Pandemic Pedagogy Article Series

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This reflective essay explores four major themes addressed during the T4 Conference - The New Normal: Education Post COVID-19 in May 2020 which are wellbeing, collaboration, leadership and technology. The conference provides a global perspective through the lens of teachers amidst the disruption posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

1 Transitioning to Online Teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

This reflective essay articulates my experience as a Biology teacher in the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACEi) programme of online teaching pivoted on global lessons shared by a panel of educationists and administrators during an online conference, T4 Conference - The New Normal: Education Post COVID-19, on 30 May 2020. 100,000 registered teachers and leaders from 81 different countries attended the conference. I chose to self-direct my professional training in 2020 specifically towards redesigning pedagogy. The T4-New Normal Teacher Conference endorsed the challenges I faced in my role as a teacher amidst the disruption posed by the global pandemic. The four major themes addressed during the conference, namely wellbeing, collaboration, leadership and technology, provided a global perspective through the lens of teachers.

Taylor's had already launched online and mixed modes of course delivery and were capacity building on greater infrastructure and teacher development skills in accordance with its newest blueprint of graduate capabilities. The teaching and learning processes were being aligned to the use of technology, robotics and artificial intelligence to prepare students for a more successful transition into the workforce of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (I.R. 4).

The pandemic acted as a catalyst to accelerate the adoption and adaptation of technology by teachers in remote learning earlier and more abruptly than planned. Lessons from in-house professional development courses conducted by Taylor's University's Center of Future Learning, together with the shared experience of all teachers in the T4 conference, as well as strong support from collegial sharing and institutional leadership, helped me to address some of the challenges of remote teaching.

Well-being

Wellbeing, which is the presence of positive emotions in the learning environment of both teachers and students, includes contentment, happiness, achievement, success, and the absence of negative emotions such as depression and anxiety (Tuckwiller, Washington & Milman, 2019). Teacher confidence, which is pivotal to their well-being, was challenged due to the uncertainties associated with their return to school. As I transitioned to online learning, my professional and home lives merged, and for me it meant a loss of work-life balance. I struggled initially to adapt to the "new normal" of teaching and learning, grappling with the possibility of never using the teaching methods that I had acquired during most of my professional life. Institutional leaders must recognize that the risks of emotional distress, irritability, stress and insomnia are real whether one is trying to teach or learn remotely. Continuity in learning can only be achieved through self-care and the psychosocial support of every individual (T4 Conference - The New Normal: Education Post COVID-19, 2020).

Student well-being was affected by feelings of isolation resulting from the loss of teacher and social support due to local or international lockdowns. Furthermore, some students were plagued with intermittent internet, and difficult financial and family environments. According to UNICEF (2020), while more than 1.5 billion learners of all ages were affected by school and university closures, only 45% had access to internet or internet band width to support online learning. Hence, I immersed myself in self-directed professional training which gradually helped me recreate lessons and other new resources to support student learning. Recorded lessons, pre-recorded announcements and guidelines for assignments, recordings of solutions to tutorials and answer keys to exam questions were immediate and valuable resources that I used to support student wellbeing. I was able to teach effectively during lessons, with students taking ownership of their learning as they felt more supported, less anxious and more goal oriented. Higher TES (Teaching Engagement Scale) scores based on less than a year of remote learning made me feel like an effective online educator.

Key approaches to humanizing online learning experiences must display two prominent features of the pedagogy of care, namely forming connections and being flexible (Nasr, 2020). I was able to engage both synchronously, via online classes, and asynchronously, via personalized consultation, with students to mitigate problems such as poor connectivity, lack of digital devices, unsuitable family environment and lack of motivation or purpose to study

remotely. Some students were even plagued with challenges to complete assessment tasks without teacher support and simply unable to meet deadlines for assignments or assessments. I displayed flexibility as I assessed students individually or with different tasks as each student was challenged differently due to the uncertainties of the pandemic.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a synchronous effort amongst teachers to construct and maintain a shared conception of a new approach to education in the 'new normal' (Maine, 2020). Collaboration between government agencies, institutional support, families, teachers and students is vital for the effective transition from face-to-face teaching to online learning. Strong institutional support for the development of technical skills, coupled with collegial sharing, allowed teachers to redesign their lessons to include technology for effective online learning and assessments (OECD, 2020).

However, a brief online survey of the T4 conference participants revealed that 25% teachers sourced their own resources and online training, 50% of the teachers felt isolated while 25% got no support (T4 Conference - The New Normal: Education Post COVID-19, 2020). An analysis of the challenges posed to education in four different south-east Asian countries, including Malaysia, revealed that lack of infrastructure, device and teacher preparedness for online learning led to less interaction with students (Balakrishnan, 2020).

At Taylor's, the strong institutional support extended to teachers working remotely as well as the gradual increase in collegial sharing helped to reduce my initial feelings of isolation and anxiety. The consolidation of the existing infrastructure of the learning management system, Moodle, and the training provided to teachers on the utilization of useful applications on existing platforms for remote learning and assessment proved invaluable to me.

Teacher Leadership

School leadership needs to provide time to mentor, support and coach teachers for professional leadership roles in training and research in their interim role in teacher capacity building for education post COVID-19. Teacher leadership is needed to form relationships and obtain feedback from their students, families or communities to pivot future online teaching. Teachers are agile, flexible leaders capable of demonstrating leadership capabilities at the student, family or community level. Teachers also need to provide equal opportunities for all students to learn in a new dimension of an adaptable new curriculum by using different environments and technology. Hence, some teachers have engaged in the development of alternative instructional systems other than live online lessons, such as radio, educational TV, podcasts, and vlogs, to address learning inequalities due to the lack of technology, finances, and a supportive home environment (T4 Conference - The New Normal: Education Post COVID-19, 2020).

I re-evaluated the criteria for different types of assessments in collaboration with the South Australian examination board (SACE) to achieve the same learning outcomes in isolated student settings. All learning and assessing activities were redesigned to preserve emotional well-being, promote independent learning, and encourage higher order thinking through open-ended questions as well as assess achievement accurately without classroom surveillance and close monitoring.

Technology

It was clear that all teachers needed to plunge into technology regardless of their comfort level. Teachers are the most valued contributors and architects of new education integrating innovation, inclusion, technology and collaboration to reimagine a more resilient future for education (McQuirter, 2020). Teacher autonomy and didactic freedom are important in the new bottom to top management approach. School administrators too needed to adopt suitable technology from the plethora of platforms available to plan training for online teaching and learning. The design of learning technology needs to focus less on technology and more on students and equipping teachers with skills to plan curriculum and pedagogy for both collaborative learning and instructional learning. Technology designed by teachers must have a positive influence on student learning, and students connecting with each other and their teachers (T4 Conference - The New Normal: Education Post COVID-19, 2020).

As I embarked on redesigning lessons with technology, I was presented with a multitude of novel applications and learning platforms to design self-paced learning modules for students. Zoom was adopted extensively for live lectures, pre-recorded lectures and for interactive consultation for assignments feedback due to the share screen feature. Quiz platforms such as Kahoot, Quizizz, Zoom Polls and Mentimeter that provided immediate feedback to the students were utilised. I was able to conduct live student opinion, emotions and understanding polls as well as collect student responses to open-ended or short answer questions using Zoom polls, Google Docs and Google Forms or by incorporating ClassPoint plugin into PowerPoint slides.

Conclusion

In reflection, the 'new normal' of learning is what it should always have been to prepare students for the future. Lessons from teacher experiences worldwide highlight self-care, collaboration, autonomy, trust and collaboration in the reskilling of teaching during the pandemic. I strongly believe in the need for teachers to maintain their own wellbeing if they want to demonstrate any form of leadership in the classroom or institution. School leadership needs to accentuate the extensive use of innovative technologies as an integral and no longer complementary or supplementary tool in the post pandemic education-scape. Furthermore, collaboration with students, their families, teachers and institutional leadership could provide amongst the best solutions to a common problem and serve as an opportunity to review traditional education for the future.

The conference made me passionate about redesigning new pedagogies and assessments for a new curriculum swiftly. I have learned to display more empathy and encouragement, be more adaptive, creative, and supportive of student learning offsite. My online lessons are designed not only to deliver content but also to develop social and communication skills, build interpersonal relationships amongst peers, and present opportunities to display community and environmental citizenship in projects like the Malayan Tiger Conservation Awareness and Fundraising Project. Humanising teaching and learning should remain vital in the 'new normal' of education. I plan to continue untapping technology in a collective initiative with my peers to build and share new practices based on the current model and to embrace with a greater willingness the winds of change in preparing for teaching and learning for the future.

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