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We Close on Friday: A Case Study Pivot to Online Learning and Beyond at a UK Higher Education Institution

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Introduction

'We need to be fully online from next week, and the University is closing this Friday'. A similar refrain was probably one heard within every Higher Education Institution (HEI) across the UK in March 2020. Traditionally technology has been simultaneously embraced and resisted by academic colleagues (Scherer et al., 2019). Where technology had previously played a supporting factor in students' learning experiences in March 2020 it suddenly became the primary focus of efforts to maintain learning and teaching. Within this case study, we explore how the University of Bedfordshire in the UK transitioned through an emergency pivot to online learning, with a subsequent major change to the University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Our approach is innovative for

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two reasons: firstly, owing to the unusual size of the support team; which led to the methodology we utilised for the initial transition to online learning; secondly, modelling and developing a new way to implement Virtual Learning Environment change. Our evaluation is focused upon a subset of colleagues from the University's teaching faculties and student-facing support teams. We examine their experiences of changes implemented as a result of COVID led by us and at an institutional level.

This case study is comprised of three phases:

1. Phase 1 (reflection-in-action—Schön, 1991)—The authors' initial reaction to the COVID crisis; identifying and defining the key challenges for the organisation to move online rapidly.
2. Phase 2 (reflection-on-action—Schön, 1991)—Contextually effective change, considerations made initial phase of the COVID lockdown in the UK; the process of developing and informing change, and reflecting upon ways to support colleagues further
3. Phase 3 (reflection-on-action—Schön, 1991)—Moving forward to a new digital reality; evaluating change and supporting colleagues to optimise their digital learning practice and students' learning experiences.

The University took a centralised approach to change and so much of the policy and procedure initially developed sought to standardise colleagues' approaches, but we as authors were mindful of the potential to utilise the colleagues' expertise and the opportunity to utilise colleagues' autonomy to maintain and deliver learning. We borrowed from the ideas of Bercovitz and Feldman (2008) and Beckman and Cherwitz (2009) notion of academic entrepreneurship. By doing so we placed a focus upon colleagues' abilities and opportunities to innovate, and to form an online community for peer and self-support. Rather than focusing upon eventual commercial considerations (Bercovitz & Feldman, 2008), or working with an external community (Beckman & Cherwitz, 2009) our interpretation operates within the scope of our immediate academic community. We felt this to be a necessary catalyst for change.

A Brief Overview of the Institution

The University of Bedfordshire is a multi-site provider located in the East of England. It has two large campuses in Luton and Bedford. This is supplemented by provision also being provided in smaller study centres in Aylesbury, Milton Keynes, London, and Birmingham. In addition, the University works with partners nationally and all were impacted by the need to move online in different ways. As the University is a widening participation provider our student demographic represents a challenge for online delivery. Our experience is echoed by a recent Office for Students report (Barber, 2021) which describes the challenges of students' limited access to technology and opportunities to study. Our student community for our main campuses is also heavily comprised of local and commuter students. Consequently, our approach to the use of technology needed to be accessible to all students and be available at all times where a balance could be attained amongst the complexities of life and study. Our students are supported by 530 full-time equivalent academic staff and a similar number of professional services colleagues. At the start of the COVID crisis, the team supporting the Virtual Learning Environment consisted of 1.5 full-time equivalent staff.

Phase 1: Initial Reaction to the COVID Crisis

In this section, utilising Schön's (1991) reflection-in-action, we explore our initial reactions to learning that we would move online, how we used our knowledge and experience of technology and online learning implementations, and the immediate steps we took to implement change.

Like many institutions, before the pandemic, the Virtual Learning Environment (Blackboard Learn 9.1) was primarily used as a repository for documents with limited online pedagogic practice. Our Virtual Learning Environment usage was focused upon minimum acceptable standards (Jackson & Fearon, 2014; Reed & Watmough, 2015) with the intention that our activities would enhance NSS (National Student Survey; NSS, 2021) and unit-level outcomes. With the sudden arrival of

the pandemic, we could not solely rely on rules focused upon Virtual Learning Environment and learning and teaching standardisation—the pedagogy for online learning and student engagement is quite different. The purpose of our Virtual Learning Environment was no longer as a supplement to learning but became the primary vehicle for learning.

We set ourselves the goal of quickly transitioning to a model of online delivery that supported learning, teaching, and assessment which colleagues could quickly adopt and adapt. We focussed on delivering solutions by answering three key questions for colleagues:

a. What is the University's policy on online learning and what do I need to do immediately?
b. What practices could and should I adopt?
c. How can I manage the transition to support my students to learn online?

In considering these questions we took into account that colleagues would likely be overwhelmed by the support needs of students during a period of heightened global anxiety, their own personal circumstances, and their overstretched workloads that existed before the pandemic.

Phase 2: Contextually Effective Change— Our Considerations

In this phase we moved from Schön's (1991) reflection-in-action to reflection-on-action. In the early stages of the COVID crisis, our immediate response was to translate University policy into practical support for developing effective pedagogies that met institutional policy intentions. Once colleagues' approaches had time to bed in with students, and policies and methods of working had become established we were able to switch our approach from reflection-in-action (acting immediately) to reflection-on-action (reconsidering the situation and thinking forward) approach. Our approach allowed us to model the type of change that we wanted academic colleagues to adopt, showing them it in practice as

opposed to telling them what to do. Specifically, an interactive online community was provided in addition to our standardised support service.

Groups such as ALT (Association for Learning Technology), JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee), and BlackBoard (the University's Virtual Learning Environment provider) published a considerable amount of advice and guidance (e.g. BlackBoard's (BlackBoard, 2020) scaling teaching and learning advice: BlackBoard, 2020) and practitioners in social media spaces such as Twitter offered a plethora of examples of practice that could be adopted. However, not all of this practice was appropriate to our context as it was contrary to the policy decisions of the University. For example, the standard tool for online teaching was Collaborate rather than Microsoft Teams. We found external examples also made assumptions of skill, resources, and time from both a staff and student perspective that did not meet the needs of our institution.

Given the changing nature of the COVID pandemic activities were reactive and often tools-focused with a desire to experiment to find the most appropriate tools to provide continuity for students' learning—we considered this to be at the expense of consistency. As authors our own online learning experiences (learning, delivery, and development) also made us aware that a tools-focused approach often lacked effective supporting theories of implementation (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). Our approach was to curate a Community of Practice where we could offer colleagues an opportunity to seek advice and to engage with distilled examples of practice they could adopt. The community iteratively developed in three stages:

- firstly, specific advice for immediate and mid-term change. This was both text-based and involved short, recorded technology guides that mirrored the language of the University's policies and was repurposed from existing content.
- secondly, direction for effective changes for colleagues' own contexts (e.g. assessment and teaching) curated from sector good practice.
- thirdly, to place colleagues in a position to utilise their subject-level expertise to develop students' online learning experiences through live, office hour drop-in sessions and asynchronous discussion boards. Our

intended ethos was to develop an approach that was managing change **_with_** colleagues as opposed to imposing change.

What was the Rationale for a Community Approach?

We considered the possibility of making additions to our fixed Virtual Learning Environment standards (Jackson & Fearon, 2014; Reed & Watmough, 2015)—the method would be consistent with the position that we could maintain course outcomes (e.g. in the National Student Survey), but we decided in the midst of a fast-changing environment that providing a central single source of support and guidance would help support colleagues. We also anticipated that an online community would provide a regular opportunity to interact with us and other staff colleagues with the intention of sharing and developing innovative practice.

In working to introduce relevant examples that had resonance for our institutional context, we set out opportunities for colleagues to ask questions publicly and privately. The key for us was evangelising and instilling confidence in our staff colleagues so they could achieve their individual pedagogic goals. The focus of the content and support provided shifted over time, moving from a focus upon content creation, moving towards improving student engagement, and finally towards adapting to assessment and feedback processes.

Our intention and aspiration were that modelling good practice would install confidence in colleagues and would allow us to lead change rather than enforce and manage change. However, many colleagues did not engage and continued to focus upon live synchronous sessions. This meant instead of providing a truly transformative online learning experience with tasks and activities—colleagues and students utilised an approach that was focused upon delivering an online equivalent of classroom-based activities. This was a transfer of pedagogy rather than a transformation.

Phase 3: Moving Forward to a New Digital Reality

In this section we continue with the theme of Schön's reflection-on-action, and we focus upon our efforts to take the pedagogical lessons learned in phases 1 and 2 and apply them to the Virtual Learning Environment transition we undertook in the latter part of the second UK-wide lockdown (December 2020). On reflection the combination of major pedagogic and Virtual Learning Environment change was a bold decision, but we believed that our efforts would lead to an improved online learning experience for both staff and students.

Evaluation

In developing an evaluation for this unprecedented change, we wanted to consider how different disciplines and pedagogical practices aligned with a COVID-impacted way of working. We invited academic and support staff to participate in focus groups with a total of 36 spread across 6 focus groups (academic staff n = 23 and support staff n = 15). Participants came from three of the University's faculties (Business, Health—ten participants, Social Science—ten participants, and Creative Arts and Technologies—three participants); support staff participants were those who directly involved in the support of students online (Student Information Desk—two participants, Professional and Academic Development—six participants, and Learning Resources—seven participants). Participant groups (but not the participants) were selected purposefully (Cohen et al., 2007) to ensure adequate coverage of both academic and support services impacted by COVID-19.

Ethical approval was gained from the University's Institute for Research Applicable Computing (IRAC) and we conducted focus groups online following the BERA Ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018). Invitations to participate were made at an institutional level via the University's Virtual Learning Environment and via email invitations sent to faculties. Once colleagues had indicated an interest in participating the authors provided

each participant with a Participant Information Sheet which detailed the nature, purpose, and publishing outcomes of the research. Interviews were conducted in groups of a maximum of 10 participants to ensure that colleagues had an opportunity to participate.

During these focus groups we discussed the nature of colleagues' experiences during the COVID crisis. Each focus group was conducted, transcribed, and anonymised by one of the authors using Microsoft Teams. The resultant transcripts were coded using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were independently identified through iterative reading of the transcripts which were then discussed between the two coders.

When analysing the data from the focus groups, we also examined our own personal communications over the period of the change we implemented utilising a form of auto-ethnographic commentary (Holman-Jones, 2005). We wanted to ensure we had developed a sense of how our own attitudes and approaches changed over time, and how this impacted our decision-making.

Themes Emerging from Our Evaluation

The analysis highlighted five high-level themes which describe the experiences of our participants. Each is listed with supporting material from the focus group interviews.

Confidence: With Online Learning and Technology

The COVID pandemic presented a seismic challenge for colleagues, and this became clear in some of the comments surrounding the pivot to online learning and our own Virtual Learning Environment change. "I think it was fortunate because I was teaching a unit semester one, but it was a very small unit, so I was able to kind of it as a learning experience with the students" (Focus Group A). Staff who worked in roles supporting students' learning (Focus Group D) explained they found two key types of difficulty when dealing with students' confidence: "Some of their

[students] computer skills are very poor" and they spoke of students "not being able to handle technology", with online lectures students "don't know what they are supposed to be doing" and "they [the students] don't know what is expected of them". It is arguable that students often have difficulties of connection and understanding, but the pandemic would have forced previously connected students into isolation. Even if students could support each other, there was the difficulty of accessing learning. Teaching colleagues from Focus Group C focused their concerns of students' having the right technology "A lot of the students struggle because they didn't have very good equipment" and using technology to evidence attendance and "avoiding the [institutional] paranoia of those students who didn't turn up. We want to trace, record, etc.". These examples speak to the preparedness of students and of the need for the University to monitor and ensure students where engaging with their learning. A lack of equipment or the wrong type of equipment would not only prevent students from learning, but in students and staff colleagues' initial attempts to engage it may leave a lasting negative impression.

Communication: From Us as the Authors and Cascaded Institutionally from Senior Managers

During our journey communication and engaging with stakeholders, but a key problem endured; the issue of communicating change. From the focus group participants, it was evident that despite numerous communications about the introduction of Blackboard Ultra, its release was a shock to them. In some cases, there was an absence of communication through their faculty management structure however in others it was about overload. The sheer volume of communications about policy and procedural changes over the preceding months meant that often messages were ignored or unread. Focus group B described this in terms of unexpected magnitude: "No one said this sort of change had this sort of magnitude…" and "we would have approached the training materials differently"—there was a significant difference between "upgrade" and what was seen as a "new" product. Focus group C critiqued the lack of a "clear plan of communication as to what's coming and why it is coming",

and indicated the need to demonstrate piloting amongst staff and students. Despite the support provided staff felt this was mostly experienced "post-hoc" (Focus Group B) and often in response to problems rather than enhancing learning experiences. Communication is key, but there is an inherent overloading of resources needed to ensure all mediums and channels are covered. It does raise an important question about how best to engage with both staff and student groups.

Change: How It is Managed and Experienced

Despite three months of messaging, staff were unaware of the changes, putting them back into crisis mode as semester 1 began: panicked, reactive, and unable to adopt a reflective pedagogy first approach to its implementation. This challenge, we contend, is not unique to the pandemic, although exasperated by it. It speaks to the wider issues of workload and expectations of the already stretched staff. This resulted in what focus group c described as "a perfect storm". This volume of information, only served to create more pressure on the time-poor staff resulted in prioritisation meaning that communications seen as peripheral to their immediate concerns were likely to be ignored. Focus group C expressed indicated that a rationale would be more helpful than simply directing change "there have been examples in the past where a change has been made" and "why are we doing this way, and what might work best in terms of teaching and learning?". Following on from this comment participants also indicated the problem of assuming success in one department is generalisable to a different group: "the answer is: yes, it was done in [x subject] in Polhill [Bedford]". The comments made by our participants suggested that change was enforced rather than agreed. However, we did consider that colleagues had missed an earlier opportunity to engage with our communications and the difficulties resulted from missed opportunities for connections.

Workload Demands: With the Change to Online Learning and Supporting Students

In hindsight our approach should have taken into the account the difficulty that some units run in multiple locations. We envisaged that staff would give themselves enough time to experiment or work with existing units. Participants in group A described two problems: the inability to experiment or take risks when you have "hundreds of students on an undergrad unit" and the resultant inconsistency in departments and "Students were getting differential [and] inconsistent experiences with their [Virtual Learning Environment] engagement". In this specific focus group's case units run in multiple physical locations (in many cases over 15) and repeatedly in short form with some units repeating six times in one academic year. Focus Group D highlighted the problem of getting used to using technology to make recorded sessions engaging, but "it always took like twice the amount of time it was going to", but that teaching staff tended to create "an hour and half or two hours of Panopto [recordings]". Moving to online learning created difficulties for both teaching staff and those who engage students with study skills. Staff came under pressure to provide a continuity of learning, but equally to transition and change their practice to continue to engage students. Invariably with larger cohorts and distributed cohorts, there is a need for scalable change, and this placed teaching staff in a difficult position as they had to find answers and then distribute their solution rapidly.

Systematic Difficulties: Software and Institution Processes

For teaching staff difficulties stemmed from changes to tools commonly used in older versions of the Virtual Learning Environment: "you can't have an online journal if it's more than 50 people and you can't have an assessed online journal" (Focus Group B). Emphasis was being placed on the name of the tool rather than the functions it provided—an assignment with a link available for students to upload content would have sufficed. The pedagogical benefit of tools such as weekly quizzes in some

cases was perceived as superfluous, and in some cases to question "the target market of the product [BlackBoard]", and functions such as "attendance, quick tests and not the sort of functionality you need when you are teaching a Masters class" (focus group B). Colleagues had become used to viewing data related to students' virtual presence and this was taken to be an adequate method to clarify that students had engaged. As Muller (2018, p. 177) questions: "how useful is the information?"—presence is not engagement. Subsequently, whilst the notion of measuring presence satisfies colleagues that students are "attending" it cannot evidence the level to which students are gaining value from such activities. Though not highlighted by teaching staff, staff colleagues supporting students identified accessibility as a difficulty when working with online resources during lockdown and that the situation meant accessibility "even more amplified that everything has to be [accessible]" (Focus Group D). The development of accessible materials was naturally a priority for academic colleagues but required systematic effort. Parts of the newer Virtual Learning Environment automatically provided positive change and adjustments. However, colleagues placed emphasis on determining functional change within the VLE.

Doing Change to or with Colleagues?

Hindsight is a powerful tool, and where colleagues felt more challenged by change, it was generally accompanied by a conception that they had not been privy to the changes before they were imposed at the start of the COVID crisis and leading into our Virtual Learning Environment development. Change was being done to, rather than in concert with colleagues. It highlights issues of communication and dissemination from higher management to the front-line staff. Colleagues' focus was upon maintaining a continuity of teaching in the context of overstretched capacity within a pandemic allowing less time and space to think about systematic change. Even with the extensive resources, FAQs, video tutorials, and virtual tutorials, reactive approaches to challenges often lead to a crisis mentality leading. Therefore, despite building communities for supporting staff, there was still a huge demand for individualised support

resulting in emails or calls to our support team, often outside of the traditional office hours.

Ultimately, whilst our goal was to develop a collaborative and supportive approach to managing large-scale change with limited human resource, the data from our focus groups indicated that symbolic change (Bercovitz & Feldman, 2008) was more evident than substantive change. Colleagues attempted to replicate and relocate (to a different medium of delivery) their pedagogies and approaches they used in class. In some cases, colleagues transferred pedagogy rather than taking advantage of new features of the new Virtual Learning Environment. The driver for this was partly an institutional mandate for asynchronous learning in the first national lockdown.

Scholarship on Long-term Impacts and Recommendations

Much of this case study has focused on the necessary. We simply had no choice when the pandemic arrived—technology was the only medium available. However, there are elements of practice that staff have felt were preferable to more traditional face-to-face modes. For example, our staff have valued and adapted to the efficiencies that providing one-to-one and group online communication brings, especially online live document editing and the reduction of travel for both staff and students. Consequently, institutional conversations surrounding teaching and learning have begun to focus on what elements of this emergency mode should become part of the business of usual. This of course assumes that the nature of learning and teaching will be back to "normal" in late 2021. Regardless of what the "new normal" looks like, our experiences and findings lead us to recommend the development of more experiential modes of training, engagement, and ongoing support to facilitate colleagues' pedagogic goals. We acknowledge that the needs of colleagues are likely to be diverse, heterogeneous, and dynamic as student, sector, and workplace expectations evolve. Rapid change created the conditions for more rapid, experimental approaches to teaching and learning which can often

be less possible within prior academic frameworks. We make three recommendations.

Firstly, a need to develop a flexible and investigative approach to developing online pedagogies. This is where we believe the concept of developing entrepreneurship (Bercovitz & Feldman, 2008; Beckman & Cherwitz, 2009) might present significant utility in thinking more flexibly about pedagogy. In the event that a similar effort would be attempted in another institution, our advice would be to start earlier and to place emphasis upon reporting and feedback to encourage engagement.

Secondly, ongoing change and improvement need to be carefully managed and evaluated. Communication and understanding alongside effective support are vital to enable colleagues to develop confidence and competence with digital technologies. For staff to buy in to change, they need to feel like they are active participants and not the passive recipients. Whilst for some change will always be a source of discomfort, our recommendation is that an early and coordinated collaborative effort would assist with adoption. It is a reflection of our method of adoption due to the speed of our transition both to online learning and the changes to our Virtual Learning Environment. For us this would lead the University in adopting theory-based led approaches. This could include greater integration of student surveys at course and unit level that allow for better understanding of what works (or indeed what does not work) about varied modes of delivery. However, it should reach beyond satisfaction-based measures and involve scholarship on teaching and learning and reflection upon practice to understand the impact of these changes on teaching and learning. This could include existing mechanisms such as Advance HE fellowship applications but also through creating ongoing time and space for colleagues to share practice and to continue to support each the use of digital learning within their own subjects.

Finally, one of the most significant issues that needs to be engaged with by the institution and more widely in the sector: the workload involved in digital learning. Within the emergency mode of online learning, staff were expected to accommodate the extra work to take learning online within existing workload models. This often meant the de-prioritisation of other key elements of their role such as research. We can also see from this case that a lot of the change happened due to a lot of extended

working days, resilience and enthusiasm of staff, and a crisis management mentality. One year on, we are seeing some of the goodwill slipping away. Moreover, this approach fails to acknowledge the labour needed to develop high-quality teaching and learning in this mode. Pushing staff beyond manageable workloads is not a sustainable model and if digital learning is to play an increasing role in higher education going forward, staff need to be given the time to properly develop their digital literacies, reflect upon their approaches and develop pedagogically led materials. This requires rethinking the workload planning assumptions of academic staff, and investment of time and resources to do effectively. It also requires frank and honest conversations about the need for expert learning technologists and IT support staff to develop and support the workforce long-term. We cannot rely solely on a "make do and mend" strategy that allowed us to ride out the storm.

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