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**Reflexive Transformative Approach to Student-
Centred Learning: Insights from the Frontlines
of Australian Higher Education Teaching During
COVID-19**

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has impacted the education sector in a host of ways (including financial, operational and pedagogical), many of which are unprecedented. This article adopts a case study approach to describe the impact that COVID-19 has had on a specific university teaching and learning experience by examining how teachers at one university responded to the sudden shift to online learning. This article discusses findings from two practitioners working in Public Relations and Communication disciplines in an Australian university, focusing on three key areas of impact: *technology, class and content design, and student and staff care*. It analyses how three approaches to higher education pedagogy: student-centred learning, active learning classrooms, and teacher reflexivity have been adapted/adopted in this process as described in our “*Structure, strategy, and sensibility: Pillars of transformative teaching practice framework*.” Finally, this article demonstrates that although there were obvious and disruptive challenges faced by teaching staff in shifting to online learning, these challenges were met with equally unique opportunities for personal growth, professional development and learning and teaching innovation.

Keywords: technology, pedagogy, transformative teaching, active-learning classrooms, student-centred learning, reflexivity

COVID-19 has impacted the higher education sector in a host of ways including financial, operational and pedagogical. Many of these impacts are unprecedented and have created significant challenges for academic and professional staff, and students alike. But, whilst there were clearly significant challenges, COVID-19 provided opportunities for teachers in higher education to become more reflexive in their approach to subject and class design, and provided space for personal growth, professional development and pedagogical innovation. This article addresses the impact that COVID-19 has had on our university teaching and learning experience by using a case study approach to examine how we, as teachers in public relations and communication fields, responded to the sudden shift to online learning. By reflecting on the previous teaching session from February to June (Autumn session) 2020 in Australia, we were able to identify three key areas impacted by the shift from on campus to online teaching: technology, class and content design, and student and staff care for both our students and subject teaching teams. We discuss these areas in the “*Structure, strategy, and sensibility: Pillars of transformative teaching practice framework*” in the following sections. By reflecting on our key approaches to teaching and learning in higher education (student-centred learning, active learning classrooms, and reflexivity in teaching practice), we are able to share insights gained from this experience and suggest recommendations for future online learning.

We are transdisciplinary academics working in the field of Communication at an Australian university. Dr Kate Delmo teaches both undergraduate and post-graduate subjects across public relations, strategic communication, organisational communication and crisis communication. Dr Natalie Krikowa teaches undergraduate subjects in digital and social media that focus on user experience, social marketing, and rapid prototype development. We met weekly during the teaching session to discuss our experiences and reflect on our teaching practices. Our shared teaching

philosophy is that effective learning comes from collaboration between teachers and students and that as teaching practitioners we should remain reflexive in order to improve and transform the shared learning experience. This philosophy is supported by our university's approach to teaching and learning, a flipped learning model, which emphasises student-centred learning (SLA). In this model, teachers act as facilitators and encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning while providing the framework and opportunities to develop their learning skills.

During the COVID-19 pandemic however, there were many challenges and difficulties in maintaining the student-centred approach. Many aspects of our teaching and learning strategies had to change, but it was imperative that the student-centred learning approach remained. We relied heavily on regular feedback loops with students and teaching team staff to determine what was working and what was not. There was a weekly requirement to problem-solve and the student experience ultimately drove the reflexive transformation process from Teaching Week 1. As teachers we needed to be agile, adaptive and organic. As a result, changes became instantaneous. Pre-COVID-19, reflexivity was considered going the extra mile. The Early Feedback Survey (conducted in Teaching Weeks 3 to 4 of the session) and the Student Feedback Survey (conducted at the end of the session) were two key occasions where most teachers would reflect on their teaching practice and consider improvements. Often teachers were teaching the same subjects for years and therefore changes were often minimal as the subjects were typically in good shape and working well for the face-to-face environment. During COVID-19, the informal, anecdotal feedback provided by students to teachers in between the main survey periods conducted by the university were critical to the reflexive process that ultimately led to a collaborative, student-centred learning approach during the pandemic. We received this feedback informally as verbal responses to questions posed in classes, or as personal

correspondence through emails and messages. Reflexivity became a survival tool — the pandemic required frequent and urgent response to solve problems that arose in the areas of technology use, class and content design, and care given to students and our respective teaching staff in subjects that we handle. In this article, we discuss three key approaches to teaching and learning in higher education that continue to drive our teaching practice. Here we examine how these approaches were activated/adapted during COVID-19 in the subsequent move to online teaching and learning.

Background Context

When the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on the 12th of March 2020, our university in New South Wales, Australia, alongside other organisations and civic institutions followed the lockdown protocols issued by the government. This date was a few days before the first week of the Autumn teaching session commenced (in mid-February). Three days later, our university management issued a directive for the entire university to pause teaching for one week to shift student and learning activities online to align with the wider COVID-19 protocols issued by the state and federal governments.

During the paused teaching week (referred to as *pause week* from here), both academic and professional staff worked as a joint silent machinery in recreating learning activities for students through the online learning management systems (LMS) that the university prescribed. Although our university has initiated a move towards embedding online learning with face-to-face, on-campus activities in 2014, it has taken relatively small steps in fully embracing hybrid (i.e., mix of online and on-campus) teaching modes to foster a strong student-centred learning environment. When the pandemic lockdown period commenced, the entire university was compelled to reconfigure teaching and learning from mostly following an on-campus learning model to a fully online approach.

Due to time constraints, the main purpose of the pause week was for academics to find an approach to substitute for existing on-campus timetabled learning activities. In our faculty, most of the subjects follow the one-hour and two-hour tutorial mode of delivery. Initial discussions amongst academics centred more on how students can access one-hour lectures and complete two-hour tutorial activities online. Academics did not have ample resources to innovate current teaching initiatives towards a hybrid and/or flipped teaching and learning classroom experience for students that encourages an integrated and embedded approach for content provision and student engagement. Instead, the priority was to devise ways to deliver one-hour lectures and two-hour tutorial sessions online either synchronously or asynchronously. The intended effect was to follow the set timetabling schedules and for class activities to be delivered online as if they were facilitated on-campus.

Students were provided specific instructions as to whether lectures were pre-recorded or delivered live via online video conferencing softwares such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams (MS Teams). Synchronous delivery of tutorial activities consisted of students simultaneously working on assigned tasks uploaded to the prescribed LMS with academic supervision. Asynchronous activities asked students to complete their weekly tasks independently usually with extended time provisions. Academics had to identify ways in providing formative feedback to students' weekly outputs online as well.

During the pause week, our university provided institution-wide support for academics to have last-minute changes to subject outlines approved by faculty administration and to quickly learn the appropriate technology to use for online teaching before classes resumed in a few days. Academics made amendments to the assessments and weekly tasks to fit the new parameters set for COVID-19 teaching. There were university-wide sessions offered to staff to introduce skills such as

recording lectures and uploading them online, embedding low stakes quizzes in recorded lectures, using wikis on MS Teams for student collaboration, integrating apps such as Padlet, or Jamboard in archiving responses to weekly tasks, or using online polls as discussion starters in tutorials, among others. The aim of the sessions was for academics to identify which tools were simple, functional and fun to use in their respective classes to encourage student participation.

The immediate shift in teaching and learning resulted in lessons learned in pedagogical challenges and opportunities that academics are continuously discovering at our university. On the one hand, the pause week illuminated issues such as: a) identifying which technology was appropriate, functional, and available both to staff and students, b) staff members' literacy in the use of LMS, and c) determining dual formats of learning for our onshore and offshore students. Our university had a large cohort of students who were impacted by the overseas travel bans in March. Such students remained overseas for the duration of the Autumn teaching session. This entailed a customised teaching and learning approach in relation to the following issues: bandwidth and interconnectivity concerns, time zone differences, and restricted access to certain websites and social media platforms that were used in weekly activities. For example, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube are key sites used in subjects offered by our faculty. During the pause week, academics had to immediately create alternative learning toolkits or weekly tutorial packages solely to be accessed by overseas students. The learning toolkits consisted of written instructional materials that provided a step-by-step guide for students to follow in navigating the technological requirements on a weekly basis. This was on top of the challenge in simultaneously delivering weekly subject matter to our onshore students.

Teachers learned and relearned to maximise the university's LMS and other online softwares that led to an opportunity for us to recognise

technology, literacy, adaptability, and reflexivity as integral to effective and efficient teaching and learning during, and perhaps even after the pandemic. The directive for online teaching under COVID-19 protocols paved the way for academics to avoid some of the reluctance in embracing the possibilities of innovating pedagogies around a purposeful use of an appropriate mix of technology in the classroom. It is significant to gather insights from us academics — the essential frontliners in the education sector — on our lived experiences in teaching under the global lockdown period. In particular, we describe in this paper our key learnings on the role of reflexivity as a transformative teaching and learning practice in creating a student-centred, active learning environment during the initial weeks of teaching during the pandemic.

Conceptual Framework of Teaching Philosophy

Our shared teaching philosophy is that learning is a collaboration between teachers and students and that as teaching practitioners we should remain reflexive in order to improve the shared learning experience. This paper discusses three key approaches to teaching and learning in higher education that drives our teaching practice: *student-centred learning*, *active learning classrooms*, and *reflexivity* in teaching practice. It examines how these approaches were activated during COVID-19 and the subsequent move to online teaching and learning.

A student-centred learning approach (SLA) encourages students to take more responsibility for their learning and is a process that relies heavily on teachers' professional confidence to surrender traditional teaching responsibilities (McCabe & O'Connor, 2014). SLA is ubiquitous throughout pedagogy literature (see Akerlind 2008; Gibbs & Coffey 2004; Kember 1997; Samuelowicz & Bain 2001; Trigwell et al., 1994) and appears in many university and higher education strategic documents. Many studies cite Rogers as the origin of student-centred learning, and in particular Rogers and Freiberg's *Freedom to Learn* (1994). In this

seminal text, the authors criticise the expert driven, transmission model of university teaching and suggest adapting their “client-centred” approach to counselling to the education arena (Tangney, 2014, p. 266). Research has endorsed the incentives of a collaborative student-centred community (Gilis et al., 2008; Hardie, 2007; Maclellan, 2008), “although it is inherent that deep methodology can be an anathema for some” (McCabe & O’Connor, 2014, p. 354).

As mentioned earlier, our university has undertaken a formal institution-wide learner-focused approach to teaching and learning since 2014. This flipped learning model (as described above) emphasises student-centred learning (SLA), where ownership of learning is shared between the teachers and students. In this model teachers act as facilitators and encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning while providing the framework and opportunities to develop their learning skills. This facilitation role has been discussed in many studies over the past two decades (Blumberg, 2009; McCombs & Miller, 2007; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2002; Weimer, 2002) all of which emphasise the transformative potential for our understanding of teaching and learning practice.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, there were many challenges and difficulties in maintaining the student-centred approach which are inherent to adopting SLA in general. These include having limited preparation, competing timetables, resistance from other staff, student reluctance and teachers’ lack of confidence (McCabe & O’Connor, 2014, p. 351). The only preparation time we were afforded in shifting our classes online was our pause week. We had less than six days to completely redesign our subjects for online delivery, select online platforms to deliver our classes and learn them (then teach them to our teaching teams made up of mostly casual/sessional academics). We then had to redesign assessment tasks and weekly content often on a week-to-

week basis. Integral to the ability to adopt SLA is a realistic time frame for effective implementation (Felder & Brent, 1996; Lea et al., 2003) and six days is certainly less than ideal.

Pedagogical methods such as student-centred learning are highly context-dependent (Harju & Åkerblom, 2017) and students are not a homogeneous group (Attard et al., 2010). There is no “one-size-fits-all” model. This is even more apt when it comes to student’s learning online. What is consistent across many contexts is the humanist approach to SLA. Tangney (2014) highlights consistent ideas about SLA environments that emerge from the humanist literature, including:

- students should have a choice in what they do and how they do it (and subsequent responsibilities of that choice);
- an underlying faith that students have the potential to make appropriate choices (to them) and maximise their potential; and
- students are learning in an environment with little power differential, and where unconditional positive regard and attendance to feelings is central, among others.

This humanist approach to student-centred learning is essential in our university’s model of teaching and learning as it foregrounds the student in the learning process and emphasises the role of the teacher in providing the environment in which the students can best learn. During the pandemic, we were encouraged to move away from traditional lecture-style modes of teaching delivery to an active learning model that highlights peer learning and collaboration as key approaches to effective class design.

Prior to COVID-19, most of our face-to-face on campus classes were conducted in collaborative classrooms where active-learning was emphasised. These physical spaces intended to promote peer interaction, engagement and collaboration. Collaborative or active learning classrooms (ALCs) are designed to facilitate collaborative learning activities,

minimise the barrier between teacher and student, and to improve teaching practices (Baepler & Walker, 2014; Carpenter, 2013; Metzger, 2015). ALCs can be regarded as rich environments for collaborative, problem-based learning involving dynamic, interdisciplinary and generative learning activities with the goal of achieving higher order thinking and constructing complex knowledge (Grabinger & Dunlap, 1995). Although active learning pedagogies, such as peer learning, team-based learning, cooperative learning, or blended learning (flipped classroom) can certainly apply in traditional classrooms with fixed seat setting (Deslauriers et al., 2011; Lyon & Lagowski, 2008; Mazur, 2009), a better space for these pedagogies are ALCs designed specifically for student interaction and engagement (Chiu & Cheng, 2017, pp. 269-270).

When COVID-19 happened the question for us was how do we translate “active learning” to the online classroom? We had less than a week to not only interrogate this question and what it meant pedagogically, but rapidly devise a new approach to teaching and learning for the online environment that (as best as possible) mirrored the active learning classroom with which both students and teachers were already familiar.

The above required many teachers to adopt a more *reflective* and *reflexive* approach to teaching practice. On the one hand, reflectivity which is essential to both student and teacher learning is “the use of personal values, experiences, and habits to make meaning” (Wilhelm, 2013, p. 57). Most teachers will undertake some form of reflection throughout their teaching session to identify areas for improvement. Reflective teachers operate in a mode referred to as “knowledge-in-action” whereby they reflect upon their specific content knowledge and teaching practices that are established through their past experience (Brookfield, 1995; Zeichner & Liston, 2013). This reflective practice can be seen before a new teaching session begins as teachers prepare their subjects for delivery. Some teachers use formal student feedback surveys to determine what worked

and what did not work, from the student perspective.

Reflexivity, on the other hand, is an ongoing internal dialogue that leads to action for transformative practices in the classroom (Archer, 2012). Jeffrey D. Wilhelm (2013), a thought-leader in this field, suggests that reflexivity requires that we “suspend [...] our own assumptions in order to understand what someone else brings to [our] understanding, learning, and practice, whether this someone else is a historical figure, a student, or a colleague” (p. 57). Taking a more “epistemic reflexivity” approach encourages internal dialogue on personal epistemology to facilitate meaningful and sustainable change in our teaching (Feucht et al., 2017, p. 234). Having the required time and space is needed in order to be reflexive. Under the unprecedented COVID-19 conditions, however, it was challenging to maintain a reflexive process due to the scope and immediacy of changes that academics had to make.

Discussion of Reflexive Transformation

The sudden shift to online learning due to COVID-19 brought with it many challenges, but also opened up many opportunities to improve the learning experience for both students and teachers alike. By reflecting on the Autumn 2020 teaching session, we were able to elucidate three key areas impacted by the shift from on campus to online teaching: technology, class and content design, and care for both our students and subject teaching teams. By reflecting on our key approaches to teaching and learning (student-centred learning, active learning classrooms, and reflexivity in teaching practice), we were able to develop a transformative teaching practice framework developed from the insights gained from this experience. This framework, referred to as the “*Structure, strategy, and sensibility: Pillars of transformative teaching practice framework*” (illustrated below) is a model that demonstrates how these philosophies and practices intersect. The model underpins the discussion in the following sections.

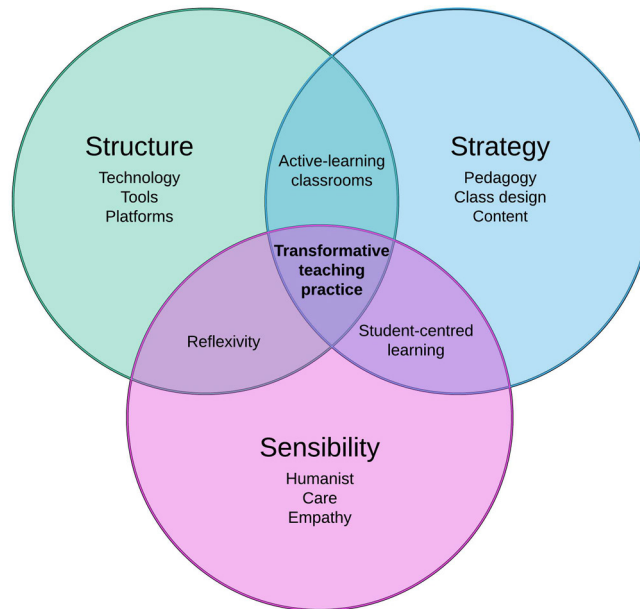


Figure 1: *Structure, strategy, and sensibility: Pillars of transformative teaching practice framework (2020)*

Structure Pillar: Technology

The initial shift to online learning that occurred in the pause week emphasised subject and assessment redesign and the quick adoption of online platforms including Zoom and MS Teams (in addition to our university's LMS). Directives coming from university management and administration were centred around what teachers or academics needed to do to ensure their subjects could run in an online mode (e.g., checking assessment tasks were individual tasks where possible and writing new tasks if required). For most teachers this also meant re/familiarising themselves with the technologies. The university promptly provided technology workshops, however these focused on the practical how-to's and not necessarily on how best to use the platforms for pedagogical purposes. Teachers were given many technological options to explore, but due to time constraints were forced to make quick decisions.

What was missing for most during these crucial paused teaching days was input from the students on how they felt about online learning. Jenkins (2014) argues that students are mostly left to navigate a complex and often confusing array of programmes and services on their own. In Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama et al.'s 2018 study, students commented that the main concerns experienced when adapting to the university experience included access to technology (in particular Wi-Fi), confidence in the use of the university online learning management system, and computer literacy skills. For our continuing students, their sudden move to online learning already raised similar concerns, and yet we were also dealing with a large cohort of commencing students, who now had to orient themselves to online learning on top of university learning more generally.

It was important during the pause week to identify the technological capability of our students. Some students lived in urban environments, with good access to broadband internet, however some students lived in more rural areas with patchy access, and others were joining from overseas. Many of our overseas students were impacted by travel bans or were being quarantined in hotels during the first few weeks of the session, and many struggled to gain access to our technology platforms and participate in our classes.

In one subject with a high overseas student contingent, we sent out a survey in the pause week to all students in the subject to determine their current technology capabilities and preferences. The survey enquired about their levels of comfort in using particular technologies and platforms (video conferencing, LMS etc.) as well as their access to a reliable computer, internet connection and video/camera/audio technology. Without these necessary technological elements, students would struggle to participate in online classes. Students were also asked if they had any accessibility requirements that would require specific modification to class materials or delivery, or if they had external circumstances that might

impact their ability to study online remotely, such as health conditions, career responsibilities, or frontline/essential worker considerations. The information obtained through the survey allowed the subject to be tailored to meet the needs of the students undertaking the subject as best as possible. This student-centred approach remained throughout the teaching session.

The main challenge was discovering how to adopt an active learning environment in the online classroom. Our current LMS was not suited to full online course delivery and lacked appropriate interactive and collaborative functions. As a result, many staff were encouraged to adopt Zoom for live tutorials and lectures and MS Teams for asynchronous class activities. Most staff and students were new to these platforms and lacked the required digital literacy to effectively use them. Many teachers needed to be taught how to use the platforms first, before then utilising them for their teaching and learning. Zoom was relatively easy to adopt and all students required was a Zoom link and then they could join at the required time. MS Teams, however, was intended to be used as a collaborative working platform that required both staff and students to be active and contribute content to the platform. The platform was not necessarily designed to be used for the kinds of activities that teachers were hoping to use it for, but it provided a space for classes to share and collaborate in similar ways to that seen in active learning classrooms.

MS Teams allowed us to create weekly channels for all that week's content (including peer learning activities), files and resources and facilitate discussions among small and large groups. The video chat tool allowed the teacher to host a large group meeting, and then have smaller groups go into separate chats with one another to complete the activities before then coming back into a main group meeting for debriefing and discussion. The Wiki widget/tool was used over a three-week period to build understanding of key concepts by having students contribute one

concept a week in groups of three. This cooperative learning activity remained an archived resource for the rest of the session that students could refer to when completing their assessments.

Students were surveyed again at the completion of the subject to better understand their experience of online learning and to hopefully gain insight into further improvements and refinement to be made for the next session which was also going to remain online due to COVID-19. The survey was completed by 54 students and 60% of respondents said that they found the use of MS Teams useful for collaborating with peers. When asked if they would prefer to use MS Teams and Zoom in future, 82% said they would use MS Teams again and 48% said they would use Zoom.

When maintaining reflexivity in teaching practice, the easiest place to start is often the learning environment itself. By engaging the students in the reflexive process and gaining their insights through regular feedback loops, meant that changes to the learning environment could be swifter and often more innovative. Students clearly appreciated being involved in the construction of their learning environment and by the end of the session were able to articulate the benefits and shortfalls of particular technology platforms.

Strategy Pillar: Class and Content Design

Teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic saw the emergence of reflexivity as a critical tool in adapting to the changing classroom experience. The immediate shift to online teaching led to a further emphasis on the importance of using a reflexive teaching approach anchored in student-centric learning experience (Tangney, 2014). Although subject descriptions were revised to reflect the online teaching environment, we observed that our teaching strategy and tactics changed frequently based on constant feedback from students and our teaching staff.

In terms of class content and design, we were encouraged to

pre-record our lectures for students to access prior to their tutorials. This proved especially helpful to our students who were still overseas due to the travel bans. One of the early decisions made by individual faculty members during the pause week was to determine what types of tutorial learning activities could best be delivered synchronously or asynchronously, or a mix of both. Synchronous activities consisted of class activities that students worked on simultaneously with academic supervision and completed during the prescribed tutorial hours. Teachers used Zoom or the video call function of MS Teams as the main online conferencing tools that allowed students to collaborate with each other in small groups. Asynchronous activities included online group work that students completed independently usually outside of tutorial hours. Canvas and Blackboard were the primary learning management systems used by the University. Both served as key archival and student engagement portals that helped us design and deliver subject content.

Teaching in a fully online environment resulted in consistent, ongoing reflexivity in terms of re-designing subject content and delivery. As the teaching session progressed, we learned that the decisions we made regarding class and content design during the pause week did not work for the succeeding weeks as initially planned. Prior to the pandemic, adjusting teaching and learning strategy and tactics as the session unfolds occurred regularly. During the pandemic, the need for constant updating of strategy and tactics happened more frequently, mostly on a weekly basis. Knowledge-in-action (Brookfield, 1995; Zeichner & Liston, 2013) was unfolding more rapidly and organically. Most of the changes were either based on observation or informal feedback gathered from our students and teaching staff.

In one subject, where classes ran Tuesday through Friday, the first Tuesday morning class was used as a “trial” tutorial. Activities or strategies would be tested in that class, and anything that could be tweaked

to improve those activities or strategies would be quickly rolled out across the other classes. These “tweaks” were communicated informally, using a shared MS Teams site for the teaching team. Teachers were then encouraged to provide feedback on how the activities and strategies were received in their own classes. This constant feedback loop meant that changes could be made for the following classes and could be tailored to suit the conditions of each class.

There was less reluctance to be flexible and resilient in developing weekly workshop activities as compared to hesitations we had in changing teaching plans mid-way of the teaching session pre-COVID-19. More importantly, the reflexive approach that emerged was highly motivated by exploring ways to keep our students interested and engaged in their first experience of mandatory remote studying. For example, in one of our undergraduate public relations subjects, by Week 4 (two weeks after the pause week), we learned that students felt less pressured to work on certain tasks asynchronously because they save time in “getting group discussions going” (Anonymous, Student Feedback Survey comment, June 2020). Through informal feedback gathered before a Zoom class concluded, some students remarked that working on some tasks asynchronously helped them minimise broadband costs because there was no live streaming content. There were some, conversely, who found asynchronous activities “overwhelming” (Anonymous, Student Feedback Survey comment, June 2020). As one of our overseas postgraduate students explained, “It is hard to be left alone working on the Canvas exercises with no one to ask if you are on the right track or not” (Z. Zhou, personal communication, May 10, 2020).

Guided by these insights, we decided to intersperse a few more asynchronous activities with the initially planned synchronous ones. For the asynchronous tasks, this entailed providing more instructional and contextual details to make the tasks more structured and coherent. We

developed numerous last-minute user guides for students to help them in their workshop participation such as activating mobile/software apps (e.g. Jamboard, Padlet) that are applicable to PR campaign brainstorming sessions. Pre-COVID-19 where most teaching was done face-to-face, explaining details about apps was done verbally in class, hence avoiding the need to prepare written instructional documents beforehand.

As one first-year student explained:

Having a chance to work on some tasks individually and outside of the tutorial times in certain weeks made me focus on the content more. Sometimes, online group activities that need to be finished within class hours can be rushed, people are just typing away without really discussing things. I quite liked it that you [Kate Delmo] still gave us feedback in time for the following week's tutorial. It made all the work worthwhile! (Anonymous, Student Feedback Survey, June 2020)

The need to simplify weekly activities was another ongoing priority during the initial phase of teaching under the lockdown period. We noticed that student engagement was more focused and structured if students in Zoom breakout rooms were working on fewer activities. Pre-COVID-19, a two-hour tutorial session usually allowed students to work on a cluster of three small-group activities. After the pandemic occurred, we followed the same format, thinking that the platform of delivery would not affect the quality of student engagement. However, by Week 3, students felt rushed in finishing all the tasks. This observation led us to change both content and number of assigned activities for the students, moving to one major activity/case study but adding more discussion questions.

The timing of publishing course materials online via the university's LMS also changed mid-way into the teaching session. Our postgraduate public relations students who were currently overseas due

to the travel bans offered feedback that they had difficulties in accessing the materials online real-time, and most importantly, some of the URLs of websites we used were restricted from their location. In response, we developed separate learning materials for our onshore and offshore students to ensure that both cohorts were given equal opportunities to learn the content. We searched for alternative URLs that were accessible from China in order to give our students there an opportunity to work on the tasks remotely. Eventually, our university gave us a summary list of websites that overseas students could and could not use. We also made the online modules available to all students at least three days earlier.

Finally, establishing a sustainable system for providing feedback on students' weekly online outputs was also a part of the overall strategy in designing course content during the early weeks of teaching during the pandemic. We maximized the use of Google Docs, MS Teams worksheets, Blackboard wikis, among others so we are able to provide general feedback on students' group activities. The shared-screen functionality of Zoom and MS Teams rendered useful when students discussed highlights of their group discussions to the wider class.

One student remarked:

It is helpful to see that the tutor [teacher] already wrote comments on some of our answers to the discussion questions. This helped us further explain what we wanted to say to the rest of the class.

(Anonymous, Student Feedback Survey, June 2020)

Online teaching during the pandemic made us more aware of the student learning experience. There was more room for flexibility both in macro and micro strategies in designing and delivering subject content that is meaningful to students. By continuing to place students at the centre of the learning design process we also ensured that their perspectives, feelings and circumstances were taken into consideration.

Sensibility Pillar: Care and Empathy to Students and Staff

The final area within which we focused our reflexive practice was in the care of those we were ultimately responsible for — our students and fellow teaching team staff. Being a reflexive teaching practitioner meant securing the perspectives of others, including students and fellow teachers. If we did not consider and understand the unique circumstances that our students and teaching team were now experiencing, it did not matter what technologies we utilised or how we designed our classes, it would be all for naught.

What we found, through our weekly virtual face-to-face classes, was that students ultimately wanted someone to care about them and empathise with what they were going through. Many of our undergraduate students were losing their jobs and having to move home. We saw statistically significant higher levels of referrals to our university’s counselling services and accessibility services for stress, anxiety and depression. As Black Dog Institute (an Australian mental health charity) notes, those who are unemployed or from a casualised workforce are at increased risk of mental health deterioration during times of economic instability such as pandemics. They state that “high job insecurity is associated with stress, financial strain, poorer health and increased rates of depression and anxiety” (Black Dog Institute, 2020, p. 2). It was no surprise to those of us teaching on the frontlines of this pandemic that our students were suffering.

For university students, intensified levels of psychological distress and subsequent negative academic consequences were widespread pre-COVID-19 (American College Health Association, 2019 cited in Grubic et al., 2020). It was clear that these mental health concerns were exacerbated by COVID-19 and were unsurprisingly having a detrimental impact on students’ ability to complete their educational responsibilities. In a survey by YoungMinds (a UK-based youth mental health charity), it was

reported that 83% of young respondents felt that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing mental health conditions, with 32% claiming it made their mental health much worse (YoungMinds, 2020, p. 3).

As Grubic, Badovinac & Johri (2020) point out:

By increasing academic stressors in a population with heightened pre-existing stress levels and a potentially reduced ability to rely on typical coping strategies – such as family who themselves may be experiencing heightened distress – the COVID-19 pandemic has placed an unprecedented mental health burden on students, which urgently requires further examination and immediate intervention. (p. 517)

For the subjects we teach, we held weekly catch ups with our students as a means to check how they were coping with the challenging life in lockdown. We also reminded our individual teaching team staff (tutors) that it did not matter if the weekly activities did not go as planned. What was important was for us to be patient and understanding with our students, so they felt their concerns were heard and resolved. Oftentimes this meant starting Zoom classes with a “check-in” where students were invited to share their worries or inversely their small victories. We invited our pets to class for show and tell and discussed our favourite TikToks of the week. For the first 15-20 minutes, human connection was prioritised. Then, once the students felt grounded and secure, we could begin exploring the content and activities.

As greater emphasis was placed on listening to students’ situations, it also became apparent that clearer guidelines needed to be put in place to provide a structure to those communications. Teaching staff were seeing a huge influx of emails and MS Teams messages requesting for more one-on-one assistance or addressing students’ personal issues. The immediacy of digital communication meant that many students assumed their teacher would respond immediately to their query. Mid-way through the session,

many teachers were having to re-establish boundaries and set clear expectations on the extent of support given to students in between classes via emails and messages. This required more clearly defined consultation hours centred around staff availability. This became even more important when communicating with overseas students, who required greater support but were in different time zones as ours. Students were slow to respond to these expectations and frequently required reminding. They were, however, grateful to receive the added support and care.

Overall, students were kind in their formal and informal feedback, acknowledging the extra work required by their teachers in shifting their classes online. On the whole, students appreciated that it was a difficult situation for everyone and appreciated the efforts by the university to keep their classes running while keeping them and their communities safe. Some students even emailed personal notes of thanks to their teachers in recognition of their work and care.

One third-year student remarked:

You definitely put the students first in every way and I really appreciate that - couldn't have asked for a better tutor for this subject. It's been such a difficult time for everyone, with COVID-19 taking such a hit on Universities, and I commend the seamlessness of the move to online learning in DPA. Hats off to you and the rest of the team for putting so much time and energy into adjusting the course so flawlessly. (M. Sacks, personal communication, June 12, 2020)

Another student remarked:

In short, I am impressed with the transition online and how classes are run in these unusual times. You are an outstanding educator, with clear direction, expectations and assistance that goes way over the extra mile. Your teaching style is thoroughly enjoyable from your positive attitude and clear care for us students. Moreover I

would like to commend you, and the team. (M. Billingham-Yuen, personal communication, May 28, 2020)

Student care was a key focus in the reflexive process, but equally as important was the concern and care for the staff in our teaching teams. Reflexivity meant touching base consistently and openly with the teaching team. While pre-COVID-19 teaching conditions required less focus on wellbeing for staff, there was still an emphasis on collaboration for consistency in teaching delivery. The shift to online and the consequent adoption of new technologies required subject coordinators to provide education and support to their teaching teams to ensure digital literacy across these technologies and platforms. During the pause week, there was also added work on the part of the coordinator to provide crash course, last-minute training on technology use for our part-time casual academics. For some coordinators this meant ongoing, closer mentoring of casual academic teaching staff to improve confidence and competency in running online classes. This extra training on top of their own personal COVID-19 situation also increased their stress and anxiety levels. Many were now also having to do more training and preparation for online classes, all of which was extra unpaid work. During COVID-19, teaching staff were provided with detailed weekly tutorial guides to outline objectives, teaching tactics and desired learning outcomes, but due to the agile approach to class design improvement, these were often given only days before classes were scheduled.

Previously, staff feedback in terms of their overall experience in teaching on the subject was procured sporadically during the session and at the end of the session. During COVID-19, regular/weekly Zoom meetings were used to provide necessary briefings and roadmaps about what lay ahead and get feedback on their teaching experiences. But these meetings were also valuable opportunities to check in on the teaching team's mental health and wellbeing. It was important to check in on how

people were feeling on a regular basis and ensure we communicated about our own wellbeing.

One teaching staff member who teaches in one of our public relations major subject said:

With all these abrupt changes, thank goodness for these weekly briefing sessions prior to class time. As industry practitioners who are part-time teaching, we have been trained mostly to share content and experience with students. But these changes in online teaching is something else, it is a crash course to teaching methods for me. Thank you for not getting tired in guiding us in this journey. (E. Barclay, personal communication, June 10, 2020)

Discussing our shared and unique experiences helped build stronger collegial relationships and human connection. It was crucial that we maintain human connections, as connection is one of the most protective factors contributing to our emotional wellbeing. We emphasised the importance of everyone in the team taking the time to take care of their own wellbeing and to reach out if they needed support. We found ourselves more in touch with our part-time colleagues during COVID-19 teaching because we knew that being expected to fully and immediately comply with the university's directives in online teaching was challenging to their part-time employment status.

What COVID-19 brought home was the importance of establishing and maintaining positive relationships with our students and fellow teaching staff. It forced us to be more empathetic and responsive to others' needs. It encouraged us to listen, rather than speak, and to provide safe spaces for our students and staff to share their concerns and worries. While it may have placed a heavier burden on those coordinating the subjects, the efforts were not in vain. Our classrooms became transformative spaces and ultimately opportunities opened up for personal growth, professional development and learning and teaching innovation.

Conclusion, Limitations and Future Research

In conclusion, we surmise that at the intersection of transformative teaching practice during COVID-19, the three pillars of structure (technology), strategy (class and content design) and sensibility (student and staff pastoral care) create active-learning classrooms (Archer, 2012), student-centred learning experience (Gilis et al., 2008; Hardie, 2007; Maclellan, 2008), and reflexivity in teaching practice (Wilhelm, 2013). Despite issues in technological literacy, bandwidth and interconnectivity, and in overall pedagogical changes brought by an immediate switch to a fully online teaching platform, we found that the pace and rhythm of teaching and learning during the initial phase of the COVID-19 lockdown was highly guided by feedback that we gathered from the frontlines – our daily and/or weekly engagement with our students and our teaching staff.

The importance of a reflective and reflexive approach to teaching became more instrumental as compared to how these guided our teaching pedagogy prior to the pandemic. In hindsight, we were not certain if the changes we introduced at the beginning of the Autumn 2020 teaching session would work for us or to our students and our teaching teams. The humanist approach to teaching (Tangney, 2014) ultimately emerged as the lynchpin of our teaching and learning practice. Every week during the Autumn session, we found ourselves asking two simple but highly critical questions. First, *what worked and did not work last week?* Then, based on feedback from the first question, *what adjustments do we have to make for our students to learn this topic in a structured and engaging way next week?*

This type of reflective thought purely guided by principles of student-centred learning and unfolding on a weekly basis was not as prominent to our teaching and learning methods prior to COVID-19. It is aligned with how scholars in teaching and learning pedagogy describe knowledge-in-action (Brookfield, 1995; Zeichner & Liston, 2013).

However, during COVID-19, we were not only using student feedback to change our teaching for the following teaching session, we were making changes for the following week, every week. In addition, the process was reflexive for us: we were constantly self-checking our classroom methods. This is similar to what Archer (2012) explained that a person who is reflexive engages in ongoing, internal dialogue that leads to action. It also embodied epistemic reflexivity among teachers (Feucht et al., 2017) in a high-pressure, unprecedented situation (COVID-19) that resulted in meaningful changes in our teaching.

This case study looked at one university within a specific regional and environmental context. As such, its findings are limited to those universities within similar contexts. We understand that faculty in different regions and countries will have had different experiences depending on a number of factors. Future research will broaden the reflexive transformative approach to student-centred learning by examining it in other university contexts (both nationally and globally) and outside of COVID-19-like environmental conditions. What would be of interest is how this “Pillars of transformative teaching practice framework” could be applied in other public relations and broader communication subjects, programs and degrees. Future applications of this framework could provide valuable insights into how it can be adopted effectively in other higher education settings. Similarly, identifying and comparing other COVID-19 responses from other disciplines and universities could further expand our understanding of how students were impacted by the pandemic and the subsequent remodelled approach to teaching and learning.

Within the context of our university response, the immediate shift to online subject delivery required a change in teaching and learning outlook both for students and staff in our university. We learned that these changes were not simply “putting things online” as what we initially did during the pause week in the initial days of COVID-19 teaching. There are

pedagogical aspects to consider from a macro level such as corresponding changes in the following: staff and student expectations, overall learning pace in the online space, extent and depth of engagement both for staff and students, managing feedback, assessing student progress online, staff's availability in addressing student concerns, and drawing the line in managing communication channels with students, among others. It helps if students understand these realities so they can equally manage their learning expectations.

Teaching during the initial phase of the pandemic brings key learnings that will introduce more changes to our active-learning classrooms. To date, we are gradually learning that a fully online delivery of classes is not, and should not be viewed as, a direct substitute for face-to-face, on-campus classes. The pace of and expectations in learning are different for both platforms. Beyond COVID-19, we envision that a hybrid teaching approach that combines online and on-campus learning experience will increasingly be a core pedagogical model to follow. A hybrid model introduces innovation, but it should be anchored in the principle of co-creation between students and staff in universities. The changing teaching and learning ecosystem in higher education will continuously undergo changes after lived experiences of the teachers during the global lockdown period.

Postscript

It is important as COVID-19 continues to impact our lives, workplaces and educational experiences, that teachers maintain a reflexive, transformative approach to student learning. In Australia, city and state-wide lockdowns have once again moved learning online in 2021, and with an uncertain future, online and hybrid learning will remain to some degree. Both teachers and students are feeling the effects of online fatigue and many students are expressing emotional and mental distress. As a result, teachers are reporting that student welfare is their number one priority in

their approach to teaching in 2021. Whilst many of the approaches made during the first response to COVID-19 teaching and learning in 2020 can and have been adopted again, sustaining a reflexive approach to learning means that teachers can respond to new challenges quickly and remain agile. Adopting a transformative teaching framework enables teachers to reflect on the structures of their teaching and learning (technologies, tools and platforms used), devise and revise strategies around pedagogy, class design and content delivery, and embrace a student-centred learning approach where empathy, care and humanity are at the core of teaching practice in these uncertain times.

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