

2020

Editorial 17.5. Strengthening our focus for a post-COVID-19 environment: Learnings from a pandemic in higher education

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Recommended Citation

Crawford, Joseph; Percy, Alisa; Kelder, Jo-Anne; and Butler-Henderson, Kerryn, Editorial 17.5. Strengthening our focus for a post-COVID-19 environment: Learnings from a pandemic in higher education, *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 17(5), 2020.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol17/iss5/01>

Editorial 17.5. Strengthening our focus for a post-COVID-19 environment: Learnings from a pandemic in higher education

Abstract

The year 2020 will unlikely be one that any member of the higher education community will forget. It has posed challenges and opportunities to rethink aspects of tertiary learning and teaching, and also confirmation of some of the better practices we have engaged in. For some, the novel coronavirus pandemic has forced bad practice – such as simple and rapid digitalisation of existing curriculum – often bundled into the pedagogically-ambiguous ‘emergency remote teaching’ or ERT (Toquero, 2020). The intense pressure for academics to deliver curriculum online, typically to the exception of time for comprehensive academic development and upskilling.

The practice for an overnight transition to online learning, while deemed by many to have been essential at the time, has created a myriad of future decisions to be actioned across the sector. These range from deploying future academic development workshops to transform the workforce for continued online learning to employment of educational technologists, learning designers, or similar to enable purposeful decisions of pedagogy within online learning environments. Financial constraints have tempered the deployment of additional resources, with institutions suffering from financial modelling unexpected in late-2019 budget forecasting meetings. A reduction in student enrolments from international markets offers complexity for higher education exporter nations like Australia (Marshman & Larkins, 2020). Nonetheless, there has been a resilience from the sector to ensure continuity of education under all circumstances.

The role of journals like the *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* during the pandemic has been to support timely publication of evidence-based practices for responses to COVID-19. This has included a need to balance the acceptance of manuscripts with pre-COVID-19 data and implications, and those authors contributing to the exponentially expanding knowledge base for teaching and learning during COVID-19. For the former, we have encouraged authors during final acceptance to reflect on their work’s role in enabling a positive response to the pandemic. For those in the latter, we have ensured that writers have considered the broader implications of their work beyond the pandemic. These decisions support manuscripts publishing in JUTLP to contribute to the contemporary landscape, and also beyond the pandemic.

Keywords

novel Coronavirus, tertiary education, 2020, learning and teaching, Editorial

The year 2020 will unlikely be one that any member of the higher education community will forget. It has posed challenges and opportunities to rethink aspects of tertiary learning and teaching, and also confirmation of some of the better practices we have engaged in. For some, the novel coronavirus pandemic has forced bad practice – such as simple and rapid digitalisation of existing curriculum – often bundled into the pedagogically-ambiguous ‘emergency remote teaching’ or ERT (Toquero, 2020). The intense pressure for academics to deliver curriculum online, typically to the exception of time for comprehensive academic development and upskilling.

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Beyond business-as-usual, we have sought to continue to support our continued push for higher quality practice-based manuscripts that extend beyond single-institutions and enable international learnings (Crawford et al., 2020). To this end, we also published a call for papers for the forthcoming 2021 Special Issue *The cross-cultural effects of COVID-19 on higher education learning and teaching practice*, and members of our team led the development of an open access database of publications in the first six months of the pandemic (Butler-Henderson et al., 2020). To this end, we continue to support manuscripts that focus on COVID-19 effects on higher education, and also those with a focus on any of the aims and scopes of JUTLP.

Reflecting on the Journal’s year

With the last standard issue of 2020, this editorial provides an opportunity to summarise our changes to publishing in 2020 and provide context for such changes:

- **Expanding the editorial team.** To support a larger volume of authors choosing to submit with the Journal, with more diverse discipline and theoretical lenses, we expanded the Editorial team. This included the creation of an Editor-in-Chief role to assume some of the responsibilities previously assigned to the lead Senior Editor. Expanding to four Senior Editor roles to oversee four discrete (but interconnected) sections of the Journal, and expanding the number of Associate Editors. The aspiration with the team growth is to support higher quality editorial processes and more personalised assessments of manuscripts submitted.
- **Broadening the types of publications accepted.** Traditional articles, and an editorial are not the only types of manuscripts which encapsulate the practices of higher education. We have expanded to include limited commentary and book review submissions. We do, however, note that these should be developed in consultation with the Editor-in-Chief given only a small number will be published each year.
- **Clarifying peer review processes.** While on-going, there was a need to support a more rigorous peer-review process to enable the Journal to be adaptive and responsive during the pandemic to longer peer-review timelines. This has created an opportunity for our editors to support revising the protocols for peer-review to create higher quality manuscript reviews from 2021, particularly in relation to Special Issues.
- **Simplifying our submission requirements.** We moved our referencing style to APA 7 to reflect a consistent style with existing referencing software (e.g. EndNote) and a common referencing style used by the higher education discipline. In 2021, we intend to revise our submission guidelines to also simplify these and make these more uniform with other higher education journals.
- **Rethinking our aims and scopes.** We dedicate the next section to discussing the new aims and scopes for the Journal. For future submissions, explication of which aims and scope the manuscript should be assessed under will be essential.

Rethinking learning and teaching practice

The aims and scope statements of the Journal have existed in largely the same form since their inception. On reflection, these tended to enable almost any manuscript related to teaching in the university setting to be accepted as within the aims and scope of JUTLP. To support a stronger conversation across our collection of works, we have identified four specific, yet broad, areas of work for the future of learning and teaching practice. We recognise that each manuscript submitted will likely have multiple areas of focus (e.g. student evaluations of technology integration based on a strong pedagogical framework). However, we ask authors to explicitly focus their attention within one of the areas of focus. The Senior Editor responsible for this particular section will assess articles against that aim and scoping statement for a preliminary decision. This is to support a far more timely desk-rejection period, to enable authors to find an alternate home, rather than sending a manuscript to review to only have it rejected in three months from poor scope alignment.

To reshape our aims and scope, we engaged in a co-design whereby we created, and recreated sections in Senior Editor workshops, section-specific workshops, and whole-of-editorial team workshops. These iterative processes have produced four clear sections for JUTLP to guide a future- and practice-focused journal for 2021 and beyond. We present more information regarding these below.

We do, however, recognise that rather than being prescriptive on what theories or frameworks are appropriate, we expect that papers should explicitly reference or be underpinned by a theoretical framework, that is appropriate to the research questions and method. We welcome papers that add to broader understanding of the theories they build on. It is important to locate both researchers and research within a theoretical approach, and we encourage papers introducing novel frameworks, however we also look for information relevant to the situation of the research, to support translation and generalisation.

Theory and practice of learning and teaching

The radical disruption to life-as-usual caused by COVID-19 has surfaced a whole range of existential questions about what constitutes a life worth living, and related to this, whether and how we are creating a world that is worth living in, particularly for future generations. For those of us who work in the tertiary sector, the role of higher education is central to these questions. Locating curriculum and pedagogical choices at the heart of the designs we choose to prepare future generations for an increasingly complex and uncertain world, we are interested in the moral and relational aspects of the educational choices we make. For this reason, we are not just interested in publishing papers about ‘what works’ or ‘best practice’; we are equally interested in how authors conceptualise their *praxis*; that is, how they answer the moral questions of ‘What *should* we be doing?’, ‘What is *worth* doing?’, ‘And in *whose interests* are we acting?’ (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). Moving forward, we are seeking a more critical and reflexive engagement with theory and practice to inform the kind of scholarship we publish on learning and teaching.

We invite contributions that critique and extend our theoretical and practical understanding of educational praxis, including curriculum design, pedagogical choices, and critical engagements with the way student learning is imagined and enacted in university settings. Theory and practice of teaching and learning articles will further our understanding of how, why and in what contexts, specific choices in educational praxis are made and to what effect.

We are particularly interested in papers that further our understanding of teaching as a professional *praxis* that: foreground the moral agency of the educator and is informed by theory or prior research; showcase empirical studies or critical reflections on educational innovation; illustrate curriculum design supported by a pedagogical model; demonstrate how localised SOTL research can be a generative space for rethinking or reimagining pedagogical practices and/or policy development; and evidence how autoethnographic and collaborative autoethnographic research engagement can advance the theory and practice of learning and teaching.

Student experience

In considering the future of effective student learning, there was a critical conversation that we believed was necessary to support the pedagogical and technological practices of learning and teaching. Indeed, many manuscripts published in the *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* apply a student-centric lens. This lens often extends beyond the student within curricula towards the university learner in a series of connected and broader contexts. Student success is not characterised primarily by their ability to achieve a pass grade in a quantifiable number of subjects to achieve course learning outcomes and be awarded their final testamur. The student's ability to also create meaning, generate knowledge relevant to their unique circumstances, and to feel a sense of satisfaction with their relationship to learning are also important to their ongoing success. We highlight the importance of research and practice that supports and enables an ambitious end-state vision of student flourishing (or similar).

We invite contributions that deconstruct and interpret current and future academic, living, and social interactions between and of tertiary student flourishing, engagement, satisfaction, and success before, during, and after their higher education pathway. Student experience articles will contribute to a multifaceted understanding of what constitutes high quality student experiences and in what contexts does such knowledge apply.

Student experience manuscripts within the Journal have greater implications for practice than reporting variance on the deployment of descriptive statistics from an institutional student evaluation survey, or on student experiences from an isolated single-institution study without careful consideration to the broader context.

Measuring, evaluating, exploring, and understanding the holistic student experience can be furthered through the completion of small-scale qualitative and quantitative studies. Such studies require a clear theoretical framework, and deep contextual recognition of the literature and how such a study will influence or challenge our current understanding of learning and teaching in universities.

Developing teaching practice

We recognise there is a broad range of suitable methods for the variety of research that might fit into the theme of developing teaching practice. We welcome papers presenting research that has appropriate ethical approval and using methods appropriate to the research questions. The theme is rich in authentic opportunities for teachers to reflect on their own development and the development of the field. We welcome reflective pieces that are underpinned by rigorous scholarly practice and include the expected elements of peer reviewed literature.

We invite contributions to critical conversations related to developing teaching practice in higher education. Papers that will contribute to improving how academics think about and practice teaching as well as describing and evaluating the design and implementation of professional learning activities, resources, or programs. The aims and scope of the 'developing teaching practice' section is grounded in our belief that pedagogically supported and capable teachers, equipped for teaching disciplinary

knowledge, are essential in higher education. Research papers in this theme will provide significant commentary on the outcomes of the reported program, activity or resource developed, including in relation to its intended purpose. They will also articulate how the findings are relevant to which audience, why they matter and identify the potential audience. Limitations and future research will also be described and discussed.

In coming together for this section, questions we asked, broadly, were:

- What topics are relevant?
- What theories support academic development (developing teaching practice)? and,
- What methods are appropriate for researching this?

Thinking about methods in the context of research that develops teaching practice or investigated the development of teaching practice, we envisage:

Quantitative studies to measure:

- teachers' capabilities, attitudes, beliefs, leadership, ...
- teachers' effectiveness, in particular their impact on student learning and experiences.
- teacher development programs and their effectiveness, impact, and outcomes for students.

Likewise, qualitative studies to explore and identify factors, aspects, dimensions, and themes as listed above. Mixed methods studies to integrate and synthesise qualitative and quantitative evidence. We encourage research that incorporates different perspectives and research lenses to generate research questions and findings that cannot be answered by qualitative or quantitative methods alone.

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Educational technology

We invite contributions that examine and evaluate the use of technology in university teaching and learning. COVID-19 saw the rapid transformation to online teaching globally as universities and colleges closed to reduce the risk of transmission. Suddenly we needed to identify ways of translating face to face learning experiences into digital formats. However, the need to quickly move to online teaching saw many institutions focus on the digitisation of curriculum. This shifting of face to face activities into a digital format, such as narrated PowerPoint presentations, often did not consider online pedagogical principles. As we now transition into the new 'normal' world, where institutions are reopening their doors, academic leaders need to consider what model they want to adopt now and for the future. Online pedagogy principles centre on technology being the tool to facilitate quality digital or virtual learning experiences, as opposed to the mechanism to convert the face to face activities into an online format like we have (often) seen in 2020.

We invite contributions that examine and evaluate technological innovations that facilitate or support high quality curriculum design and pedagogy, enable learners to cross boundaries to access higher education, and advances our knowledge, practice, and policy in university teaching and learning. Educational technology papers examine how technology and data can be used in university learning and teaching, and how innovations will shape the future learning experience.

In a world where decisions need to be informed by sound evidence, empirical and reflective pieces will inform our academic leaders of the possibilities in the post-pandemic world. We seek contributions that will inform how technology can be a facilitator, to address some of the fundamental questions of today:

- How can gamification, robotics and virtual reality change the learning experience?
- How will higher education become more data driven and evidence-informed?
- How can universities incorporate new technologies into teaching to create more authentic experiences?
- What will the 4th and 5th industrial revolutions look like in higher education?
- What will be the innovations of the future that universities need to plan for today?

Our manuscripts in Volume 17, Issue 5

In a short practice summary, **Reilly** captures the effect of one possible response to heightened anxiety and stress facing students during the pandemic. This early look at practice provides examples of how such an initiative can be delivered in alternate contexts. **McInnes et al.** examine the context by which academic course writers experienced the emergency remote teaching delivery required due to COVID-19, highlighting considerable satisfaction with production, course, and knowledge processes during the pandemic. Wilson et al. reported that students felt generally disconnected from their experience during COVID-19, with the changes to their learning experience making it difficult to create social connections. Students felt their agency was important, self-awareness and accountability enabled this.

Dianati et al. provide useful insights into students' perception of three technological tools used for specific purposes in the flipped learning environment. In their international cross-institutional study (Australia and Japan), the authors use the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to evaluate a collaborative canvas tool (*Padlet*), a live polling platform (*Kahoot!*) and an annotation tool (*Cirrus*). **Milne et al.** discuss an assessment and feedback intervention designed to support elevations of student satisfaction with the role of feedback in achieving the learning outcomes and their own learning. The findings from the final year nutrition unit provide evidence that in some contexts, providing feedback on drafts alone “may not enhance student satisfaction with feedback” (n.p.).

Cruz through quantitative methods confirmed existing understandings surrounding the role of student demographics in influencing their preferences for pedagogical practices, with a specific focus on understanding the differences between generational groups of students. **Hunt-Gomez et al.** draw on existing gender differences in gamification to understand the role of escape rooms as a pedagogical practice to develop skills such as teamwork and problem solving. Through an exploratory study in Spain, **Hunt-Gomez et al.** identify components of the escape room that

supported student learning, with recognition that escape rooms are often not designed with a female audience in mind despite their potential utility for broad learning opportunities. **Villarroel et al.** study of experiential learning implemented in a developmental psychology course describes students' perceptions of their ability to apply theoretical knowledge to solve real problems and perceptions of teachers and beneficiaries of the 'product' of an experiential learning activity.

Beatty et al. present TLABs (Teaching and Learning for Level A and B academic staff) as an effective strategy to support early career teachers' transition into their roles. The TLABs Community of Practice intentionally scaffolds role maturation, developed in a School of Medical and Health Sciences. **Hughes et al.** sought to optimise teaching in cadaveric-based practical classes. They present the model for team-teaching that emerged from their educational design research project to provide career development, providing mentoring in teaching skills and anatomy content knowledge to improve consistency of teaching methods.

Kanuka and Sadowski report on the evaluation of a peer observation of teaching process conducted at a Canadian university as a professional learning opportunity for both the observed and the observer. The study found the process fostered collegial relationships, but also indicated that having external examiners with a strong background in the scholarship of teaching and learning enhanced the nature of the reflective discussions and quality of the feedback.

Beatty et al. report on a pilot study within one School in an Australian university to help academic staff better respond to the inclusive teaching needs of international students by internalising curriculum and content delivery. Their study points to a greater need to attend to further internationalisation of content and foster a sense of belonging among international students.

Bedford et al. report on the evaluation of the use of a technology-mediated peer feedback process to enhance the oral proficiency of students studying French at an Australian university. The intervention was designed to better engage students in formative oral assessment activities, develop their assessment literacy, and improve their overall performance in the summative assessment activities. **Zhang et al.** report on a collaboration between Australian and Chinese academics to co-design and deliver a series of research training workshops for first-year postgraduate students studying in a Chinese university. The evaluation of the series, intended to enhance their scientific literacy and self-efficacy, indicates improvements in students' motivation, confidence and feelings of accomplishment in addition to the development of research skills and capabilities.

Vlachopoulos and Jan explore attendance modes and student preferences and motivations for attendance. Students during the study identified, in a pre-COVID-19 context, preferred flexibility in decision-making for lectures in both on-campus and online modalities. This study creates opportunities for a rethink of the educational instruction approaches to better support student learning by students represented in this Australian study. **Chen** conducted a study to assess the relationship between thinking instruction and metacognitive behaviours in a Taiwanese university. There was a positive relationship identified between the 'thinking instruction' provided to the intervention student and their metacognitive skills, and recommends integration of similar instruction to support critical thinking skill development.

Namaziandost et al. explored the impact of a flipped classroom approach on student self-efficacy. This study provides a useful example of work with some null results presented, or insignificant data, as a practice of the Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice to publish manuscripts whose null results are presented. While some results highlighted an increase in self-efficacy when using a flipped approach, their sub-analysis identified a higher level of self-efficacy in women compared to men. Writing for the context of Industrial Revolution 4.0, where the division between physical and digital worlds is blurred, **Sarmiento et al.** analysed an extensive body of qualitative data to identify common and best assessment practices in Science, Technology, Engineering, Agri/Fisheries or Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) higher education in the Philippines. They make recommendations for how assessment can be further enhanced for a more relevant STEAM education for the country.

Allen et al. provides interesting insights from the current Editor of [The Educational and Developmental Psychologist](#) and a team of higher education veterans on the effect of normalising rejection. This commentary offers a great introduction to the kinds of thought-provoking and evidence-based commentaries that we seek to publish to progress early narratives in the field of university learning and teaching.

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