A caring approach to teaching with technology could underpin digital transformation in universities

Summary: The pandemic had a lasting impact on students' wellbeing. During lockdown students were suffering different levels of trauma and were supported by caring teaching staff who engaged with them via digital technologies. Caring teachers recognised student trauma and worked hard to create stimulating and engaging environments for them, using digital tools to encourage active collaboration and dialogue. When lockdown ended, students studying on campus asked for a return to classroom study. We are urging universities to identify and maintain the benefits to students accrued through learning online while also retaining benefits of face-to-face teaching. This can be achieved a pedagogy of care. Well-designed blended learning can sustain a caring approach to teaching in ways that can support students through challenging times.

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The pandemic has had a lasting impact on students' wellbeing which universities are struggling to address. At the same the pandemic ushered in a more compassionate approach to students that should be retained. During periods of lockdown, when students were suffering different levels of trauma, some learners were supported effectively by caring teachers engaging with them via digital technologies. It could be argued that the pandemic ushered in a more compassionate approach to students that should be retained.

Blended learning may not seem an obvious solution to what has been labelled a mental health crisis, especially given that students have been arguing to return to in-person teaching on campus. Yet it is widely acknowledged that the shift to online teaching at the beginning of the pandemic was not by design. With limited support and almost no time to learn how to design for engaged online learning, many university teachers could do little more than transfer well-established teaching practices, like lecturing, to the online environment. There was not time to evolve teaching and learning practice in line with best practice. Indeed, the transfer of traditional teaching practices online is likely to have exacerbated inequalities for some students. It is not surprising that these experiences led to students and their representatives arguing for a return to campus when the lockdowns eased.

There is evidence that returning to campus for lectures made it easier for some students to be motivated to attend classes. Students wanted a separation between study and home where they were too easily distracted. At the same time, students do expect a different campus experience to that available before the pandemic; one in which digital affordances give them access to a learning community where they can engage in new ways with learning materials, their teachers and their peers.

For other students, there were clear benefits from the pivot to online learning. During the pandemic, disabled students were astounded to find that their long-denied requests for recorded lectures and coursework extensions were now being put in place for all learners. This emphasises what the sector has known for some time: catering for the needs of disabled students will result in actions and solutions that benefit all.

Some students also appreciated the greater flexibility that online learning offered them, especially those who have to work or care for others while they study. These experiences mean that, compared with expectations before the pandemic, students have a range of different expectations about how they will learn at university.

The online pivot was also challenging for university teachers and professional staff. During our UCL study of the move to online teaching in the first weeks of lockdown, staff told us they missed the direct engagement they had enjoyed with their students when teaching in physical classrooms. Those who had no experience of teaching online did not know how to engage students using online methods; they did, however, understand the need to find ways to connect with and care for students. Many staff we talked to in our study engendered what Morris & Stommel term 'Critical Digital Pedagogy'. This pedagogy focuses on humanisation through active collaboration, creating dialogues with and amongst students and remaining open to diversity.

Caring teachers recognised the trauma their students were experiencing and worked hard to create stimulating and engaging environments for them, using digital tools to enact a pedagogy of care. Similar to teaching on campus, it is these forms of unseen labour that can keep students engaged, so ignoring them is not an option. In addition, of course, the pandemic laid bare the different and additional labour that is involved in teaching online; for example the up-front time it takes to prepare resources and the emotional labour involved in engaging reluctant students.

Looking to the future, we can see that caring for students means taking a broad range of individual needs seriously, especially when many current students are still experiencing the after-effects of pandemic trauma. This is a challenging ask for universities. Taken at face value, it could mean that universities should be attempting to respond to every student's individual and dynamic preferences for access to learning. So, how can universities move forward in the ways in which we design learning?

One lens through which to think about the future design of learning is the tenets of a pedagogy of care. Teaching as caring means caring about students' expressed needs for support. Instead of assuming what those needs are, we need to put in place digital activities that elicit students' needs and understanding by engaging them. Practical examples at UCL include: introducing continuous module dialogue, instead of an end of module evaluation, so teachers can respond to students before the module has ended; online discussion forums that help students get to know each other and build stronger, more inclusive communities before they arrive on campus; and digital pinboards or survey tools to help groups of students to share their thinking with the class easily during small group work in blended or hybrid sessions. These activities open opportunities for teachers to engage in care-giving by being clearer about what action is required and feasible. Teachers can also gauge students' responses to see if actions have intended effects.

An important strength of an embedded teaching as caring approach is that it aligns well with academic identity. Yet, after the difficult years of the pandemic, teachers also need to feel listened to and cared for. To be effective, digital transformation requires consideration of the seen and unseen ways teachers use their time to care for their students. Looking ahead, universities need to acknowledge and reward this labour and make sure staff feel cared for too. Teachers also need advice and guidance to help them to bring a sensibility of care to the design of courses and blends of modes of learning.

We have learnt that well-designed blended learning that encourages a caring approach to teaching has the potential to support students through challenging times and even help address growing mental health challenges. Therefore it is in everyone's interest to move towards a caring approach to teaching with technology and toward the digital transformation of higher education - signalling a new imperative in the switch to blended learning. We believe now is the time for universities to embed the pedagogy of care into their emerging education and digital transformation strategies.
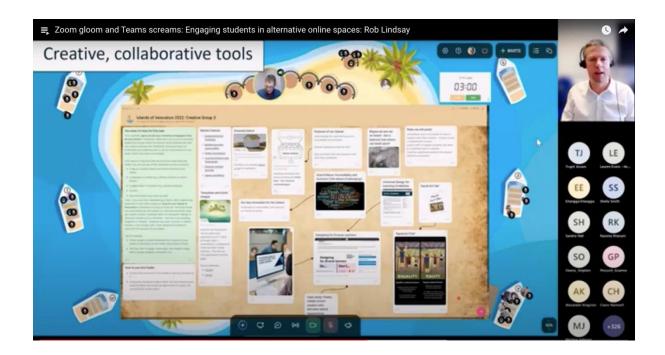
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Note, if it helps to illustrate an example, we could use the screenshot below. Thought we would want to contact those involved ahaead of publication.

The [Spatial Chat](#) collaborative online workspace is used with students at the University of Liverpool, by Rob Lindsey.