Educating in a Pandemic – A practitioner perspective

Jacqui Browne and Simon Justice

Introduction

"The worst possible response to COVID-19 in education would be to do nothing at all"

Did you know, the use of the word Pandemic has increased this year by more than 57,000%? (BBC, 2021). Keyworker, Support Bubble and Lockdown have also become commonplace in our vocabulary over these "unprecedented times"

According to Oxford University Press: "The English language has developed rapidly to keep pace with the political upheaval and societal tensions that defined the year" but what about the development of education? How has that been able to respond to the year unlike any other?

Have practitioners maintained their desired levels of creativity within teaching, or have we resigned ourselves and our professional identity to survival mode, waiting out the pandemic for a brighter horizon?

Methodology

All participants who are involved in this study are internal college staff. The sample consists of 4 Full Time practitioners who teach across a variety of subject areas. The candidates were chosen due to established connections.

Narrative Inquiry has been used to gather and represent the stories of the practitioners. All activity has been undertaken on Microsoft Teams. Practitioners were prompted with just one statement at the start of the recording: "Tell us what it has been like for you, educating during a pandemic".

The interviews took place on MS Teams during June 2021, a time when all had returned to the classroom full time.

All names, job titles, location of work and responses that may reveal personal information were removed from the research write-up. No videos will be shared in the research.

A thematic analysis has been undertaken, identifying 3 common themes from the data. This has been used to inform our recommendations.

Results

Early findings indicate that the results centre around three key themes: development of online pedagogy; practitioner wellbeing; and reflections on professional identity.

Development of online pedagogy

Many practitioners discussed the development of their own online pedagogy and the impact they felt it was having on learners. All participants felt they had developed in some ways, but many did not notice these changes until they were back in the classroom.

"When we shut down, I just assumed we would keep teaching them (the students) straight through, we would take advantage of the time and do something a bit further with them but that's isn't really what happened, there wasn't that structure and I think there was a huge variety on what we were doing"

"I feel like we haven't had a lot of time to learn off each other"

One practitioner spoke of their experience of the first lockdown and said: *"I thought I'd got it, but actually I was nowhere near!"* By the third lockdown, with experience and better technology, they felt more at ease.

Another practitioner shared their experience of viewing other peoples' lessons remotely. They stated that if all teachers had this opportunity then they would have *"instantly realised the bits that matter...the skills that they have already got as a teacher, that they just haven't recognised because they have been clouded by the panic of teaching online"*

Wellbeing

For many of the participants, wellbeing was a key focus during the conversation. For some, there was a real acknowledgement of the loneliness that came with lockdown. One participant had underlying health issues and discussed in detail the impact that being at home had on their wellbeing, particularly as their colleagues returned to the workplace.

"It was really depressing; I think my mental health suffered"

"All my confidence and everything that I was relying upon was gone"

"I came out of online lessons feeling utterly exhausted and utterly demoralised"

"It's been something that I really didn't expect it to be actually, and professionally, I think it has been really great for me. It's made me a lot more confident in my own practice"

"You miss talking to people, you miss building those relationships with another person a little bit! If I think about it too much it makes me quite sad"

Professional Identity

Professional identity was mentioned specifically in two of our interviews and inferred in the others. Some participants suggested they felt their professional identity was lost during remote delivery:

"All the skills that I didn't know that I had, that I learnt that I had.....were gone"

"....not getting the stuff I needed to keep me feeling well, to keep me feeling confident, to keep me feeling that identity that I was talking about earlier. That sense of being a teacher was gone"

Recommendations

The move to online education in the FE sector is likely to be a permanent shift. The post-COVID landscape will only further whet the appetite for reform in the FE sector. The digital upskilling of an entire workforce in a short space of time has already altered the focus of both professional development and curriculum design.

The stories told in this study will enable leaders and managers to make informed decisions when implementing change within their institutions. From the early findings we established three key questions for institutions to consider.

For Managers and Leaders
- Decisions on curriculum design should take into account learner and practitioner wellbeing alongside other factors such as cost and convenience
- Create the time and space for practitioners to reflect upon the previous 18 months through a personal and professional lens and use the results to inform future practice
- Explore opportunities for future CPL activity to be made available asynchronously and supported by peer discussion and collaboration
- Ensure that all practitioners are comfortable in online delivery and that the delivery plan and infrastructure can support switches to online delivery at short notice

For Practitioners
- Continue to develop and enhance online pedagogy so as to effectively meet the needs of 21st century learners and in turn the modern global workforce
- Pause, reflect and celebrate the achievements of the last 18 months. Use the experience to shape the next stage of your professional development
- Seek assistance from peers and collaborate to solve any problems that arise during both classroom and online delivery
- Investigate and then implement effective assessment and progress tracking methodology for the online space

Contact

Jacqui Browne and **Simon Justice**
Professional Standards Learning Coaches