Student Perspectives on the Impact
of COVID-19 on Learning

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Abstract.

COVID-19 caused major adjustments to teaching environments, educational strategies and class delivery, with a significant impact on students' learning experience. This reflective piece outlines the impact of COVID-19 on two students' experiences of learning, on a 1-year blended postgraduate diploma in nursing education.

Keywords: COVID-19, learning, online learning, postgraduate education, student engagement

1.   Introduction

According to Livingston (2018), societal and governmental expectations have placed substantial challenges on educators to adapt their teaching outside of their personal teaching philosophy in order to meet the needs of a diverse student population. These challenges were further exacerbated by COVID-19 which required teachers to radically adjust their teaching environment, educational strategies, and class delivery, with a subsequent, significant effect on the students' learning experience.

This reflective piece uses Gibbs' reflective cycle (1988) to describe and analyse our learning experience under the restrictions associated with COVID-19. In order to continuously learn and grow, we felt that reflecting on this situation would allow us to develop further, both personally and professionally. Gibbs' reflective cycle (1988) is a systematic framework that enables reflection on both positive and negative experiences that provide the basis for learning and

planning for future experiences. In this context, the Gibbs' cycle (1988) will be used to reflect on the impact of COVID-19 on the learning and wider academic experience of two postgraduate students on a one-year blended learning postgraduate diploma in nursing education.

2.   The Reflection

2.1 Description.

The authors were postgraduate students in higher education undertaking a level 9, one-year full time blended learning programme in nursing education. The first semester consisted of four full day face-to-face workshops that were timetabled across the semester. The purpose of these workshops was to help students to summarise, integrate and apply learning completed independently as well as providing them with opportunities to practice professional skills applicable to the course. In addition, a learning schedule was shared with students via Blackboard, an online teaching and learning management system where students were encouraged to engage in recommended readings and other independent individual activities in a timely manner. A blog was set up also within Blackboard so that students could interact and share their ideas. There was also a mandatory requirement for students to complete 100 hours of teaching as part of the programme.

As a result of COVID-19, face-to-face workshops in semester two were cancelled and an entire module within the programme was delivered online using Blackboard. Most of the workshop elements were replaced with PowerPoint slides, reading materials, a one-hour online session hosted one evening by a lecturer, optional discussion forums and the blog which was used as the main point of interaction between students. Finally, students were expected to deliver some of the 100 mandatory teaching hours online in order to meet the requirements of the course. This shift to online teaching also posed numerous challenges to us as 'novice' teachers. We had to quickly adjust the traditional teaching styles we had developed, to embrace technology and deliver lessons online. This was challenging for us as novice teachers trying to apply these new innovative teaching methods, alongside the students trying to navigate their way with unfamiliar technology and new ways of learning.

2.2 Feelings.

While there was consistent learning material available via Blackboard and sufficient

technological networks for students to collaborate and remain interactive online, it is impossible to deny the feeling of isolation that COVID-19 exerted in the final semester of our studies. Utilising an online platform for learning, while facilitating other personal commitments such as family life, working full time and striving to complete the mandatory teaching hours for the course made it difficult to stay motivated at times. At various points we felt confused, unsure of how to proceed but rarely sought clarification from academic staff due to the absence of face-to-face interaction and continued to the best of our abilities.

We were disappointed to lose out on the workshop days with academic staff as we found the face-to-face contact important to receive reassurance, summarise learning, and gain a broader perspective, troubleshoot, re-evaluate, and establish further learning goals.

There was a reduction in participation in the blog and optional learning forums by most students due to the amount of time it took to ensure that entries in any online forum were reflecting academic writing standards with little direct benefit as marks were not awarded for participation. Additionally, we missed connecting with peers face-to-face and learning informally from each other's experiences which always helped focus our learning whilst enhancing motivation to learn. Learning in a small group classroom provided a free, non-judgemental environment for students to explore, share ideas, create understanding and find new meaning in their learning.

2.3 Evaluation.

Whilst Blackboard was a valuable learning platform, there were times where we found it may have impeded our learning. Despite academic staff creating an open environment, we feel we may have held back during discussions for fear of saying the wrong thing or being misjudged. Moreover, Blackboard Collaborate sessions were held with audio only to facilitate students with remote broadband access, so not being able to 'see' our peers and lecturers made group conversations more difficult, as there was a feeling of disconnectedness and isolation from the group. There were often occasions we were tempted to ask questions but refrained and attempted to trouble shoot with peers via a WhatsApp group later.

We felt our approach to our studies changed during the second semester, we were much more strategic, focusing our learning towards achievement of the assessment criteria as opposed to following a weekly learning schedule that was available via Blackboard. This was partly due to

the lack of structure and the diminished sense of belonging within the group, in addition to the changes in our personal lives caused by the pandemic such as trying to work from home.

The blogs were left open, often without new entries for prolonged periods of time. Lecture slides were available but, in some instances, the concise bullet points provided very limited information which was inadequate to our learning needs. Where lectures were provided online with audio voiceover, it enhanced our learning and understanding.

The course was initially designed to include workshops as students progressed through various topics across the learning schedule to summarise learning and to help students to relate theory and practice, providing students with the opportunity to learn together and from each other's diverse experiences and backgrounds. Thomas *et al.* (2014) highlight the value of students feeling this sense of belonging in order to have success with online learning.

2.4 Analysis.

Student engagement is a central concept in the literature on teaching and learning in higher education (Chapman, 2003). Zepke and Leach (2010) emphasise the importance of engagement between students and between students and lecturers. Docherty *et al.* (2018) identified students' active engagement in learning as central to their academic success. Marton and Saljo's seminal studies (1976a & 1976b) found that more deeply engaged students are motivated to learn by intrinsic interest in the subject rather than by fear of failing the assessments and that they are more likely to understand what they have learned. Finally, Campbell and Mayer (2009) found that students who engage deeply with learning are better equipped for life-long learning.

Engagement between students and lecturers was significantly hindered by moving the workshops online, as the face-to-face time allowed relationships to be built with each of the lecturers. Building relationships between students and lecturers can be beneficial for active engagement in classes (Dismore *et al.,* 2019; Bramble *et al.,* 2018). However, it was challenging to continue to build these relationships with lack of contact, and therefore achieve full engagement within the online learning environment.

Reinke (2019) found that if students are emotionally engaged, they will experience emotive reactions including a sense of belonging, enjoyment, and interest, and when students feel this

sense of belonging, their classroom engagement improves (Bryson, 2014). With online learning, it was difficult to achieve this 'sense of belonging' as time spent with peers online was limited, as some students were less engaged due to other commitments as they tried to juggle life in lockdown with learning.

This lack of engagement during online learning between students and between lecturers and students was challenging (Bowcock & Peters, 2016). Numerous ways are noted in the literature to motivate and engage students including lecturer enthusiasm, interactive classes, engaging students through group activities and using effective teaching methods that promote active learning (Collaço, 2017; Race, 2007). These conditions are difficult to maintain when teaching is restricted to online sessions. This was particularly so for many of the classes, which previously would have been delivered face-to-face and included interactive elements, where the content was uploaded to Blackboard for students to read individually at their own pace. As engagement between lecturers and students is noted to be crucial to learning (Zepke *et al.,* 2014), this was significantly lacking using this method.

Senior *et al.* (2018) discovered that by giving students the opportunity to share their opinions, engagement levels improved. There were limited opportunities for synchronous discussion where all of the students were online at the same time and the majority of engagement occurred through blog posts.

Actively engaging students in learning is central to academic success and improved outcomes (Docherty *et al.,* 2018). The use of online platforms such as Blackboard, can be useful to create discussion forums, provide feedback and participate in online discussions. However, some studies reported these activities as being of limited value to learning where students participation was seen as ''going through the motions' rather than actively engaging (Dyment *et al.,* 2020). Students reported higher engagement with meaningful activities that were linked to summative assessment and those activities with a personalised approach in which lecturers actively participated (Dyment *et al.,* 2020; Randsdell *et al.* 2018). An absence of meaningful activities can lead to a more surface learning approach leading to poorer learning outcomes (Dolmans *et al.* 2016).

Finally, it may be noteworthy to mention, the potential of social networking such as WhatsApp in fostering connectedness within online student cohorts. Similar to the findings of Stone and

Logan (2018), the accessibility, convenience, speed, informalities and freedom to ask 'silly questions' (pg. 52) was perceived favourably by students. WhatsApp had been referred to as a 'lifeline' where the interactions were described as being central to student engagement and completion of the course (Stone & Logan 2018), which aligned with our own experiences within this course.

2.5 Conclusion.

Overall, the experience posed many challenges, resulting in reduced engagement and disrupted learning opportunities. However, there were also some positives with online learning including flexibility of learning such as completing activities at the students' pace and being able to learn in a location convenient for the student. A hybrid approach for future learning opportunities could be beneficial with increased staff and student engagement through interactive activities.

2.6 Action Plan.

If this situation arose again, we would be more confident with engaging with online learning. We would feel more competent to engage in a positive manner going forward and actively engage ourselves with the class through online platforms. As future teachers, we are now more aware of the need to create meaningful activities online, whilst promoting increased interaction between students and teachers. The use of smaller breakout groups set with purposeful activities during Blackboard Collaborate sessions would promote discussion and active learning, whilst helping to diminish the sense of disconnectedness with peers. We would aim to use video in addition to audio, for webinars and Blackboard Collaborate sessions to connect with the students.

Where lectures using PowerPoints are delivered online, we would always use Panopto recordings or voiceover to supplement students' learning and increase the quality of content delivered online, as we found the lectures with audio extremely beneficial. We would set tasks and questions relating to directed online readings to give students a focus when engaging with the materials. We would be creative in our teaching plans incorporating simple strategies to engage students such as using a flipped classroom approach, peer teaching, interactive gaming, virtual polling to elicit student interaction, brainstorming and screen sharing for teaching new concepts. Finally, we would ensure that there was sufficient time allocated for questioning

and student feedback to facilitate students to achieve their learning outcomes successfully.

3.   Conclusion

Through reflecting on this incident, we have been able to explore the impact of COVID-19 on our learning. Through continuous learning, reflecting and doing, we will continue to grow and develop.

4.   References

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