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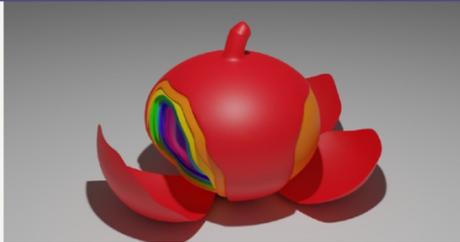
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## Stripping the layers of the onion in learning and teaching in HE

03 Jun 2020 | Dr Gerasimos Chatzidamianos and Dr Chrissi Nerantzi  
Dr Gerasimos Chatzidamianos (FHEA) and Dr Chrissi Nerantzi (PFHEA, NTF), Manchester Metropolitan University, reflect on positive lessons learned from working during a pandemic.



## Introduction

COVID-19 has had a major impact across all parts of the economy. While individuals, communities and society as a whole are battling to navigate their way through the unprecedented challenges experienced for our generation, this article aims to 'strip the layers of the onion' in learning and teaching in Higher Education (HE) and reveal what lies beneath it. In the midst of the devastating news of death statistics from across the globe, the article recognises that with challenge comes opportunity and with every opportunity comes challenge. It is our obligation, therefore, that as education practitioners we reflect and identify the emerging positive lessons learned that help un-think, re-think and new-think learning and teaching and curriculum design in HE.

Through a shared reflection and observations from recent practice, we, two UK based HE academics, discuss our emerging professional experiences that illuminate positive outcomes and opportunities for students and staff. As academics, we can study a situation, critically appraise it, draw objective conclusions and apply theory to

practice. In an attempt to move away from the grim reporting of death statistics, here we report three positive lessons learned that relate to learning and teaching in HE during the pandemic: ***Positivity, People and Emotions***. These are operationalised through embracing change, focusing on the emotional and social dimensions of learning and teaching and placing greater emphasis on staff development and emotional support. These lessons form the PPE for learning and teaching that seems to work during the pandemic. Our next focus should be on ensuring these lessons to have a positive lasting effect.

## **What?**

Our world has changed, our daily lives too. A tiny tiny and so so deadly virus that almost nobody can see has turned our world upside down. Literally. From one day to the other, almost. The new normal in the COVID-19 pandemic is now being at home, avoiding human touch. Actually staying away from each other. Two meters is the recommended distance. And washing our hands rigorously and often while singing Happy Birthday twice. From 'stay at home', the slogan has changed to "stay alert"... as if it is a zebra crossing! New cleaning regimes have been implemented in all households. In public we wear masks and gloves. Some of us... most of us... no-one! It is not actually clear whether we should wear one or not, or where or how or which one. Shopping for the basics has become an excursion with uncertain consequences. Will we return with the shopping (whatever we can find) and a few unwanted invisible guests? Will the virus infect us and our loved ones? We know that the virus just needs a host and any of us can become one, at any time. Pretty scary stuff... really.

Working from home (those who can), teaching from home, learning from home. Many have lost their jobs. Others have been furloughed. Companies are closing and the UK Chancellor formally announced that we are entering a period of a major recession. Domestic violence is on the rise. And mental health problems are flaring up too. How can we protect the vulnerable? Our National Health Service (NHS) is under strain but coping even without sufficient/appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and with limited testing. Key workers risk their lives to save others.

We show our appreciation in any way we can and many individuals like Captain Tom and communities are coming together to help the NHS and all those in need.

The news seems to focus on the lockdown, the easing strategies, the opening (or not) of schools and the phased return to 'normality'. Nobody truly knows when this is going to end. Will it end? Researchers work around the clock to find treatments that work and a vaccine. Research is now reviewed, conducted and published speedily as open access publications globally, to share findings and build on each other's discoveries. How long will it take to find a cure? A vaccine? How long?

In the meantime, the boundaries between personal and professional life have not just been blurred but dissolved completely. And we are stressed and anxious for ourselves, our loved ones, our colleagues and students, for humanity as a whole. Life during the pandemic seems to have brought human activity to a standstill... almost; externally at least. Within us there is a lot of movement, turbulence. Has our life gone back to survival mode? What about thriving in this time of extreme adversity and pain?

### **So what?**

Universities moved online even before the UK-wide lockdown on the 25 March. Some were quicker than others. Remote teaching and learning became the new norm. But we can't suddenly all be(come) experts in online teaching. Teaching face-to-face and teaching online is not the same thing; and institutions recognise this. This new normal (for now) is and requires a radical change in a time of this global emergency. It also generates an apparent flexibility and choice which is good but also overwhelming and in need of finding a balance. Adjustments in this time of adversity are made rapidly and are ongoing. Changes to the way we offer our modules and programmes, the way we support our students and colleagues, the way we assess and evaluate and also grow new provision. This is stressful not just for students but also for staff. There are competing priorities now more than ever before and feel out of control and out of balance. Wobbly. Very wobbly... like acrobats who are performing in front of a live audience without or with limited training. High up on a

thin rope. Many will feel lost... stressed, depressed. There is a lot of turbulence everywhere.

Universities are complex systems with attractive buildings that cannot help us now. We rely on our people and their professionalism, their commitment and care. Business as usual? Not quite! 'We are not working from home, we are at home during a crisis trying to work' featured on Twitter. There are now conflicting priorities, more than ever before. Many have caring responsibilities, some will get ill or have been ill already, others (far too many) may have lost a loved one. At least, and following years of division due to Brexit, it feels as if we are all in this together. That togetherness, while living in physical isolation from each other has shown to bring out our need for connection more. Connection with each other at a personal level. As we can no longer enjoy the human touch, a hug, a kiss or even a handshake, we long to see each other online.

Today we have the digital technologies and applications to do this. Not everybody but many of us in the UK and the so called developed world do. Before appearing on the camera, we dress up instead of dressing down, shave, put our lipstick on and... ACTION... we start sharing so much of our everyday reality with others. Pyjamas and (silly) hats also feature and people are curious about how and where we live. We have opened up our personal lives and don't just share our culinary disasters, our pets and DIY haircuts but also our raw emotions despite the culturally informed 'stiff upper lip'. We are revealing our human side and this seems to help us connect with who we are, what we are going through and with others. Sharing helps us realise that we are not alone. Our fears, anxiety and dreams bring us together.

Despite so much negativity, we are trying to remain positive and hopeful. United. People are coming together. Some relationships amongst colleagues, between academics and students seem to become stronger thanks to that emotional glue, that shared experience that binds us. A different type of partnership seems to emerge, a more humane one. We more frequently see people closing their emails with 'Stay safe' and not 'Best regards'. Academics and other professionals who teach and support learning work hard and are resourceful to make this work for them

and their students, to make adjustments, to make learning happen in this new normal. This is because it is important to move forward. We are going through a fundamental change with a lasting impact. We long for the past rather nostalgically but in reality, we are rethinking our practice more widely. We hear that colleagues are not just adapting to the now, but also started re-thinking what that they have been doing. Also, despite devaluing the arts over the years we are reaching out to the arts to save us. How ironic! However, we have not been using the VLE to its full capacity. It was a space for resources sharing and not a space to come together. We are now sharing to connect and we connect by sharing. We are starting to finally move away from content delivery (problematic term anyway) and context becomes king - 'contextualised marking' is a new term for most. When it comes to assessment, are we finally realising that less is more? Are we actually moving away from exams? Away from learning as assessment and seamlessly integrated into the learning process? Is process equally if not more important than product? Universities are working hard to identify viable and sustainable solutions. With that in mind, we may have found the PPE for learning and teaching that seems to work in the time of this pandemic: Positivity, People and Emotions. Here is what we learned so far.

### **Now what?**

It seems that through this experience our wandering mind has been awakened.

### Lessons learnt

1. Embrace change. Sooner or later the COVID-19 pandemic will be contained. Its impact, however, will have a lasting and far-reaching effect on the wider academic community
  1. Creativity might provide a valuable way forward. There are existing networks and communities (e.g. [#CreativityHE](#), [@creativeacademic](#)) that provide valuable space and resources for staff and students on how creativity can be implemented in HE to maximise engagement and stimulate learning.

2. Resourcefulness: At times of adversity people often focus on what they are lacking and not on what they already have. It is now time to utilise and repurpose our existing materials, networks, open education resources, foster existing communities of learning with peers, colleagues and collaborators.
2. Focus on the emotional and social dimensions of learning and teaching.
    1. As pedagogists, we need to re-shift our attention from the threshold concepts of the fundamentals of our disciplines that our students need to master to their ability in doing so given the context they operate in. Hence, we need to inspire them, motivate them, empower them, support them in developing academic confidence and give them the emotional tools to work and flourish and the learning of the subject matter will follow naturally/organically.
    2. Learning and teaching a priori operates in a social context whereby we value human connections, work together, learn together and be together. COVID-19, however, has situationally forced us to keep physical distance from our social circles. By reframing this reality, we could move away from social distancing towards distant socialising. The digital world enables distant socialising and makes, to a degree, our realities less lonely and isolated. HE practitioners should harness the opportunities that the digitalisation of learning and teaching provides, whilst ensuring, however, that the systems and processes they use safeguard personal sensitive data. Indeed, we see many cases whereby researchers have questioned the integrity of many of the digital platforms currently being used and their transparency of how the data generated are being processed with or without the knowledge of the user. During this transition to a more digitalised provision, the fundamental safeguards provided by ethics and governance becomes even more important and need our full attention.
  3. Place greater emphasis on emotional support and staff development

1. “It is OK not to be OK” academics often say to their students during stressful times. It is time for academics to practise what they teach and focus on their emotional wellbeing, by engaging in self-care activities, talking through their concerns with colleagues and seeking formal support if needed. Universities have responded to the emotional needs of staff by encouraging flexible working arrangements (even more to what was before) to accommodate, for instance, childcare or homeschooling. Multiple peer support groups emerged; from online yoga to online knitting groups; groups for academics with kids, without kids, with pets, without, with caring responsibilities of elderly relatives.
2. Not all staff are equally proficient in the use of pedagogical approaches that utilise digital technologies. Redesigning curricula for online delivery requires the deconstruction of teaching and learning first. Staff are encouraged to proactively engage with widely available academic development opportunities. Simply attending a webinar is not enough. What is needed is to develop reflective habits and capabilities and seize the opportunities presented by practice-based CPD and open educational offers. Recognise internal and external networks and communities as spaces to share practices and develop new skills, competencies and behaviours.

## **Conclusion**

For years and alongside operational systems and resources, universities have been investing in shiny buildings and facilities. These, however, cannot help us anymore. They have been deserted... University leaders have rightly shifted their attention to what really matters and what we really rely upon: students and staff and their wellbeing, their professionalism, their commitment and care. On the same token, however, there are financial pressures that no one knows what the implications will be. A slimmer HE sector? Redundancies? Is a new post-pandemic world emerging? Could our PPE in higher HE provide a shield or a pair of lenses through which

difficult decisions will be made. If yes, our lessons learned are bound to have a positive lasting effect and will help shape any future HE landscape.

***Join the open Flexible, Open and Social Learning course on Advance HE Connect organised and facilitated by volunteer practitioners in 10 north-west England higher education between the 5 -14 June, together with colleagues and students across the UK and further afield. Find out more here: <https://connect.advance-he.ac.uk/topics/18345/feed>***

Dr Gerasimos Chatzidamianos is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Manchester Met, in the Faculty of Health, Psychology, Social Work and Social Care (FHPSC) – Psychology Department, with an expertise in experimental psycholinguistics, mental health and Deafness, clinical communication, carers involvement in mental health practice, and clinical and research ethics. Gerasimos have also trained clinically in family-centre approaches for early interventions (0-6 years old kids with complex needs) and for adults with Bipolar Disorder. Prior to his psychology training Gerasimos qualified as a SEN pre-school teacher.

Dr Chrissi Nerantzi is a Principal Lecturer in Academic CPD in the University Teaching Academy (UTA) at Manchester Met. Her interests are in creativity, innovation and openness. Chrissi teaches on the MA in Higher Education, leads Recognising and Rewarding Teaching Excellence within UTA and supports colleagues across the institution in their professional development, curriculum design and scholarly activities in learning and teaching. She founded a series of open professional development initiatives, such as the #creativeHE and MAKE communities, the TLC webinar series, the open course FOS, #101creativeideas and with Sue Beckingham the tweetchat #LTHEchat and the open course BYOD4L.

**Artwork by Odysseas Frank (16)**