

Volume 4, Issue 2

Editorial: Student Engagement in the time of a Pandemic Part 1 : Empathy, Energy and Achievement

Jill LeBihan, Steve McVeigh and Rachel Forsyth

There is no doubt that student engagement was different during the 2020-22 Covid-19 pandemic and fortunately for us, many practitioners have taken the time to think about this and find out from students and staff what has worked, and what we may happily leave behind with lockdowns and social distancing mandates. In the first of two special editions considering student engagement in a pandemic, we have a wide selection of articles...

Of course, it's really too early to be certain about whether or what we may have learned about engagement during that period, when everything felt like an emergency and students and teachers had to negotiate new ways of working together whilst simultaneously coping with, at best, serious restrictions on their personal freedoms and at worst, serious illness in themselves or close family and friends. Tom Lowe tackles this uncertainty in the first opinion piece, where he reviews the impact of the pandemic on engagement and suggests some fruitful areas for future work, particularly the effects of increased use of technology. We look forward to seeing this conversation continue in future issues.

We are delighted that several students from Sheffield Hallam University in the UK have taken the time to send their reflections on their experiences of engagement during Covid-19. Rebecca Mayne gets us started with an honest account of what it felt like to be a student being taught using the approaches described by Tom in his opinion piece, and how she navigated issues like the use of cameras in online classes. Rebecca also talks about the impact of the pandemic on her volunteering work with the Nightline student support service and the differing responses she saw among other volunteers. James McMillan and Sinead Farrell evaluate their work as undergraduate peer advisors, showing how they developed their service to support their peers more effectively, including the use of social media to structure the week and evaluated the things they tried in order to make best use of their limited resources. Following on from this, Olivia Ley and Alyssa Aglae explore their transition from undergraduate to postgraduate students during the period, and recount how their work as peer advisors changed to reflect the use of online teaching and how they tried to tackle students' challenges as they came up, with approaches such as facilitating online writing retreats and managing screen time. The overall picture from these three student reflections is the importance of active student engagement with teaching and peer support in a period of turbulence. Picking up the peer advisor theme, Joakim Malm and colleagues from four different universities in different countries look at how Supplemental Instruction-Peer Assisted Study Sessions (SI-PASS) programmes adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on scheme co-ordinators. Peer support is also the focus of an article by David Gilani, Russell Parke, and Nathan Wilson, which describes and evaluates their 'Student Callers' scheme, in which trained peers called students who were perceived to have levels of academic engagement which might be correlated with lower academic achievement.

A series of case studies looks at how engagement was supported through the use of online techniques. Kirsty Russell presents a project to use 360 cameras to generate an alternative approach for student dancers to view their own moving bodies from different angles, and to

respond to tutor feedback which had been restricted by physical distancing regulations. Chris Brignell, Christina Brady, Lisa Mott and Tom Wicks explain how they set up online communities in mathematics to support early engagement in mathematics courses, and what they will keep from the experiences. Sarah Aynsley, Simon Jacklin and Jane Jervis will probably give a lot of people flashbacks as they remember the challenges of moving an effective interprofessional education (IPE) programme to the online environment, with 121 Microsoft Teams channels, and talk positively about what has been learned for the future of teaching in this area. The fifth case study, by Juliette Wilson-Thomas, examines the challenges of project-based learning online, something touched on earlier from a student perspective by Ley and Aglae.

Addressing issues about student engagement touched on by Lowe and the student contributors earlier in the issue, Dimitra Kostaki and Irene Karayianni surveyed students to find out the impact of technical difficulties and home distractions on student engagement and to identify any mitigating factors such as computer self-efficacy, leading to some simple recommendations for hybrid working. Outside the curriculum environment, Hilda Mulrooney, Hannah Denison, Phoebe Wood, Alison Kelly and Karen Lipsedge have explored the roles of student representatives during the pandemic, surveying students engaged in course representation and public-facing work for the university, and have produced recommendations for universities who are working with students in these roles in a largely online or hybrid environment.

We end with a couple of articles which show how the pandemic has led to positive changes in some areas. Alison Cook-Sather and Nandeeta Bala had a constructive experience in developing new fora which brought together students and staff from across colleges and universities who would not otherwise be in dialogue, and found that they were able to collectively create student-staff pedagogical partnerships to develop trauma-informed, anti-racist approaches to teaching and learning in remote/blended contexts. Participants were clear that the benefits of the programme were worth keeping after the restrictions of the pandemic had ended. Sam Elkington, Paul Chesterton and Phillip Cosson took the opportunity to design new approaches to healthcare assessment, and provide a range of practice examples of working with new and existing digital learning tools and technologies to integrate authentic assessments.

To round off this issue, Alejandro (Ale) Armellini, Harriet Dunbar-Morris, Amy Barlow and Dylan Powell then pull together some lessons about student engagement learned from online learning and place their findings in the context of university teaching strategies for the future, where a more blended or hybrid approach may be expected by students, teachers, and employers, providing a handy 'stop, start, continue' matrix for university teachers.

We had so many contributions for this special issue that we will be publishing another in early 2023 – look out for that. The volume, and the challenges the community has been facing to make time for reviewing, has also meant a slow turnaround with some papers, so I would like to thank authors for their patience. We welcome new reviewers – you can register yourself on the journal website if you would have time to support the community in that way. Student reviewers are welcome.