Other educational technology support at City University of London

In response to the pandemic and the need to move teaching online, City provided a range of resources and activities to support staff. These included over 100 educational technology and online teaching workshops, an online teaching toolkit that was visited by over 900 users, daily support drop-ins, regular good practice events and structured online modules to support specific schools. Considering the role other types of support played in helping manage the shift to online teaching, the variety of activities meant staff were able to find something to suit their needs and availability. Many staff were time poor during the pandemic, managing their increased workload and the stresses of life during a global health crisis. This meant the time commitment required to complete modules as part of the MAAP was compromised. However, we saw a high level of engagement with the workshops and other support activities.

It was important for us to ensure that EDM116 complemented the support available, for example, promoting relevant resources and workshops during the teaching sessions and ensuring that the approaches we used tied in with the approach being taken across the institution. An example of this was the incorporation of Petty’s [5] Present, Apply, Review model into the module alongside the existing use of the ABC learning design approach.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Supporting staff to teach online during the pandemic has been a highly challenging but also a rewarding experience. Staff at City who were teaching the MAAP programme had to shift their own programmes online, while supporting colleagues in the digital pivot. Engagement with the programme remained high, but staff clearly needed a range of options to support online teaching, depending on their own levels of knowledge, digital literacies and particular circumstances. It seems clear that one size does not fit all, but that accredited modules can provide a far deeper engagement with online learning than one-off training. During the conference we look forward to sharing further insights from our experience and also learning from others about how to best support teachers in higher education post-pandemic.

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