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‘Acknowledging Emotive Response and Epistemic Positionality: Disruptive Transformative Pedagogy Amidst a Global Pandemic’

Ian Corrie * (University of Cumbria, UK)

Ed Cunliff (University of Central Oklahoma, USA)

Catherine Hayes (University of Sunderland, UK; University of Cumbria, UK)

Abstract

In the dynamic and iteratively changing landscape of global Higher Education, processes of learning, teaching and professional practice have been irrevocably impacted upon by the COVID-19 virus. This brief paper explores how the concept of emotive response generally and emotional labour specifically, have impacted on the context of Higher Education Institutions globally and the implications of this in practice based educational settings. Wider civic society will bear the burden of this pandemic via processes of economic restraint for a generation, yet transformative perspectives have great significance to both how people’s capacity to reflect and make meaning of current times will continue to drive a proactive and reflexive response to the challenges and opportunities it provides. Mezirow’s, now seminal, Transformative Learning Theory (2000), and the Hayes and Corrie (2020) Disruptive Pedagogical Approach to facilitating learning provide the baseline theoretical frameworks for this conceptual discussion.

Keywords: Higher Education, Coronavirus Pandemic, Communities of Practice, Emotional Labour, Online learning.

Introduction

This conceptual discussion paper illuminates how processes of global learning, teaching and professional practice have been extensively disrupted during the COVID-19 Pandemic of the last year. The resonance of the Coronavirus pandemic across global society still resounds a year after the first genetic code of the virus was identified. The initial outbreak of COVID-19 was triggered in Wuhan in the centre of the Hubei province, China. As of January 2021, the virus has progressed globally, with reported numbers of infected reaching 22.5 million and 3.05million across the USA and UK respectively, with corresponding deaths reaching 375 thousand and 82 thousand across each geographical region according to a national report. Amidst these stark statistics, the virus continues to spread indiscriminately and with mutant forms, which exponentially increase its infectivity rate, only the pace of vaccine provides a means of bringing the pandemic under control. Whilst the major concern across an integrated world has been one of global public health and containment, education generally and higher education specifically have become major adjuvant victims of the need for containment of the virus, in efforts to limit its spread. Beyond the evident distress caused by the pandemic, and to those who have lost family and friends and been separated from loved ones during illness, is the economic world of productivity of which education is an integral part. As well as presenting dire challenges, in the context of Higher Education across the USA and the UK, the pandemic has also provided opportunities for a unified and optimal response to the challenge of sustaining and maintaining educational provision.

Situational Specificity and Context for Global Response

Across the globe there was a wide variation of approaches in responding with agility to the demands this Pandemic placed upon learning communities, with many of the adult learning and higher education institutions typically adopting hybridised approaches to bridge the immediate gap that the pandemic introduced in the context of face-to-face teaching. The introduction of social distancing rules, the wearing of masks, and a tangible amount of online learning characterised the initial weeks of the pandemic in March and April 2020. Existing models of best practice from blended and distance learning programmes were used as templates for how instructional design could be quickly adapted to fit the needs of learners. Due to diverse situational and context specificities, there was a lack of generalisable consensus as to

how best this ought to be approached and as a consequence there are now almost as many different versions of online learning as there are institutions of Higher Education globally.

The COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic evolved at speed, requiring a shift in the higher and adult education organisations and in each individual educator's epistemic perspective, which in turn has the impact of creating disorientating dilemmas for address, Mezirow (2000). These necessitate reflection on practice in order to develop timely alternative pedagogical approaches, as an integral part of professional practice.

There are a number of terms that describe learning other than that delivered face-to-face in a formal classroom setting, they include blended learning, distributed learning, e-learning, online learning, and virtual learning.

Despite the organisational and individual barriers, Porter & Graham (2016), reported, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, that in the United Kingdom HEIs there has been a groundswell of support for the adoption of technological approaches to teaching and learning. What could never have been anticipated was the forthcoming need for the process of early adaptation to be accelerated to the extent of 100% of all delivery shifting to this basis over a chronological period of a calendar month. Kirkwood & Price (2014: Pg. 7), provide a useful definition of this enthusiasm for early adoption as being fundamental to, "the application of information and communication technologies to teaching and learning". The benefits of the adoption of technology into learning include better utilisation of academics' allocated work loading time, the widening of access to extended learning opportunities and learning enhancement initiatives and the concentrated focus of debatably more productive face-to-face learning and teaching time. It is notable however, that only those equipped with the appropriate access to digital technology and access to the internet can be afforded this opportunity. A recent study by the University of Cambridge, (Holmes & Burgess, 2020), debates the contention that the COVID-19 pandemic has also enhanced the impact of digital poverty and hence contributed to the concept of digital exclusion, for those most in need of educational stability and progressive opportunity.

The Coronavirus Pandemic has required a shift in the educator's epistemic perspective and a reflection on praxis to develop alternative pedagogical approaches. The response in both the United Kingdom and the USA was fundamentally similar. The education system in both countries is aligned, adult student's study in a formal environment underpinned by customs

and practices which are based on the delivery of, and the expectation of, face-to-face teaching and learning.

Political Drivers of Change

The resultant impact of this approach proved an active catalyst in enabling the decision making of those who wished to leave study, whilst for others, the degree of increased flexibility it introduced to the mechanism of delivery of study proved a motivator and catalyst for continued learner engagement. The pace of acceleration with which change was introduced across global learning platforms was remarkable. The need to wear masks became a debate which hinged precariously between science and politics, this need provided an accessible forum for educational continuance.

Framing and Contextualising Emotional Labour in Higher Education

For the purposes of this article, and in keeping with the seminal definition of the concept provided by Hochschild (1983), emotional labour will be interpreted as the suppression of felt emotion at a time when it is necessary to ensure a countenance that reassures others. This complex process of being able to suppress a direct emotive response to a crisis situation or modification in approach to usual events, such as teaching and leadership in Higher Education during the COVID-19 pandemic deals specifically with emotional regulation. Being able to manage expectations and norms of classroom delivery is an integral part of the role of HE educators.

Complex Ambiguity

What the COVID-19 pandemic has ensured is the acceleration of the use of digital technology, so that it is no longer an adjunct to student learning but an embedded and integral part of it, which has had to be embraced with a sense of immediacy, that a year earlier no one could have anticipated. In reassuring their learners, at a point of pragmatic and emotional insecurity, educators have characterised all that emotional labour and the burden of it entails at the front line of education and training provision during a time of complex ambiguity (Bodenheimer and Shuster, 2020). It is this complex ambiguity which is also immediately recognisable as an

integral part of the processes of transformative learning, and in common with emotional labour shares tenets of emotional intelligence in terms of capacity for interrelationships and interactions with others, self-awareness, self-regulation and ultimately reflection and critical reflexivity. Since an emotive response to any crisis situation hinges on a complex cognitive response, which links thoughts, feelings, and as a consequence expressed behaviour, this aligns directly with what it is to engage with active learning.

Processes of Cognitive Adaptation

Unlike usual processes of adaptation, with no degree of external threat such as the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an accompanying response of adaptation, which leads to an additional emotive response, which distracts both learners and teachers, generating negative stress and leading to a variety of emotive responses from anxiety to anger through to hopelessness and helplessness or in instances where students respond positively, thriving and excelling (Heffernan and Bosetti, 2020). In instances where the suppression of negative emotion is permitted to perpetuate, this can contribute to the emotional labour experienced by students as well as staff, which far from having a transformative impact in a positive sense, can lead to further stress, anxiety and the sense of an inability to cope (Rickett and Morris, 2020). With a direct link between stress and vulnerability, it is relatively easy to see how virtual classrooms across the HE sector illustrate the broadest parameters of coping and how processes of emotional intelligence can have a tangible impact on specific contexts of learning and teaching (Zubin and Spring, 1977; Kastberg, Buchko and Buchko, 2020). The more intense emotions are, then the more complex the cognitive process of managing them becomes (Ward, McMurray and Sutcliffe, 2020).

Contested Authenticity

One of the most important facets of transformative learning in action is the concept of authenticity, which from the seminal definitions of emotional labour, can be seen as the very antithesis of authentic behaviour (Darby, 2017). Whilst emotional labour enables coping in crisis situations, the cognitive response to what would usually be a familiar and known context has shifted during the COVID -19 pandemic to a situation where interactions with others, far from being familiar, known and sound have shifted to being complex and integrative

perspectives, driven via the use of digital technology platforms (Raffaghelli and Stewart, 2020). Perhaps then a wider question, ought to be how far technology detracts from the capacity of HE educators to be authentic in their approaches to learning and teaching in a new context for the profession, where the concept of individuation is paramount to authentic and tailored approaches to learning and becoming.

Emotive Capacity and Burnout

What is imperative for both educators and learners, is their capacity to manage their emotive capacity for interaction with others, as an integral part of professionalism for the educator and developing professionalism for the learner. What is central to the avoidance of functional ‘burnout’ is the capacity to manage perceptions or actual experiences of depersonalisation, cognitive and emotional exhaustion (which can be characterised by a sense of chronic fatigue) and the sense of a lack of achievement or accomplishment with cohorts of learners. The more laborious it becomes to regulate emotions the more likely educators are to burn out in accordance with the Maslach Burnout Inventory for Educators (MBI-E).

Delineation of Experience in Agile Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) on Higher Education, is incomparable to any event in history necessitating a wholesale adaptation to daily practice bar war and natural disaster. The enforced shift to the online delivery of programmes and modules traditionally delivered by student centred, classroom-based signature pedagogies and academic disciplines is unprecedented (Amemado, 2020). Whereas education had a traditionally global outlook, the iterative spread of the virus has ensured every country across the globe has become progressively more inward looking, in terms of how it might best respond and cope with the need to sustain processes of teaching and learning at the front line of the pandemic. The differential between rich and poor became wider, as those with digital technology and access to the worldwide web and those without was starkly highlighted and capacity for organisationally agile responses came to the fore (Rasheed-Karim, 2020). It is arguable that although mechanisms of delivery were quickly adapted to ensure access to information, that robust pedagogical methodologies were somewhat overlooked as processes of teaching and learning came secondary to their mechanisms of dissemination. Here too, on a local level, that

differential between rich and poor students came to the fore, and it was illuminated which students had the capacity to access online learning environments and those whose social and fiscal backgrounds dictated they could not. Another clear source of emotional labour emerged during the moment of adaptation to the avoidance of viral contraction via a series of national lockdowns. It is hardly surprising that these dividing issues have arisen, and that individuation has become a central theme of coping during the COVID-19 pandemic, this was annotated as a functional mechanism of response long before the global pandemic became a reality (Brunetto et al, 2014).

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has irrevocably and incomparably thrown global education systems into silos of containment, where efforts to maintain and sustain robust and systematic processes of educational provision have driven the roll out of new and adapted approaches to remote delivery. These are virtually all different and are predominantly characterised by the individual needs of learners, their educators, and the civic boundaries within which their institutions operate. Emotive response in particular is an integral part of the emotional labour that now characterises both how, where and why people continue to study. The long-term implications and challenges of the pandemic will not only highlight an indelible mark on the landscape of global HEIs, but will also have accelerated the very best of creativity, innovation and highlighted the most agile and responsive institutions, who in the spirit of connectedness that global education once represented, we can hope will be disseminated as an integral part of sharing best practice. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on society with equal measure in relation to its infectivity, what it has illuminated, in the context of HEI learners is the clear disparity between those who are digitally poor and those who are not. This divide is further expanded when dependency on digital literacy and IT are used as an integral part of educational provision not just an integral part of it. The transformative capacity of educational provision is perhaps the one constant that we can hinge most hope and perspective on. The disruptive ambiguity we now face, will become a future benchmark of success and hope for the global sector.

Connection to the special edition theme

This paper links directly to the special edition theme and scope by exploring how concepts of emotional labour and consequent emotive responses to disruptive processes of transformative and arguably critical pedagogy has been applied to teaching and learning on a global stage. The reflections of the educators provide a rich narrative authentic positionality within this Coronavirus Pandemic.

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