

Technology-enhanced learning in designing for uncertainty

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Abstract

In this talk, we discuss the affordances of digital technologies to facilitate student-determined learning when delivering practical or ‘hands-on’ courses. We also examine the constraints that affect the learner experience when courses that are designed for face-to-face classes suddenly move online.

We use a case study of how a practical multimedia undergraduate journalism paper was moved from face-to-face to online delivery mid-way through the semester after an outbreak of Covid-19 in New Zealand led to a sudden imposition of a level-4 lockdown in 2021.

The case study demonstrates how the delivery of courses designed within a heutagological framework can successfully be adapted at a time of crisis while maintaining the learning outcomes required. Our experience provides empirical discussion points on teaching a practiced-based activity such as journalism, where restricted mobility can in fact lead to student-initiated opportunities for growth rather than being a hindrance.

Our approach from the start of the academic year was to develop our students’ digital capabilities and guide them towards being agents of their own learning (Hase & Kenyon, 2007; Blaschke & Hase, 2019). We were aware that the situation with the Covid-19 outbreak was evolving in New Zealand, and government instructions could require our university to move our practical courses to be delivered online at short notice. Therefore, this case study should not be considered as a pure example of “emergency remote teaching” (Hodges et al. 2020).

The design took a social constructivist approach (Lockey, Conaghan, Bland & Astin, 2020; Vygotsky, 1930-34/1978) that included experiential learning and reflection to increase students’ independence and preparedness. It then built on this using connectivism principles (Siemens, 2004) to link the individual to the class, including employing collaborative peer learning.

Our planning took account of less successful attempts to engage students online (Cowie & Sakui, 2019) as well as the lessons we had learned from the first lockdown in 2020. We considered student engagement, student access to the required technologies and their level of digital competence would be our greatest challenges, also identified as major challenges by Greenhow and Lewin (2021) in their reflections on learning in the pandemic.

Learning strategies we employed included mirroring the culture and emerging practices professional journalists were applying under Covid-19 lockdown. Strategies were developed in an online classroom environment that fostered expert-like thinking that enabled student-determined activities, founded upon small group collaborations and play-based learning. We encouraged a high level of flexibility in our student-lecturer interactions throughout, and regular discussions around wellness evolved organically. We found that students often sought increased opportunities to engage with others, as many students were away from home and without a social support system, and some also reported feelings of isolation.

When designing the course, we conceptualised our role as “designers of learning experiences” (Cochrane & Munn, 2020, p. 2). Hence, we modelled emerging journalistic practices through the increased application of social media technologies, and embedded critical analysis via peer review in a way that achieved a higher level of engagement among the students than had been experienced in previous journalism papers. Practical outcomes included the

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production of weekly multimedia news bulletins \modelling broadcasting industry newscasts that were published on a purpose-built website, and student e-portfolios supported by multimedia exegeses.

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