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During and beyond a pandemic: Publishing learning and teaching research through COVID-19

Joseph Crawford

University of Tasmania, Australia, joseph.crawford@utas.edu.au

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During and beyond a pandemic: Publishing learning and teaching research through COVID-19

Abstract

The novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has been a prevailing topic in contemporary higher education literature over the past year. The initial and emerging responses will be ongoing sources of critical reflection and future research. This commentary seeks to reflect on three types of manuscripts we are reviewing frequently within the Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, and those published elsewhere. Despite our best efforts, many publications overemphasize the present context without contextualising previous insights, or retain previous knowledge without application to contemporary practice. This commentary provides a brief review of manuscripts with pre-COVID-19 data, COVID-19-specific data, and future focused reflections. The objective is to posit mechanisms by which these manuscripts can serve as a practical account, be useful to current practitioners, and create ongoing opportunities to imagine a future higher education that serves the broad academic community well.

Keywords

COVID-19, publications, literature

Introduction

The novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has had an incredible effect on learning and teaching in higher education. The emergent literature, numbering in the hundreds, has presented a suite of responses to subject, discipline, course, faculty, institution, country, and international challenges affecting the sector (Butler-Henderson et al., 2020). The first series of manuscripts spoke to the need for emergency remote teaching (ERT) to support continuity of learning as longer-term strategies were developed. These manuscripts have ranged from micro-lens studies of emergency remote teaching in single courses (Gelles et al., 2020), to more broader studies of sector financial climates (Marshman & Larkins, 2020), reflections of quality and equity (Allen et al., 2020), and international reflections (Ali, 2020).

The rate of publication growth – fostered by publishers seeking to create accessible best practice available for collective knowledge sharing – has opened the floodgates for literature that varies in quality considerably. Indeed, the inclusion of ad-hoc rapid review processes can support timeliness of publication (e.g. Ferdig et al., 2020). This does, however, require care and caution on the part of the author(s), reviewer(s), and editor(s). In one example, Ferdig and colleagues (2020, p. xiii) provided a call for short papers on 15 April 2020, with submissions due 15 days later. From 266 submissions, 33 were accepted into a 1 June 2020 Special Issue (Hartshorne et al., 2020) and 133 short chapters in a 15 June 2020 eBook. Their process was recorded transparently, but was unlikely to adhere to traditional conventions of rigour. Models similar to this one have been adopted on smaller scales by journals seeking to publish and remain relevant during a tumultuous period.

The commentaries led by editors have been diverse, many have leveraged the rhetoric of opportunity and optimism with tribute to the ‘unprecedented’, ‘challenging’, and ‘precarious’ pandemic climate (e.g. Green et al., 2020; Ligouri & Winkler, 2020). One such example from *Adult Education Quarterly* highlights:

“It is our hope that during this trying time, adult education can be a force for connecting people who, after months of social isolation and physical distancing, may recognize more than ever the value of supportive networks and solidarity among members of society” (Boeren et al., 2020, p. 203-203).

The conservative positive undertones of most emerging literature is likely matched by those experiencing ongoing work or workload challenges preventing their sharing of practice, despite cases of failings are under-represented in the literature to date. An emphasis on successful studies, significant findings, and novelty is common across many disciplines (e.g. Antonakis, 2017). We have encouraged submissions of cases where an intervention has failed and to-date we have received few. The sector is facing challenges and the literature published only partially acknowledges the efforts that higher education is undertaking to be and maintain resilience.

This commentary speaks to three cohorts of manuscripts forthcoming - studies before the pandemic, those specifically on responses to the pandemic, and those proposing a new future - with strategies for their success within publishing and practical settings. The role of the Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice has been to connect research with practice, and at the forefront of publications accepted during the pandemic has been a focus on assurance that there is utility of publications *during* and *beyond*. The two criteria posed have challenged some of our authors, and offered opportunities to create meaningful impact for others.

The studies before

When the pandemic took full swing in early 2020 the Journal, like others, had prepared manuscripts for a possible future bereft of knowledge of what was to come. We published a brief editorial in February 2020 without reference to COVID-19 (see Percy & Kelder, 2020). Many of the manuscripts published in this issue had likely implications for an emergency remote teaching (ERT) environment, without knowledge of such (yet). For example, Giannikas (2020) highlighted the opportunity to leverage Facebook to foster student learning, and for communication with students in a place they felt more comfortable than a learning management system (LMS). This study had practical foresight to future studies that were situated in a COVID-19 landscape. A study by Chu et al., (2020) focused on unpacking the change in views, likes, and shares of Facebook fan pages for medical centres. These pages experienced heightened usage during 2020; however, many educators may have missed such an opportunity to apply such knowledge. Huddart et al. (2020) is a good exception to the rule with their use of #MedStudentCOVID on Twitter to support student-to-teacher interaction.

It is not uncommon for data to take years from collection to publication. 2019 primary data collection, and longitudinal studies commenced pre-COVID-19 will continue to be received by journals like ours. Such studies continue to retain their relevance during contemporary higher education, with many authors assuming their relevance will be retained beyond the pandemic. Strong pedagogy and theoretical content, rigorous methods, and critical reflection are the foundations for an ongoing contribution to the literature. What if that is not the case though? The pandemic has had irrevocable effects on learning and teaching practice. Academics and students have now had the opportunity to test (by force) alternate learning environments, and these will create new expectations for a future reality. Heraclitus articulates that *no man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man*. Our learning and teaching community will exit the pandemic anew, and our scholarly research must reflect that. Some knowledge and best practices will be retained, and the pressures of the environment and its members will serve as a catalyst.

The contribution of pre-pandemic data is not lost, however. The role of the authors leveraging such data is to view the analysis process with a focus to reflect upon the past, present, and future of learning and teaching. These studies collect data from the recent past, the pandemic environment is our current present, and the post-pandemic environment is our future. The greatest challenge for these works is to, sometimes clairvoyantly, apply the learnings of the studies to a context beyond the initial scope of works. When asked to revise works, we have received largely positive responses from our authors. This often does not mean rewriting entire works to change its meaning, and instead beginning a discussion for the application of learnings to the local and international contexts *and* for the past, present, and future environments.

The proliferation during

The earliest published scholarship papers have been heavily utilised by the sector. These do not offer best practice exemplars, but rather curations of what an initial response looked like. The first was published on 1 April 2020 and has amassed 342 citations on Google Scholar to date. This manuscript (Crawford et al., 2020) summarises the responses of universities in 20 countries. The second was published on 7 April 2020, with 369 citations on Google Scholar, reflecting on the transition to online education in Peking University, China. These, one of which I author, I openly admit do not offer best practice for ERT or online education. Rather, they offer a statement of current account. A baseline record for future reflection and research. Many works since have continued to document a current account of online curriculum innovation and ERT (e.g. Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Ali, 2020; Toquero, 2020).

Those articles with the most promise go beyond the present to, as Green et al. (2020, p. 1309) articulates “engag(e) in the work of imagining the future”. Effective learning and teaching research will seek to synthesize historical knowledge and contemporary environments to conceptualise life anew. Literature published during COVID-19 must build on decades of research in higher education and related disciplines (e.g. psychology, sociology, and management). These works now require leadership to postulate their application to new contexts, or challenge them. Mindfulness in higher education, for example, is not a new concept (Bennett et al., 2018; Davis, 2014; de Bruin et al., 2015). Reilly (2020) draws on previous literature and context to theorise and test a response to pre-pandemic negative emotions in students *and* the expectation these will be exacerbated during the pandemic.

Studies published during the pandemic must balance the changing environment with the need for ongoing relevance. Learning and teaching literature must be critical of the present, but contextualise this within previous literature, and imagine a future. Failing to achieve one of these steps creates a flaw within which its relevance will be questioned. Scholars who do not reflect on previous literature will likely repeat existing knowledge, or as Kristjansson (2012) and many others comment, create old wine in new bottles. Those who fail to reflect on the present extend the knowledge gap between research and practice. The pandemic will affect immediate workloads in higher education for at least the next five years (Watermeyer et al., 2020), and it is likely to continue beyond that.

The catalyst beyond

Stagle et al. (2020, n.p.) articulates their case as “the perfect storm in the midst of a pandemic”. An astute analogy reflecting where our future may be. At some point, the pandemic does end, and a cycle of recovery and rebuilding will begin. What this looks like is an important question for scholars. An essential question however, is *what should higher education look like?* We began this conversation in relation to the traditional lectures (Kinash et al., 2021) and received what Parsell (2021) articulated was ‘staff lamenting the loss’. Conversations of an imagined future require resilience and tenacity, as the pandemic continues to force questions that were bubbling to the surface before 2020.

The experiences of the pandemic will create cause for question for students, academics, and policy makers. Questions of pedagogy, relevance, equity, quality, flexibility, wellbeing, finances, and leadership among others. The pandemic offers a catalyst to create a more relevant curriculum that supports authentic and situated learning. When the pandemic truly ends, there will be temporary legacies that require undoing (e.g. ERT), and new practices that should remain (e.g. more flexible and adaptable learning). For our sector, it requires us to show leadership in retaining the grain and discarding the chaff. Not just in recognising what is to remain, but also in defining carefully those elements in accessible and practical language. Language that transcends our many geographic jurisdictions, and speaks to the human condition within learning and teaching environments.

Conclusion

The future of learning and teaching practice requires innovators and early adopters to digest and assess why we teach and learn, and how we engage in such practices with purpose. This requires careful and critical reflection of how we were, what we are now, and the places we may go next. Scholars that reflect and extend our current knowledge in a pre-pandemic and post-pandemic will be the source of our global innovations to better support the learning of our students, their engagement and excitement with learning, and the wellbeing of our sector.

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Conflict of interest

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