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Technology and educational ‘pivoting’ in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic: Introduction to the special issue

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has, since early 2020, been associated with swift changes to how education is conducted across the globe. In attempting to maintain ‘social distancing’ and thereby prevent the further spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the provision of teaching, learning and assessment has been re-mediated in ways that have placed digital technologies—and especially online platforms—at the forefront of public conversations and policy discourses about education systems to an unprecedented degree. The word ‘pivot’ has often been deployed, especially by policymakers and institutional managers, to highlight both the rapidity of the changes and the sheer extent to which it seems that long-entrenched educational practices are being supplanted by newly crafted alternatives.

This development has been a double-edged sword for those scholars who devote their labours to research fields such as technology enhanced learning, distance education, online and open learning, and e-assessment. To be sure, the extent to which such fields have projected an aura of progress and relevance has long ebbed and flowed, with bursts of popularity punctuating periods in the wilderness—a picture complicated by a dramatic unevenness between different global contexts and the rapidity with which particular ideas are, and then suddenly are not, *en vogue*. Also

to be sure, any sense in which the scholars associated with these fields have wanted to evangelise their research objects has long been contested, with more recent generations of scholars seeming (relatively) more interested in theoretically driven critiques than their (relatively) solution oriented forebears (cf. Bligh, 2020). Yet, caveats notwithstanding, the situation has been an uncomfortable one. The very nature of the conjuncture in which public attention has been focussed on technological change in education has been one in which the surrounding context has presented difficult challenges to established scholarly wisdom. Finding themselves in the spotlight, researchers in these fields have needed to vacillate; perhaps even to worry whether they are being positioned to carry the can when everything goes wrong.

Such situations invite defensive mechanisms, of course, and one rhetorical manoeuvre was adopted remarkably quickly—the coining of exceptionalist terms. Probably the most widespread such term has been 'emergency remote teaching', meaning education newly undertaken online, at a distance, because of Covid-19. Emergency remote teaching is *fundamentally* distinct, we are told, from those more established forms of online education already growing in popularity over the preceding years: with the crucial differences concerned with condensed planning processes, the prosaic objectives driving the attendant change efforts, and the intention that online modalities are to be used only temporarily (Hodges et al., 2020).

A conceptual differentiation of present phenomenon from established research knowledge serves, of course, a number of useful functions. Where scholars lack answers, change initiatives stumble forwards chaotically, or stakeholder experiences leave a persistent bad taste, the response that *what you are describing is not really online education* can serve remarkably well. Yet it also brings deleterious consequences. Among other things, it serves to homogenise prior experiences (was online learning really always so well planned before?), discourages taking inspiration from knowledge that might have been *partially* valuable (haven't the facilitators and students of online learning always had novice experiences?), and invites a reactive focus on issues of training, support and technology—to the detriment of change, development and emerging vision. A narrow focus on the exceptional experiences, technologies and training provision associated with emergency remote teaching, for example, certainly seems circumscribed in its contribution *back* to the more established bodies of literature, and *forward* to debates about what might come *next*.

The purpose of the present special issue, therefore, was to invite a range of contributions that would be

simultaneously similar and different. We wanted to present contributions which would focus on the nature and extent of educational change associated with the Covid-19 'pivot', but which would not be constrained, in so doing, to artificially circumscribe the scope or nature of their investigation. We wished to draw attention to the nature of the phenomenon we were studying—and so our call for papers explicitly used the vocabulary of "pivoting" and "Covid-19 pandemic"—yet we did not wish to strongly demarcate the work presented to an orientation within the exceptionalist literature. We certainly set up no expectations of using particular terms (such as "emergency remote teaching") or drawing on particular bodies of knowledge. The consequence, as elaborated below, is a mixed ecology, in terms of both vocabulary and scholarly inspiration—one that we hope better connects this 'specialised' field of enquiry to a range of debates both wider in scope and more longitudinal in implication.

Our initial call for papers elicited 13 proposals, of which 7 papers survived the inevitable attrition of peer review and the exceptional circumstances surrounding the writing and editing process (forced to withdraw part-way through, one correspondent invoked the irony of having been prevented from writing about the educational disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic by... the educational disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic). As has been our strategy since the beginning of the *Studies in Technology Enhanced Learning* project (Bligh & Lee, 2020), we attempted to generate a scholarly conversation between contributors to the issue. In this case, that was accomplished by trying to ensure that papers were peer reviewed, anonymously, by one other contributor—meaning that around half of the peer reviewing effort was undertaken by authors themselves—and by inviting all reviewers and members of the editorial board to contribute commentaries at the end.

In what follows this editorial, therefore, we present 8 entries in this special issue: seven full papers and a collected commentary. As we elaborate below, we cluster full papers into categories fundamentally concerned, in turn, with pedagogical values, change processes, and the position of technology. We conclude the issue with a collected commentary, comprising thirteen entries by 14 authors, which addresses a broader range of themes and considers the implications, moving forward, for both practice and scholarship.

2. The papers

Our first two papers each foreground, in different ways, the role of *pedagogical values* during the pandemic 'pivot'.

The paper by Victoria I. Marín (2022), *Student-centred learning in higher education in times of Covid-19: A critical analysis*, juxtaposes the specialist literature on emergency remote teaching with that on student-centred learning—a phrase whose meaning encompasses a variety of constructivist approaches (like problem, project, case and inquiry-based learning) which have long been understood as relevant to digital pedagogy. Marín scrutinises the literature on emergency remote teaching, and finds that, where claims are made for supporting student-centred learning, this typically refers to specific, limited course design elements: such as student prompting and progress monitoring, the provision of tools, and some encouragement for students to create artefacts. What seems largely absent, conversely, is much ambition that students might take ownership of their own learning; for instance, by setting their own goals or sharing resources with each other. Remarkably, evaluative reports for these re-designed courses are overwhelmingly positive—sometimes more positive than for the pre-pandemic courses that have been supplanted. Marín’s analysis invites us to reflect on the ongoing relevance of firm pedagogical principles, how these have been sustained or attenuated during the period of the Covid-19 pivot, and the ongoing implications for re-designing educational provision in the future.

Our second paper, by Khadija Al-Ali (2022), is entitled *To see or not to see; the withering boundaries of invisibility: A novice Kuwaiti tutor’s experience of teaching online*. Al-Ali draws mainly on the literature of feminist pedagogy, which has long critiqued issues of choice and power in classroom practices and which has, more recently, been applied to studies of online learning contexts. The paper presents an autoethnographic narrative from the vantage point of a “first-time online tutor in a Kuwaiti college during the Covid-19 pandemic”. Al-Ali notices what she calls an “emerging context of invisibility”, in which certain students choose to materialise their interests in unusual ways which, in turn, compel the tutor to adapt her teaching approach. The paper emphasises strongly the context-specificity of pedagogical values (like ‘student empowerment’), and emphasises that we must be prepared for them to be manifest in very different ways as educational contexts change and develop.

Our next three papers encourage us to understand the Covid-19 ‘pivot’ processually: through a lens of change.

The third paper, by Christos Petichakis (2022), is called *Review of a pivoted fully online flipped learning modality to promote reflection for early career teaching staff development*. The paper, which draws on the theory of situated learning, documents the re-design of a professional development course for teaching staff—contrasting the pre-Covid-19

design against the pivoted variant, and reflecting on the introduction of a flipped learning modality. The paper argues that the success of the initiative derives, in large part, from the principled application of a definite conceptual framework. Petichakis’ work reminds us of the importance of being guided by definite objectives when engaging in change processes—even where, as in the case of the ‘pivot’, planning time is scarce.

The fourth paper, by Reya Saliba, Matthew A. Carey, and Rachid Bendriss (2022), is entitled *Reimagining premedical foundation blended curriculum through design thinking: A qualitative study*. The paper draws on the long history of Design Thinking, a tradition which originally emerged in fields such as architecture, design and art, and which has since spread across many disciplines, including healthcare and medical education, which is the context for Saliba et al.’s study. Saliba, Carey and Bendriss report on an initiative in which the Covid-19 pandemic was used as a stimulus to shift from a previous course design—based on practitioner shadowing and understood through the lens of experiential learning—to a new one based on student projects, which made use of an approach derived from Design Thinking. The paper argues that the approach positively stimulated interactions, both between tutors and students and within student groups. Moreover, Saliba et al. suggest that the approach has an ongoing potential, given the success of the new course design in helping students to think in more ‘patient-centred’ ways when pursuing their projects.

The fifth paper, by Dale Munday (2022), is called *Hybrid pedagogy and learning design influences in a higher education context*. The paper explores the issue of hybrid learning design, which has emerged as an important issue in the wake of the Covid-19 ‘pivot’. Munday’s work explores the extent and nature of hybrid learning design as it has been achieved in practice: both by surveying academics from a range of UK universities and exploring institutional analytics from a single site. Munday’s analysis suggests that the commonly understood features of hybrid learning are present in actual learning designs to only a fairly limited degree. Munday’s work highlights the importance of a number of issues when pursuing hybrid learning: such as pedagogical focus, digital capabilities, institutional influence, and obtaining support from online professional networks external to the institution. Such issues will doubtless remain important for ongoing attempts at innovating teaching and learning modes.

Our final two full papers problematise the positioning of particular technologies during the Covid-19 pandemic ‘pivot’.

Our sixth paper, by Dave Gatrell (2022), is entitled *Challenges and opportunities: Videoconferencing, innovation and development*. While Gatrell draws inspiration from the literature on emergency remote teaching, he frames the issue in an unusually holistic way: noticing that there is much valuable insight that can be gleaned from the scholarship on pedagogy during previous public health crises, natural disasters, and protest-related disruptions. From this analysis, Gatrell draws the conclusion that it is important to understand situations such as the Covid-19 'pivot' as unfolding responses to ongoing dilemmas. Gatrell subsequently puts forward a longitudinal analysis, framed by activity theory, of his own support for university teachers adopting videoconferencing for synchronous teaching during the pandemic situation. The paper describes how a community of teachers was forged against this backdrop, for purposes of professional development in relation to uses of the tool, and the potential for subsequent institutional innovation that is already emerging as a consequence.

The seventh paper, by Liz Dovrat (2022), is called *Perceptions of emergency remote teaching tools used during Covid-19 online teaching by an Israeli English for Academic Purpose (EAP) department*. The paper brings together two strands of literature, that on emergency remote teaching and that on disciplinary pedagogy in the area of English as a Foreign Language, and notices that the latter conveys a long trajectory of debates of manifest resonance for the former—including the necessity of teachers managing shifts in identity when integrating technologies into their practice. Dovrat subsequently employs a social practice perspective to frame a study in which respondents from across a particular English for Academic Practice teaching setting are asked to reflect on the tools they used when 'pivoting' and how these continue to be integrated into their academic practice. The paper's findings show that teachers' views of particular technologies, and the extent to which they persevered with them, were deeply interwoven with how they were supported by local workgroups comprised of both other teachers and institutional administrators. Such findings challenge the prevalent argument that teachers simply used whatever technology was made available or prescribed within an institution.

We conclude the issue with a collected commentary, comprising 13 entries from fourteen authors, entitled *Technology and educational 'pivoting' in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic: A collected commentary* (Bligh et al., 2022). The contributors are Brett Bligh, Kyungmee Lee, Charles Crook, Maria Cutajar, Cassandra Sturgeon Delia, Yuhong Lei, Michael Lower, Victoria I. Marín, Rob Miles, Philip Moffitt, Dale Munday, Don Passey, Reya Saliba, and Mengting Yu.

Recurrent themes in the 13 concise entries include reclaiming a sense of history when discussing the Covid-19 'pivot', differentiating practitioner experiences from overblown rhetoric, reappraising educational sociality in light of sometimes harsh pandemic experiences, understanding the consequences of unprecedented change for long-established practices, examining moves to accommodate new modes of education (such as 'hybrid learning'), exploring the pandemic 'pivot' as interlocking and multifaceted processes of change, and maintaining a sense of trajectory—and rejecting a simple 'pivot back'.

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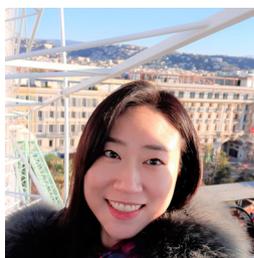
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