Educating in a Pandemic: A Practitioner Perspective

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Abstract

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Adaptability, creativity and resilience have long been desired and required characteristics of a Further Education practitioner. This has only been compounded by the 2020 outbreak of coronavirus. The education system was turned on its head overnight and the reality of this saw many practitioners needing to rapidly evolve their skillset to continue to meet the needs of their learners. While much of the early research focussed on 'effective' online pedagogy, this article investigates the lived experience of being an FE practitioner during a global pandemic.

A narrative inquiry approach was undertaken with four full-time practitioners delivering study programmes across various subject specialisms. Data was collected in June 2021 using online conversations. Three key themes emerged from the research: development of online pedagogy; practitioner wellbeing; and professional identity.

The move to online education in the FE sector is likely to be a permanent shift. The post-COVID landscape should further whet the appetite for reform across Further Education in the UK. 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.

Introduction

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

In March 2020, as school, college and university closures were announced with increasing pace and alarm across the globe, educators and learners alike found themselves experiencing a range of emotions. First came novelty and the sense of adventure that often accompanies unexpected breaks in daily routines. For many, this quickly gave way to anxiety and frustration. Centres grappled with demands for IT infrastructure that in many cases wasn't there. Practitioners were required to adapt to a style of delivery and a set of learner expectations that were alien to most and initially mastered by precious few. Teachers and classes galloped away like waggons into the sunset as Zoom, Teams and Google Classroom battled for the right to be recognised as the prominent platform for COVID education. As the long-established teacher toolkit came under a sustained challenge, a new lexicon emerged, with phrases such as 'you're on mute' and 'put it in the chat' became a central part of the daily classroom language.

This was of course evident outside of education as well. Did you know, for example, that the use of the word 'pandemic' increased in 2020 by more than 57,000%? (Rajan, 2020). 'Keyworker', 'support bubble' and 'lockdown' have also become commonplace in our vocabulary over these 'unprecedented times'. According to Oxford University Press (cited by Rajan, 2020) "...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? After the initial chaos came a more settled period for many, although the sense of unease remained, primarily because no-one knew exactly when this was all going to end. It was clear that lockdown would not be the 'leveller' suggested by some, but more that each person's experience would be different in terms of access, engagement, progress and ultimate attainment.

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? Biesta (2018) discusses the importance of providing opportunities for people to express themselves but adds with caution that the difficulty comes when demonstrating: "the *right* voice, the *right* creativity and the right *identity*" (p.14). What does the *right* identity look like in education? This was, and still is a learning experience like no other for all parties and it is critical that it is captured through the voices of those who were there. Some survived, some thrived, but all have a story to tell.

This study captures the thoughts, emotions and honest reflections of experienced FE practitioners. The rationale is clear – to learn as much as possible from these experiences and to use the emergent themes and viewpoints to inform future decisions over curriculum design and delivery. From the strangest and most challenging of periods for the population should come wisdom and opportunity both on a local and global scale. As one of our peers remarked during the research period that informs this study: "the worst possible response to COVID would be to do nothing at all".

Literature Review

It is fundamentally important to have a clear definition of the term 'remote education' when engaging in thoughts surrounding the pandemic and the practitioner experience. Ofsted (2021) define remote education as: "...being more than just education delivered through digital methods". It can be any learning that takes place without the teacher present in the same physical location as the learner. The activities could take any format. Digital remote education on the other hand is categorised as learning that takes place purely online.

"The educational significance of digital technologies has been amplified by the widespread take-up of digital education resources during the pandemic" (Facer and Selwyn, 2021, p1)

Digital technology has been present in UK classrooms since the 1980s and has been developing at a great pace ever since. You would be hard pushed to locate an educational establishment without access to screens and devices in high - income countries (Facer and Selwyn, 2021). The rapid growth of technology both in education and society has led to many global changes, a contributing factor to the requirement of 21st Century skills development. However, although the skills are required, the way learners attain and progress with these individual skills still needs to be defined (Joynes et al, 2019). Life skills, soft skills and critical skills are just three examples that are enveloped by the phrase 21st Century skills. Joynes et al (2019) critique that there is no single definition or approach to defining the skillset that is desirable in order to overcome global challenges.

Moravec (2013) predicted that 45% of the workers in western society will be "Knowmadic" by the year 2020. Agile workers who are adaptable, creative and imaginative and can work

anywhere and with almost anyone. These workers have embraced 21st Century skills and the acceleration of technology. Digital 'Knowmads' are successful in their work duties as they are able to effectively harness digital technologies. Within Moravec's 2013 publication, visiting author Christel Hartkamp suggests that in order for learners to be successful in a 'Knowmad' society, they must develop skills which are not readily available within mainstream education:

"The bottom line: Individual talent is becoming increasingly important in the 21st Century"

(Moravec, 2013 p.21)

Facer and Selwyn (2019) state that "There is little robust evidence that technology use leads to sustained 'improvements' in learning independent of teacher and other contextual effects" (p.7), yet modern education can often rely heavily on digital technology. Within their paper, Facer and Selwyn (2019) concur that developments in technology are rarely predictable in terms of their ability to change and improve education. In January 2021, Ofsted produced a report entitled: 'What's working well in remote education?' and clarified that remote education does not always mean digital education. Institutions should select the most appropriate method of delivery for their learners, ensuring that the curriculum remains aligned to what would have happened in the classroom and provides learners with the essential building blocks for progress.

The pandemic has impacted an estimated 280 million learners across 22 countries, affecting over 80% of the global student population (Niranjan, 2020 cited in Plummer et al 2020). Dhawan (2020) believes that the pandemic merely accelerated online learning, suggesting that it had been the future anyway. It is important to mention here that time must be given to educators for

them to plan and prepare for effective online learning. Without that time, Dhawan suggests that teachers become involved in delivering crisis e-learning and coined the phrase: 'Panicgogy'.

The pandemic demanded new ways of working and from an educational perspective enabled practitioners the freedom to experiment with digital pedagogy. This was a daunting prospect for those who were unfamiliar with technology and because of this, many learners will have experienced Dhawan's (2020) "Panicgogy" mode of delivery. These professional experiences, mixed with the anxiety that many people felt at home, worrying about family members and friends, feeling lonely and suffering with feelings of uncertainty, will undoubtedly have instigated a shift in an individual's identity.

Professional identity is defined by Bukor (2014) as: "beliefs, assumptions, values, and actions as well as in the various ways one perceives and interprets oneself and the world" (p.306). Professional identity is formed from both personal and professional experiences although it has also been defined as an abstract concept which cannot be directly seen or accessed (Bukor, 2014). A global pandemic with multiple lockdowns is certainly likely to influence both personal and professional experiences.

According to a study undertaken by Allen et al (2020) which covers the early stages of the pandemic and teacher wellbeing, it was found that the activity causing the most stress amongst teachers was live teaching which contained student interaction ('live' being remote during lockdown). Asynchronous activities, which included pre-recorded videos, were second in stress-inducing activities according to their findings. Two thirds of the teachers interviewed in the study (8,000 participants) agreed that the COVID outbreak had impacted negatively on their

psychological health. With this in mind, the Ofsted report published in 2021, (What's working well in remote education) highlights point 6: 'Live lessons aren't always best'. Interestingly, the report acknowledges that asynchronous lessons allow practitioners the time to draw on high quality content taught by specialists in the field and contrary to popular opinion, live lessons are not always 'gold standard'. To what degree are institutions placing unnecessary stress on their practitioners with a requirement for them to deliver online live lessons?

This topic is still young in its development, but the literature demonstrates consistency and is guiding us towards three key areas: professional identity; wellbeing and the development of online pedagogy. From the various authors cited above, there are common themes in relation to professional identity and wellbeing and we will look to investigate this link further. We are aiming to make a small-scale contribution to this growing area of interest with our study. The sample size is limited and in only one FE college. However, our findings support the literature available, and we look forward to further developing our study.

Methodology and Intervention

It takes time for authors to write articles and have their work published. During a global pandemic, we found that key ideas and concepts were hard to come by – after all, we were living in 'unprecedented times' and there wasn't a lot of literature out there to support us with our specific area of enquiry.

We decided to focus our efforts on the data collection. Our themes have emerged following the collection and analysis of data; known as 'grounded theory', created by Glaser & Strauss in 1967 (Alvita, 2021). We felt this method enabled an avoidance of the potential for bias and Alvita

(2021) confirms that: "grounded theory is derived from participants' data that is fractured, compared and raised from the level of raw data to that of more abstract concepts" (p.2). Following our data collection, we have investigated recently published literature in relation to our findings.

The participants involved in this study are all full-time lecturers at an FE College in Lincolnshire in the UK, teaching a variety of subjects and working across different sites. The sample consisted of two males and two females who were selected based on existing connections and their availability during the period of data collection.

Each participant was prompted with just one question at the start of the interview: 'Tell us what it has been like for you, educating during a pandemic'.

The period of reference for this study can be defined in straightforward terms by dates. 'Full lockdown' in the UK from March to July 2020 and then a tentative return to the classroom from September 2020, characterised by the widespread use of a blended curriculum and classrooms containing both physical learners and those on the end of a digital device ('hybrid' lessons). January 2021 brought a further 'full' lockdown period which lasted until April of the same year and ended with the situation in which we find ourselves at the time of writing.

Narrative Inquiry has been used to gather and represent the stories of the practitioners: "The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are story telling organisms, who individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.2). The meetings were recorded in order to review the conversation. All names, job titles, location of

work and responses that may reveal personal information were removed from the research write-up. No videos were shared beyond the researchers during the research period.

Clandinin et al (2007) also note that although Narrative Inquiry can seem easy to portray in a storied format, it actually carries many complexities. There are three commonplace which must be simultaneously explored. (Temporality, Sociality and Place). In terms of Sociality, we have recognised that as inquirers, we are always in an inquiry relationship with the participants and therefore, other than to clarify any points, we remained as active listeners throughout the data collection process.

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

Ethical Considerations

In line with the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018), all participants involved in this study provided their consent to take part. Consent was collected at the start of the study and there was an understanding that participants may wish to remove themselves as the project progressed. Participants were offered the chance to withdraw at any time without the need for an explanation. Withdrawal from the study included removal of any data collected up to the date of withdrawal. Should there have been any instances of accusations made by a participant, these would have been reported to direct line managers and the usual protocol would follow.

In line with BERA recommendations, all participants remain anonymous in the study and were given their own pseudonym (Participant A, B and so on). All names, job titles, locations of work

and responses that may reveal their identity were removed from the research write up. Views which could be particularly harmful to a participant's career, or the institution were also removed from scope.

Data collection was gathered using a Narrative Inquiry. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, these conversations took place over Microsoft Teams. The conversations were recorded and stored in a private online storage area and will be held for no more than 2 years.

As this study was undertaken at an FE institution, it has its own ethics board, and they too approved the data collection and ethical considerations.

We had initially titled our research project: 'From Surviving to Thriving', anticipating that this would be the overriding story that emerged from the practitioners. We quickly realized however that it would be impossible to title the project prior to establishing the data. Hence the title evolved into its current format: "Educating in a pandemic: a practitioner perspective".

Data Analysis

The research process ultimately provided an intriguing cross section of views. This was perhaps not totally surprising, given what we already knew about practitioner experiences during lockdown (s) both from discussions with others and our own practice as teacher educators. There were strong consistencies across the sample, particularly as participants recounted their emotions during the initial stages of the first lockdown and also in the shared difficulties in effectively communicating with and assessing the progress of the learners in their care. It was also noticeable that some participants put a precise focus on their own personal situation, whilst

others spoke only about the experience from a learner's perspective. There was a palpable sense of relief and tangible pride in having 'survived' the period, whilst the majority were looking forward to continuing to develop their digital pedagogy. Although, universally, there was joy and pleasure at being back in the classroom after such a long period (s) at home or in front of a digital device, many of the practitioners acknowledged a sense of achievement and ascertained that educating during a pandemic had changed them and their teaching style. There was a desire in most of them to continue with the development of their online practice, rather than losing it and returning to 'normality'.

The data is presented according to the three emergent themes from the research period:

Development of Online Pedagogy

All participants could relate to varying degrees to Dhawan (2020)'s concept of 'panicgogy'. A sample of responses below:

"This was a whole new space where the 'rules' were very different. This was daunting at first but we all had to get used to it quickly" (Participant B)

"I had experimented with apps before and regarded myself as 'tech savvy'. I thought I had 'got it' but actually I was nowhere near!" (Participant A)

"There was a sustained initial period of confusion and fear from both a professional and personal perspective. Teams wasn't working, the learners couldn't get onto it and when they did, they knew more than me about it and could eject me from meetings, mute me etc…those first few sessions were a car crash!" (Participant C)

Happily, this was not the case for very long for those involved in our sample and all reported to having made huge strides in online delivery. They also shared the views expressed in Allen et al

(2020) that live lessons did not always lead to the 'best' learning experiences and that they and their learners would often report that they preferred 'asynchronous' learning. Most felt that there was a distinct place for this type of learning in future curriculum design and also in terms of continuing professional development:

"I do feel that my learners will be expected to work outside of the traditional working hours in the future and to this degree this period was a useful learning curve for them. I am still not used to being expected to look at work 24/7 though! I think I may need to alter these expectations…" (Participant D)

"Asynchronous learning was received very well by my groups…it enabled us to discuss topics in more detail once the initial (work) had been done 'outside' of the classroom. I think asynchronous could well be the way forward for CPD too. It appeals to me to be able to do my professional development in a time that suits me rather than dictated by the college" (Participant A)

"Initial Teacher Training really helped me to develop my online pedagogy. Learning in that way myself and observing others trying to find their way online was both reassuring and inspirational" (Participant B).

To conclude this initial section, there was one particular success story in the sample and with it a potential career change (!):

"I now have my own YouTube channel! If you had told me a year or so ago that I would become a 'YouTuber' I would have laughed you out of town and now it's true!"

Wellbeing

Every participant had comments to make on this topic. Again, this was not a surprise as this had been such an emotive and turbulent period for all in both professional and personal terms.

Happily, all reported that their mental state and mood were much improved since the start of the pandemic and this coincided with the return to the classroom for both teachers and learners. The predominant factor in the negative impact on wellbeing was the sense of not knowing when the period was going to end. Not having the answers to learner questions regarding delivery and assessment ranked high on the agenda of all participants when reflecting on the January – April period. Participants also echoed the work of Allen et al (2020) in expressing that live lessons were the most stressful variant of their online education, whilst also reporting that many learners felt the same way. Important lessons can certainly be learned by leaders and managers when planning curriculum in the future. When deciding which classes should remain online, learner and staff wellbeing should be strongly considered as well as cost and convenience of keeping a class online. A selection of responses below:

"I know a lot of my peers felt embarrassed about asking for help or just tried to remain oblivious to it all. I tried not to take it home with me and I didn't experience the panic and fear I saw in others but a strong support network both at work and at home was essential for me" (Participant A)

"I just came to realise that it was completely normal to feel anxious about appearing on camera. I could relate to the learners who were telling me that they did not want to turn their camera on…sometimes I didn't either! We had to work through it together as a group but we got there in the end and in some cases it built our relationships even stronger" (Participant B)

"There was complete uncertainty and a desire for reassurance on both sides. I felt it the same as they (the learners) did…bad classroom behaviour continued online just as it had in the physical

classroom. It was hard to find a sense of composure and control when I had no idea how long this would be going on for. Now I am back in the classroom I am able to show warmth through body language and offer the reassurance I felt was missing when online. I am also sleeping much better. A solid 6 hours instead of 2 or 3 at the height of the pandemic" (Participant C)

"It was so difficult delivering a mainly practical course from home…this was not what the learners signed up for and it was playing on my mind too…felt so sorry for them. There was panic over progression to university and also over being able to access the classes online. We did find though that as the pandemic wore on the learners came to use equipment more effectively when under time pressure. For me personally, the chance to work from home has helped my wellbeing. It was good to get a break from college and work more effectively." (Participant D)

Professional Identity

All participants were able to reflect upon the timeframe in question and frame their thoughts through a professional lens. As mentioned previously, there was a definite desire to continue to evolve online pedagogy and all were planning to include digital elements in future curriculum design. All felt pride in what they had achieved and also pride for their learners. Participants related to the concept of 21st century learning skills ('knowmads') and felt that they were now much better equipped to meet the needs of their learners and use the available technology more effectively. In terms of Bukor (2014)'s definition, it was evident throughout the data collection that personal and professional experiences had shaped all of the participants. Not all would openly admit this, but the majority did and in fact made repeated reference to it.

"I am reassured and certain now more than ever that despite all the technology the one thing a learner needs more than anything is a teacher. Teaching and learning online is essentially the same as in a classroom, but if you are well-equipped and prepared to deal with issues as they arise, you will generally be absolutely fine" (Participant A)

"I feel like I have become even more patient and understanding of what it is like to be a learner. I have been learning as I go along and am only now starting to take full advantage of the technology and not just 'crowbar' certain things in" (Participant B)

"I certainly believe there is a place for asynchronous learning in modern curriculum, in fact it is actually the best way to do things in many cases" (Participant D)

Key Findings

Development of Online Pedagogy

All participants reflected positively on their personal and professional development when delivering sessions online. Most reported a sense of unease, and even panic, initially and much of this was down to the dramatic changes that had to be made in a short space of time. All practitioners felt a greater sense of perspective on their online practice once they had returned to physical and / or hybrid delivery in between the two full lockdowns. There was a strong consensus that learners and teachers were learning together as to how online lessons may be successfully delivered. The importance of peer support, collaboration and 'show and share' within teaching teams was emphasised by several participants, along with a strong support for peer observation of online sessions.

Key positives of online pedagogy were reported as:

- The convenience, versatility and enhanced communication afforded by the online platform (in this case all used MS Teams)

- The online space being markedly different from the physical classroom – new rules applied, many of which helped rather than hindered learners

- Enhanced quality of feedback, both in providing this quickly to the learners, but also in them being able to save recordings and track their own progress more successfully

- The growing awareness of how asynchronous learning can enhance the accessibility of learning programmes

Whereas the key drawbacks were:

- The fact that some learners could not access the technology required to fully engage in online sessions due to cost, demand for devices and quality of internet connection

- The reduced capacity to read learner body language, question learners and convey warmth when communicating with learners

- Anxiety in some learners when asked to turn their camera on or engage verbally with their teacher and / or peers when online

Wellbeing

It is perhaps not surprising that some participants reported feeling lonely, confused and unnerved by the experience of educating in a pandemic. In some cases, this was exacerbated by the need to balance professional responsibility with home life, particularly those who had to

home school their own children as well as continue to teach their learners. Screen time, safeguarding concerns and the perceived need to be available to learners outside of traditional working hours were all reported as particular areas for concern across the study. There was a shared consensus that any anxiety felt by practitioners might also be shared by learners, for example camera use or nervousness when asking / responding to questions. Alongside this, there were positive developments too, particularly in relation to being able to work effectively from home and the pride and satisfaction that comes with successfully navigating such a difficult period.

Key positives from a wellbeing perspective were:

- That working in some contexts was now leaner when undertaken online and that these ways of working would continue post-pandemic
- Working from home enhanced morale, mood and general wellbeing due to reduced commuting time, more time with family, flexible working patterns
- Practitioners and learners alike reported a sense of pride, enhanced confidence and happiness after returning to the physical classroom post-lockdown

And from a negative perspective:

- Loneliness, reduced confidence and anxiety over not knowing when the period may end were consistent themes across the sample
- Working hours often felt expanded and practitioners reported feeling much more tired than when delivering in a physical classroom

Professional Identity

All participants were able to reflect upon how their professional identity evolved across each stage of the pandemic. Most reported to feeling unnerved and out of their comfort zone initially but equally they felt much more confident some months later. This was not just limited to understanding how to effectively use the technology but expanded also to conducting tutorials, communicating with learners and peers and ultimately meeting the various needs of stakeholders during such a challenging period.

- Most commonly, practitioners referred to the period as a steep learning curve, during which they were challenged regularly and their professional identity evolved rapidly

- Some reported to now feeling that they are far better equipped to meet the needs of 21st century learners, both in terms of technology and emotional / psychology

- Some concern was expressed over assessment and the integrity and confidence in awarding grades to learners who had not completed practical work

Recommendations

For Managers and Leaders

1. Decisions on curriculum design should take into account learner and practitioner wellbeing alongside other factors such as cost and convenience

2. 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

3. Explore opportunities for future CPL activity to be made available asynchronously and supported by peer discussion and collaboration

4. 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

1. 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

2. Pause, reflect and celebrate the achievements of the last 18 months. Use the experience to shape the next stage of your professional development

3. Seek assistance from peers and collaborate to solve any problems that arise during both classroom and online delivery

4. Investigate and then implement effective assessment and progress tracking methodology for the online space

We have kept these recommendations succinct but would also highlight the need for managers and practitioners alike to consider how 'practical' learning can be transferred into the online space. This is particularly relevant for the FE sector which historically has such an emphasis on vocational subjects. One might also mention a review of the institution's wellbeing support for all staff when asked to deliver online for a sustained period. This mode of delivery has a very specific set of challenges and this should be reflected in the wellbeing support offered by the organisation.

Limitations & Implications

We recognise that this a small sample. With over 450 academic members of staff at the college, talking with just four is of course a tiny fraction of the workforce. We are reassured by the fact that we recorded a range of viewpoints and observations and are confident that this was an open, honest and realistic representation of the practitioner experience. We recognise that far from 'levelling up' the educational experience, the lockdown period actually accentuated common issues such as effective assessment, inclusion and accessibility and behaviour management. All educational institutions can learn from this period and use the results to inform future delivery plans. We also recognise that the interviews were conducted some time ago now and that opinions may change as practitioners return to a more traditional way of teaching and learning. One implication for future research would be to revisit these topics at a later date, particularly if the coronavirus remains in 'retreat' and schools and colleges manage to retain face to face delivery. It should also be noted that the three themes on which we focus here were emergent rather than pre-planned. The fact that they were the prominent areas of concern may suggest that future research should continue to focus on these themes.

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