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UTA University Teaching Academy | Manchester Metropolitan University

Reflections on Block-Teaching at Man Met During the Pandemic: Three Practitioners, Three Voices

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Abstract

As the end of an academic year approaches when everything about the university experience was affected by the constraints imposed by COVID-19, this article presents the reflections of three academics, offering three different perspectives on what this unprecedented year has implied, and the legacy it is potentially leaving behind.

The points of view of an Academic Developer, a Senior Lecturer, and an Education Lead trace the process that led to the roll out of an academic year like no other: from the reconceptualisation of

didactics demanded by the transition from the customary face-to-face to a blended (and eventually online only) delivery format, to the adjustments to units and the attendant assessment strategies, to the impact of all these changes on a more personal level, on the bodies and minds of all involved.

Setting the Scene

Our world changed overnight due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities across the world rapidly switched their programmes to delivery that was fully online or in hybrid mode, remaining operational throughout.

Learning can happen anywhere, anytime, anyhow. And it did and still does. Students joined, continued, and completed their studies under particularly challenging circumstances. University leaders, educators, all staff as well as students worked together to adjust to the new situation and used their resourcefulness to create a seamless continuation to university study with minimum disruption. However, life at university was not the same and the buzzing campus disappeared.

Staff and students, in fact everyone in the university, connected remotely from living rooms or bedrooms, from the kitchen table, from a shed in the garden. Uncomfortable chairs, ironing boards or coffee tables repurposed as desks, laptops precariously balanced on laps (hence for once true to their name), flaky internet connections – all became staples in the new order. And so did juggling home schooling, caring responsibilities, health, illness, and work.

It has been exhausting but also enlightening, a rollercoaster of

experiences and emotions. Conversations with colleagues in other institutions nationally and internationally confirm that many academics feel the same across the globe.

What follows is an account of how three higher education practitioners with different institutional remits - the editors of this special issue - experienced the academic year 2020/21, when a block teaching approach was introduced institution-wide, with the aim to bring focus and flexibility for students and staff. More specifically, "[b]lock blended teaching as a design solution gives us the opportunity to respond flexibly across the year, to manage staff and student workload and helps us manage campus in more controlled way. While the context for teaching and learning remains a challenging one, block teaching simplifies our structures and allows us to concentrate our efforts, managing one thing at a time" (Laville 2020, 1). This mode of learning and teaching, in which one (30 credits) or two smaller (15 credits) units were taught at the time in six-week blocks, four blocks in total during the academic year, required a rethink of the curriculum, learning and teaching strategies, assessment and the academic administration and organisation behind it: a mammoth task. Everybody in the university, academics and colleagues in professional services worked hard with great commitment and resourcefulness, in collaboration with one another, to make it work for our students.

Academic Developer

As an academic development unit, the University Teaching Academy (UTA) provided extensive support in preparation for and during the implementation of block teaching. We organised workshops, assisted faculties and departments, created resources and

guidelines, and were available to discuss with colleagues their needs, ideas, and dilemmas linked to the curriculum re-design, learning and teaching strategies, as well as assessment and feedback. We could see how colleagues were more willing to discuss their practice, to share what had worked for them, and seek help from other colleagues to resolve their reservations. Colleagues reached out to their peers and opened up about the challenges they were facing. But they also shared generously the ideas they generated, created a sense of excitement which in turn re-invigorated their teaching practice and the ways they supported students' learning. There were many eureka moments. A new energy was in the air to experiment, be resourceful and imaginative to create learning experiences that brought students and staff together, facilitating activities that were stimulating and engaging despite the very challenging circumstances.

The temptation to replicate standard classroom practice was strong during the first few months of the pandemic. It soon became clear that this was not sustainable, let alone an effective option, and **synchronous and asynchronous learning and teaching** entered our pandemic vocabulary quickly. Finding a balance was not easy during the time of physical distancing, when digital networked technologies were the only answer to the need to be with others, to share. The format of synchronous sessions, especially when it simply entailed transmission of information, didn't seem to encourage much participation from students, and was challenging for academics, who felt like they were speaking into a black hole or, as someone put it, "conducting a séance". Switching cameras on or keeping them off became a regular discussion point in sessions, and some students reported feeling under pressure to appear on

video (Harkin, 2021), which raised questions about what could be done to involve them more, to stimulate their participation. It became obvious that replicating campus-based provision online would not work, especially because in block teaching there is even less time overall to complete a unit despite the experience being more intensive and immersive.

Academic developers promoted the streamlining of provision (we often said, "less is more" and invited academics to "keep it simple"), active learning approaches that engage students in their learning within and beyond the live classroom, and the use of sound peda-gogical frameworks and models to scaffold engagement and learning (Nerantzi, 2017). We also talked a lot about the value of team teaching, which was not always possible due to resource implications. Some academics started considering and introduced peer-to-peer and flipped learning (Nerantzi, 2020) and focused on creating opportunities for interaction in the classroom, including problem solving and 'chunking' strategies to help students better understand challenging concepts. It is true that any individual can learn a lot on our own and it is useful to remember this when designing a curriculum especially in block teaching as beyond what is offered by the academic team, students should be encour-aged to study more widely around the subject on their own and with others. Therefore, supporting students with what they struggle with seemed to be a valuable strategy to focus on in sessions so that they could move forward, develop important competencies, deepen their understanding about the subject and developing academic and professional competencies. As a result of a shift in thinking about how we can harness digital networked approaches to connect and maximise engagement, learning and teaching became

more seamless. Asynchronous learning provided more flexibility, more accessibility, and so was appreciated by students. Staff often reported that they feel more connected than ever with their students and colleagues on a humane level, but also stretched and over-worked. They have given everything and more.

Senior Lecturer

Block what? Block teaching? What is that? I have never heard of that before. Do we really need something totally new now… now that all constants in our lives are being challenged? This was my initial response to the news that our face-to-face delivery, under-standably, needed to move online but in a block design. But time was of the essence, and while we were physically forced to stay away from one another, I found myself reaching out to colleagues more than I have ever done before, searching the literature, reading about block teaching, sharing ideas and ways of doing things with others… and in between, also sharing segments of our personal lives, fears, worries and the challenges COVID had brought too... with a backdrop of the kitchen cabinets, the bedroom, or the garden.

As a senior lecturer in a Department of Psychology my role is clear; conduct research, teach, and engage with administrative tasks (often branded as academic citizenship). My training, years of expe-rience and eagerness to develop as an academic has been the toolkit that allowed me to perform. Yet, this seemed not to be suffi-cient anymore. My funded research had to stop because it required face-to-face physical presences that could not pass the COVID risk assessment. My teaching had to change and from delivering a lecture to an audience of 50-300 students in a lecture theatre I found myself *trying* to e-connect with up to 20 students at a time over the

internet, for several times a day, behind a camera that most chose to keep switched off. My administrative responsibilities grew exponentially. At the same time, healthcare staff were in desperate need of special Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to combat the virus. I was too, but of a different sort. I needed an academic PPE that would allow me to perform my role and crucially support my students for the challenges they were experiencing. My PPE consisted of **Positivity**, **People**, and **Emotions** (Chatzidamianos & Nerantzi, 2020). Positivity allowed my creative self to think, unthink and rethink my practice, embrace change, be resourceful and act accordingly. By focusing on people, I was better attuned to my emotional and development needs and those of my colleagues and students. By placing greater emphasis on the emotional dimensions of learning and teaching, I was able to keep connected with my colleagues and my students at a deeper level. This connection formed the foundation upon which learning organically followed. At the end of an e-supervision session with a postgraduate student, he noted "We have never met face to face, but I feel I have connected with you and the other students in my bubble more than I ever have in my university years. And this makes me enjoy my course more and study more." The lesson to me was clear, focusing on the social dimensions of learning and teaching enables us all to work together, learn *together*, and feel as if we are *together* even if we are, in fact, socially distant.

When this academic PPE was coupled with the extensive work that had been put into the transition from face-to-face delivery to remote block teaching the block design seemed to work well for students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and staff. It enabled (a.) the development of a clear pattern that was repeated in every block with specific instructions to the students, (b.) independent learning, which

was consolidated during live sessions, (c.) the constructive alignment of the content with the learning objectives and (d.) the embedding of the assessment throughout the block through formative feedback (Nerantzi & Chatzidamianos, 2020). In my experience, this resulted in more students engaging with the learning process and deeper and more meaningful relationships being built. Because for Higher Education to thrive it needs people, human relationships and collaborations that form and sustain creative and resourceful communities of learning (Nerantzi, Chatzidamianos & Stathopoulou, submitted).

Departmental Education Lead

As a Departmental Education lead, it is my role to support the development and delivery of policies and strategies in areas that pertain to education and that include learning, teaching and assessment, feedback, and academic support. Together with fellow Education Leads in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, I promote and facilitate the dissemination and embedding of good practice in these areas, across the faculty and more widely across the institution. Our goal is to ensure that we provide a high-quality experience to our students, and enhance the standing of our institution.

Whilst the onset of the pandemic did not alter our Education priorities, it did demand a radical rethink of our strategies to realise them. The destination may have remained the same – the focus on developing and delivering "strong" courses (strength measured according to set performance indicators), on creating an inspiring environment that simultaneously challenged and nurtured students, on designing equitable, inclusive and transparent assessment strategies – but the journey to get there, and the equipment to make the journey possible, had to change.

Thinking retrospectively of the conversations amongst academic colleagues starting from late spring 2020 - when the extent of the COVID emergency, both in terms of risk to life and protraction in time, became clear to all - some distinct phases emerge.

Initially there was widespread concern in relation to **content**: how could something designed to be covered in 12, or even 24 weeks possibly be delivered in 6! Then came anxiety about **assessment**: as all assessments had to move online, those subjects traditionally relying on timed and invigilated tests (code for class tests or exams) had to accept longer time windows for completion, as well as the disappearance of the "surveillance" element. More critically, however, there was concern about **what** there would be to assess, given the severely reduced time available to cover unit content.

Once the illusion that we could win the argument that we were a "special case" and gain a raft of exemptions (from block delivery/end of block assessment/"bubbles") was dispelled, we channelled our energies towards reimagining the units in our programmes, keenly aware of the importance of remaining wholly student-centred and academically credible. Echoes from the Black Lives Matter movement made decolonising the curriculum a priority in all curriculum design interventions, and created opportunities for a more diverse and inclusive offer to which all students could relate (Patel, 2021).

Many of us had little or no experience of online teaching, and even those who had practised it before the pandemic had done it mostly in asynchronous mode. Many of us had reservations about teaching our subject online only – particularly those in areas that do not lend themselves to a virtual delivery, that rely on laboratory work, on the

use of technical equipment, or on classroom interaction. However, as practitioners, we know that learning is ubiquitous, and we always encourage students to see opportunities for learning everywhere. Experience has taught us that students learn best when they are active participants in the learning process, when their curiosity is stimulated, when they can ask questions and debate, when they are allowed scope for risk-free experimentation, when they are supported by a learning community, and when they see the relevance of what they are learning beyond the short-range scope of classroom and assessment. Seen from this perspective, it is not the quantity of content that tutors deliver that matters, as much as the quality of the student exposure to the subject, and the level of self-concordance that develops through the experience of learning (Sheldon and Elliot, 1999). These, arguably, are only in part a function of the time spent with the tutor in class. Hence, from the same perspective, a six-week block could turn from mission impossible to an interesting pedagogical experiment.

And experiment we did.

With the support and guidance offered by colleagues from UTA, from Learning and Research Technologies (LRT), and from Education Management, we were able to envision what our units could become, how they could be delivered and assessed in the new structure and in the unprecedented circumstances, and remain on the right side of internal and external regulators, despite the indispensable, extensive reshaping. Of invaluable benefit were the conversations amongst teaching teams, amongst the members of the Faculty Education Team, and generally amongst academics – within the Faculty and the university, and from other institutions.

Exchanging ideas and concerns, sharing lightbulb moments as well as moments when what we were tasked to do seemed like mission impossible, led to noteworthy results.

We changed our assessments, to make them more suitable to the shorter and more intensive block delivery – personally, I found the wealth of ideas for tasks provided by UTA very useful to overcome those moments when the inspiration seemed to have dried up, and actively promoted them amongst my colleagues. We made provisions for carefully structured scaffolding, to ensure that students had the right support to be able to learn and complete the assessments in synch with the rhythm of the blocks. And noun phrases such as active learning, peer instruction, and flipped learning became incorporated into common parlance, as we started to develop resources - be they home-produced "knowledge clips" – 5-10 minute videos introducing or expanding a previously covered topic - or materials available via the wider academic community - to reinvent our units. We created rich learning opportunities that connected learning pre-, during and post-class, and that were supported by and delivered through technology (a pre-condition in times of social distancing). We asked students to access and engage with the resources before coming to class, so that they could be ready for the in-class activities (Schell and Butler, 2018; Nerantzi, 2020). Most of us were pleasantly surprised to see that students kept their side of the bargain and did prepare in advance. In fact, as some colleagues remarked, "in the absence of anything else to do, students practised, and practised, and practised some more".

In my units, I made extensive use of EVOLI, a video tagging tool that was developed within the ELSE project, an EU-funded RKE

project of which I am a partner, and that was designed to support flipped classroom pedagogy. I had piloted EVOLI in "normal" (pre-COVID) times, and promoted it in the summer UTA Learning and Teaching Festival, where I demonstrated how it had helped my students get to grips with the intricacies of Latin grammar. EVOLI enabled me to share my "knowledge clips" – in MMUTube or YouTube-, with students, invite them to watch them prior to the class and tag them, indicating what they understood, what they did not understand, and what comments or questions they had about the content. The students' active engagement with the materials, and the full range of analytics available through EVOLI - including graphs showing the points in the video with concepts that students found difficult to grasp, and textual comments with further questions or observations - helped me structure the subsequent live session, preparing materials or exercises tailored to the students' needs, explicitly linked to their own pre-class annotations.

The academic year 2020-21 was, as well as "the year of COVID", also the year when I practised more consistently than ever in my career, and advocated, the principles of assessment **as** learning: I encouraged students to form partnerships despite often never having met in person, to work together to make sense of new information, and to contribute their respective prior knowledge to help their peers with new learning. Activities were kept personalised and meaningful. In one final year undergraduate unit in particular, I was fortunate enough to see that students used me and each other to learn and understand more about certain topics that resonated with their own developing interests and values, and that they sensed were relevant to their lives and their ambitions. Many of my colleagues did the same, and reported high levels of engagement

and satisfaction amongst students, who were behaving as proper partners in learning.

Not that it was all a bed of roses.

For all of us there were mishaps - dropping connections, malfunctioning or inadequate equipment, students' "bad vibes days" - that occasionally interfered with carefully planned lectures and seminars, or with timed and timely submissions of assessment. Thankfully, we had provisions for those, as we all came to terms with notions such as contextualised assessment and contextualised marking, overcoming the initial suspicion that they were proxy for leniency and unwarranted generosity, and learning to see them as rigorous in their own right, and not a threat to standards.

The students were at times confrontational: I have written more responses to petitions challenging marks this year than ever before. But, interestingly (and once the mild irritation at having to read through pages of students' arguments and colleagues' counterarguments had waned), I observed that a reasoned response, supported by objective evidence, actionable suggestions for improvement, and offers of help to implement them resolved the disputes. It was clear that students were anxious, concerned about the impact of the current situation on the value of their degree, and were reaching out to us in every way they could.

Finally, 2020-21 was also the year when empathy and understanding became core imperatives. Luckily these were shown to be in plentiful supply, and flowing in both directions. They were applied as appropriate by staff when it came to submission deadlines, and it

was a relief to see judicious academic discretion incorporated in the institutional policies for the year, enabling carefully managed local flexibility. Students were also more empathetic and understanding than I have seen for many years, and fully cognisant of the unprecedented nature of the events we were all experiencing. This is quite possibly the one most important lesson that I will take with me from this very peculiar period: as we prepare for another year of block teaching, we can make (and are making) technical adjustments to the way we teach and assess - tweaking the balance between synchronous and asynchronous delivery, prioritising certain topics whilst reducing or removing others, introducing flexibility to submission deadlines, etc. But the one thing that I hope will stay is the sense of how important empathy and compassion are, and how central inclusivity is to the journey that staff and student undertake together.

Final Remarks

As three practitioners in different roles, we wanted to share our personal insights into the institutional implementation of block teaching, introduced to simplify our academic offer and inject creativity into the curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic (Laville, 2020). Our words are a reflection on what we observed, and what we learnt from it during the academic year 2020/21.

As an overarching observation, the common theme linking the three contributions seems to be *connections*: how the events of this year generated symbolic pathways interlinking colleagues and students, and how the power of human connections and empathy got us through times that were pretty challenging for all involved. Further, we all acknowledge the drive and commitment that colleagues invested to create interactive and stimulating learning experiences for our

students. Everyone used resourcefulness and inventiveness, revisited and adopted pedagogical practices and approaches that may have been established - such as flipped learning and assessment as learning, for example- but were perhaps still under-used. We responded with creativity to foster engagement and deeper learning.

This academic year has been easy for no-one. We may not have willingly chosen to teach online only, or to teach in blocks, but the circumstances offered scant alternatives. And yet, during the ride we saw imagination and creativity flourish, we saw the generous sharing of ideas, we saw resilience, and a sustained desire to support each other – as the aptly named "Creative Adaptations" event that the colleagues in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities organised in December 2020 to share their experiences at the end of the first term of block teaching demonstrated.

This has been a year like nobody would have wanted, but also a year from which much was learned, individually and collectively, as we found ourselves 'in it together'.

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