

Teaching in Pandemic Times



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People are talking a lot on social media about their lives, more than ever. Indiscretions are made, but the light gets in when things get broken.

Today I saw some posts on a teaching group in FB about losing hope, about not being able to deal with the ebbing away of student motivation, snide comments about their practice, endless pressure to accommodate the student, no matter what. About reaching a point when you just want to give up and stop, just stop. This is teaching during a pandemic. When no one has had time to really think out their practice. When line managers are at a loss for how to provide 'service-as-usual' in a time when service as usual is completely impossible, and the syndrome of 'if we don't talk about X, then X isn't real, it isn't happening' is pervasive. Staff are under huge pressure to just carry on as if it'll all change next week and we will be back to normal. But we won't, I'd suggest we will never be back to normal, or not for a long time yet.

Colleagues generally like to be liked, they want to be collegiate and supportive, they try hard to fit in. We put up with each other's occasional hissy fits because we know we all have them now and again over something. Disagreements about how to approach teaching a module, or how to deal with a stroppy colleague or student. We all know we need to pull together, and make things work. In the past we could share stress with each other over coffee, in private, but we can't really do that anymore, we are mostly on our own.

Teaching now seems to require inhuman levels of attention, commitment, energy and effort. Planning and preparing lectures is now compounded by having to video them, and/or run exhausting synchronous online sessions, often too long and too boring for students to get real benefit from. Expectations for staff to all have video production skills, super strength Internet connections and high powered computers at home is assumed, and if you don't have these then you need to go and get them. Unhelpfully, colleagues may sometimes react to all this in a *slightly* competitive manner - trumpeting their own computer systems, their stats for how many sessions they've ran online, how many videos they've made, how many student 1-2-1 video feedback chats they've given. They demand other colleagues should be doing *more*, doing what they're doing, because obviously it's great. But, you know what? Sometimes it isn't great. It really isn't.

Ability to provide high quality online teaching is just assumed to be easy, that really anyone can do it - but I think this really is at the heart of the problem. The reaction by management to the pandemic seems to be that teaching can just move online with a simple switch. I think this demonstrates more than anything else why technology enhanced learning academic development has been so poor and so badly funded for so long. People think it's just a case of 'doing stuff' online, like, whatever, chatting in WhatsApp. Unbelievable, but I think true.

Online teaching is not about vast content dump. Multiple slides and YouTube links. Lots of long sections of text and academic words hardly anyone understands. Content dump is not lecturing (in any form), and it is not online learning and teaching. It is a waste of time, and students feel ripped off. They don't understand the importance or logic of guided curation, they cannot find their way through this maze. Online teaching is also not about how long your synchronous sessions are. It is not about how great your video production is. It is not about how many emails you send to other colleagues or students. It is not about densely packed VLE module spaces.

What *is* it about? There is no one-size-fits-all. It is about planning carefully for what you teach, the topics, the time you have, the engagement of the students and the human touch. It is about carefully considering and constantly revising your approach and expectations, and working *with* your learners, continuously. Discuss with your students what they are getting out of the sessions. Email them separately if you'd prefer. Ask them. Work together. Think about how resources are used. Be *very reflective* about everything. Talk a lot, to them and with them. Talk to your colleagues and reflect together, often, about practice. These are my opinions, gained after years of using technology formally and informally as part of my L&T. But you may find other things that are important. There is no one-size-fits-all, but it is also not a competition.

My final online synchronous session with a cohort last year ended with me playing some guitar for them (not a performance, just mucking about). I was being human. We were all in it together.

Note

This post is about HE lecturing. School teaching may have additional or other problems.

This post may be edited, added to or even removed, depending.

[*Img: @penworks*]