Emerging from the COVID-19 Cocoon: A critical reflection on pedagogical changes in Higher Education

Amanda Kowalczyk

Independent teacher, UK
Correspondence: A.Kowalczyk.1@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

Since March 2020, teaching and learning in UK higher education has undergone a period of metamorphosis. With campus closures, lecturers and tutors could no longer rely on the teaching and learning style honed over years of in-person delivery. Despite the initial uncertainty of transformation, academic staff have adapted to the new situation, embracing new technology to assist lecture recording, seminar delivery and meetings with colleagues and students. Many will feel that they have become different teachers. Perhaps even, improved teachers, able to work in unique ways and address new challenges. For a while it appeared that teaching in higher education had been completed altered as a result. Yet student voices continue to advocate for in-person delivery. Can, and should, lecturers and tutors revert to their 'old' pedagogy, when the opportunity arises to return fully to the lecture theatre, classroom, or laboratory? Or have we emerged from the COVID-19 cocoon completely, and permanently, altered? This article reflects on my own experiences, based on returning to exclusively face-to-face delivery from September 2022, after two and a half years of online and blended learning.

Keywords: metamorphosis; pedagogy; COVID-19; blended learning; active learning; challenge

Kowalczyk. Exchanges 2023 11(1), pp. 66-76

66

Emerging from the COVID-19 Cocoon: A Critical Reflection on Pedagogical Changes in Higher Education

One definition of metamorphosis is the complete alteration of something: in appearance, character, or circumstances (**Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.**). Since March 2020, teaching and learning in the UK higher education system has certainly undergone a period of metamorphosis; from face-to-face teaching – the 'default position' of higher education delivery (**Department of Education, 2022**) – to online teaching, or at least blended teaching, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. What about the academics who have taught throughout this unprecedented period of transition? Have we also been completely altered from our original pedagogical approaches? And if so, can we, and should we, ever revert?

Metamorphosis is not always a pleasant experience. As we commence any new career role, we nervously change our identity in response; how we define ourselves, how we appear to the outside world, how we structure our lives. In the natural world it is seen as a necessary development; the process by which a creature matures. Yet in those early days of COVID-induced online teaching, I floundered in the uncertainty of my expected transformation and how it would affect me. Should I change? Could I change? How do I grow the necessary knowledge and skills in time to emerge, and guide students, into a world of online teaching?

It was clear that academics could no longer rely on the styles and methods of teaching and learning that had been honed over years in the lecture theatre, classroom, or laboratory. I remember lecturers from my own undergraduate studies who could enrapture a 200-capacity room, simply through their presence, their facial expressions, and the transmission of well-chosen words. During my teacher training, they called this chalk and talk teaching. It's often derided as a pedagogy in Western education today, although there can be benefits from acquiring knowledge through direct verbal instruction (**Donnolly, 2014**). My personal pedagogy is based instead on active learning, which is 'talking in groups, making things, being creative, doing things. [In active learning] passive methods get an emphatic thumbs-down' (**Petty, 2004: 139**). Over the years, I have taught Law through flipped learning, debates, role plays, quizzes, poster presentations, games, case galleries and polls. Most of these activities require physical space and resources. They were never designed with online teaching in mind. Regardless of your preferred style – chalk and talk, active – or your past successes, being face-to-face with students was key. Online teaching, therefore, required all staff to undergo an overwhelming transformation.

Kowalczyk. Exchanges 2023 11(1), pp. 66-76

67

It's surprising how quickly we all adapted to the new situation. For me, this meant embracing new technology, making familiar friends of software that had once had no use to me. In the past, I have relied on non-verbal communication to gauge interest, engagement, enjoyment, contemplation of new information, confusion about new information, distraction or even sleep. Suddenly, I found myself talking into the webcam in an otherwise empty office space, recording lectures to be watched asynchronously by students who may now be in locations around the world. Any interactivity was gone. I suddenly found a need for: a designated space at home for lecture-recording, Screencast-o-matic or *Microsoft Teams* software, Moodle participation statistics, H5P interactivity and transcripts.

It wasn't just lectures that required training and experimentation with unfamiliar tools and software. My active learning strategies were straight-forward to set up when students were together in one physical space and using readily available, tactile resources. Now there was an online void to navigate around. Anything I wanted to do, other than just talk to someone via the computer, became a challenge that had to be carefully planned for. YouTube videos could not be relied upon to provide an introductory input for flipped learning, as some countries do not allow students to access the website. Poor internet connections made group work unreliable; someone could leave at any moment and may not reappear. I designed quizzes using Kahoot, only to realise at the last moment that it could not be used with more than 10 students at the same time unless I paid for a premium account. Even a virtual whiteboard presented a series of conundrums: Which app is best for this task? How do I share the whiteboard with students? Can they contribute to it as well, or only view it?

If I wanted to ask a colleague for assistance or opinion, this had to be done online too. Today, Teams is so essential to my communication with colleagues that it is set to automatically open when my laptop switches on. But in 2019, when it was first introduced within my department, its uses seemed so limited. The occasional sharing of documents or office chat when we were too busy (or lazy) to physically attend a colleague's office. Following the move online, Teams now presented a plethora of tiles; one for each module and each course I delivered on, plus a general team. We even had a weekly virtual coffee break via Teams, although conversation was stinted by the awkwardness of webcam anxiety, the queue of virtual hands up to speak and 'you're on mute' notifications. By July 2020 I was a different teacher. I had been teaching online for only two months but found myself settling into my new role. I developed a resilience to teaching and learning hurdles and was continuously planning strategies to work around the difficulties encountered in online delivery (**Kowalczyk, 2020**), knowing that further online teaching was likely:

Kowalczyk. Exchanges 2023 11(1), pp. 66-76

68

Table 1: Online Delivery Challenges & Potential Resolutions

Challenge	Possible ways to resolve this
1. Students do not like to switch on their webcams in whole group seminars, and it is odd to deliver to a laptop screen that only displays the initials of the other people in attendance	• Set up a Padlet wall where students can introduce themselves online and upload a photograph, so they become familiar with each other from the outset despite the physical distance • Using student avatars • Demonstrating how to blur a webcam background or upload a different background on *Microsoft Teams* • Using breakout rooms to create smaller working groups • Having online office hours where a student can meet me 'face to face' (via webcam) without all the other students present
2. Linked to the above, you don't realise how much you rely on non-verbal feedback such as facial expressions until it is not there	• Using apps such as *Polly* or *Vevox* to get quick and easy feedback from students on levels of confidence in a topic • Encouraging students to use emojis to indicate their feelings e.g., thumbs up, happy face, confused face
3. Some students are happy to 'lurk' in seminars – in attendance, but not contributing in any way; just listening to others and seeing the work that others produce	• Break down a question or topic into smaller areas and allocate sections to individual students who will then have to feedback to peers • Using written chat functions rather than expecting verbal contributions – this avoids connectivity issues/excuses or the fear or interrupting someone else • Use software such as *Kahoot* quiz, *Vevox / Mentimeter* polls or Padlet boards which allow anonymous contributions – this may encourage students who aren't sure to have a go in a public space without fear of criticism or judgement

Kowalczyk. Exchanges 2023 11(1), pp. 66-76

69

4. You can't replicate online the style and method of teaching and learning that you would have used if teaching in person to a group of students	• Don't try to replicate the lesson online – think instead about how you can adapt what you've done previously to work in a new way. This might involve completely changing the style of delivery or the activities set for the students.
	• Embrace online teaching and use it as an opportunity to expand the repertoire of software that you can use – there are so many training sessions and step-by-step instruction videos on how to use different tools.
	• Speak to colleagues who already have experience of software / buddy up with a colleague to do a test-run of a planned activity
5. Working from home can cause 'burnout' – the damage of mental health by excessive and unreasonable working conditions (**NASUWT, 2022**)	• Video calls can be used to just chat to colleagues, as well as to conduct formal work-related activities
	• Take opportunities to meet with colleagues in person where possible. Chat while walking outside. Don't do all communication via email / online unless you have to
	• Remember there is a whole range of Wellbeing Support available through the university, as online teaching and learning is lonely / isolating for staff and students

For a while, it appeared that higher education may have been completely altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite suggestions that face-to-face teaching could resume in the autumn of 2020, early attempts to implement this were scuppered by further outbreaks of COVID-19 (**Hubble & Bolton, 2021**). Subsequently, it was suggested that most teaching and learning activities should revert to, or continue with, online delivery for the foreseeable future. Hybrid teaching – or blended learning, as it is also called – is now used by many universities (**Office for Students, 2022**), even following the removal of COVID-19 restrictions. The concept is that of mixing in-person learning with online delivery options. In 2021, it was reported that the University of Manchester would be retaining blended learning permanently (**BBC News, 2021**).

There are benefits to this pedagogical approach. It has been highlighted, for example, that the increased use of interactive and assistive technology in hybrid teaching has particularly benefitted students with disabilities and learning conditions (**Wilkinson, 2022**). Similarly, my own foundation-level international students have welcomed the availability of asynchronous

Kowalczyk. Exchanges 2023 11(1), pp. 66-76

70

lecture recordings, accompanied by written transcript or captions. Hybrid teaching allows flexibility and the recognition of students as a group of individuals, rather than a single mass of attendees in a lecture theatre. Individuals can listen at their own pace, play the recording multiple times for clarity if needed, and learn in comfort.

On the other hand, face-to-face delivery is a priority for most students in higher education. In 2017, a survey of 60,000 university students suggested that experiencing university life, meeting people from different countries and having a fresh start in a new location were all key reasons for wanting to go to university (**Hobsons, cited in Bhardwa, 2017**). Online and hybrid teaching are claimed to provide a 'sub-par service' (**Dunleavy, as cited in Barnes & Hicks, 2022**). Student complaints reached record highs in 2021 (**Sands, 2022**), with course delivery, centred on the suspension of some or all face-to-face delivery, being the main source of discontent (**Office of the Independent Adjudicator, 2022**). In November 2022, it was announced that legal action is being taken against 18 universities by their own students, amidst dissatisfaction with the continued use of online and hybrid teaching (**Barnes & Hicks, 2022**). It was hardly unexpected, therefore, when my own department announced that all teaching and learning provision would revert to exclusively face-to-face delivery. The days of having two seminars online and two seminars in person are in the past. The hours of transcribing lecture videos are finished.

Have academic staff been fazed by this sudden return to a pedagogy that we haven't fully embraced since March 2020? In some ways, yes. Hybrid teaching allowed a flexibility of working that became expected. Suddenly, we are grumbling about the hours lost by commuting to campus. I am panicking whether I can navigate rush-hour traffic in time to pick the children up from school. We are wondering whether training sessions and meetings need to be in person. I am missing the flexibility of a timetable which allowed the recording of lectures at a time and location of my choice. We are having to question whether the tools that we have become accustomed to over years of online delivery are suitable for continued use.

Therefore, in a similar fashion to my 2020 reflections, I have thought about the challenges that I am now facing, and the possible ways to resolve them:

Kowalczyk. Exchanges 2023 11(1), pp. 66-76

71

Table 2: Emerging Delivery Challenges & Resolutions

Challenge	Possible Ways to Resolve This
1. Students may expect online delivery to be an option. Remember that they have become accustomed to the availability of online options during high school / further education over the last 2 years	• Have clear policies in place regarding the availability of online learning and apply these consistently • Retain some use of pre-recorded lecture materials from previous years. These may be useful for revision purposes, or for a student who has missed a session due to illness, visa delays, personal circumstances • Use *Moodle* as an interactive tool, rather than a resource storage space. Forums, quizzes and H5P interactivity can complement face-to-face learning well
2. Linked to the above, don't assume that all students desire for face-to-face delivery to resume	• Remind yourself of the benefits of online learning materials for students with physical and mental health conditions, learning conditions and English language barriers • Demonstrate to students how Blackboard Ally can produce alternative formats for resources • Include online options within face-to-face seminars and lectures – polling software and collaborative platforms can be tailored to cater for individual needs
3. Don't aim to revert to your 'old' pedagogy	• Reflect on the changes you made during the years of online teaching and ask yourself: • Which of these improved the learning outcomes of students? Keep these things! Online tools are not exclusively for online delivery • Which of these did not work? Consider alternative methods of delivery - chalk and talk, different software, active learning • Engage in peer dialogue with your colleagues. Discuss what changes they are making (if any) and why

[Kowalczyk. Exchanges 2023 11(1), pp. 66-76](#)

72

|	
4. Be prepared for surprises! In-person students, particularly when bolstered by the presence of peers for the first time in years, may engage with seminar activities in unexpected ways	• Advise students on suitable pseudonyms for online activities that invite participants to create a one-off username for classroom display • Maintain control over the broadcast of responses submitted: • Software like Mentimeter allows you to 'hide' responses so that they do not automatically display to the lecture theatre when received • Some software can automatically filter out profanities • Avoid word clouds as these can allow too much flexibility with responses. Using polls with pre-determined answers (e.g., how much do you agree with the following statement?) allows the tutor to have more control
5. Physical tiredness	• Don't forget to prepare lunch or make lunch plans before leaving for work! • Take breaks, including getting away from the desk when eating lunch • Practice mindfulness when walking between classrooms / campuses

Looking at this new list, one thing that hasn't challenged me at all is the prospect of entering a lecture theatre or classroom full of students and delivering in-person again. Like an old friend, once we were reunited, it was as if no time had passed. On campus, directly interacting with individuals and groups of students from all over the world, is where I've always wanted to be. Even donning a mask and face visor, as one of the first teaching fellows in my department to volunteer for a timetable that included face-to-face delivery after COVID-19, it felt natural.

I started this reflection wondering whether metamorphosis of teaching is reversible. Could we, and should we, revert to our previous pedagogy when the opportunity arises? For my department, the opportunity has presented itself and I'm able to suggest an answer to that question. Certainly, we have had the time and opportunity – whether we wanted it or not – to metamorphose. But did we completely alter? It's unlikely. In truth, we merely found new ways of working within our pedagogical parameters. We have enhanced, rather than transformed, our teaching. We understand the importance of the current group of students more, recognising that not every university student needs the same experience as those who came before them. What they need, more than ever, is a

Kowalczyk. Exchanges 2023 11(1), pp. 66-76

73

consideration of their situation and the willingness of academics to adapt to this.

I still advocate for active learning. What I have found, however, is that there are more ways to actively engage students now; software has developed, and I have prioritised the time needed to consider and embrace some of it. Rather than asking, 'How did I teach this last year?', I have instead opened my mind to the question of, 'What is the most effective way to achieve that learning outcome?' I have matured within the COVID-19 cocoon and emerged with improved features and an open mind to finding resolutions to novel problems, however and whenever they may arise.

Amanda Kowalczyk has been teaching Law on the Warwick International Foundation Programme at the University of Warwick since 2016. Prior to this, she taught a range of Law courses to students in sixth form and college.
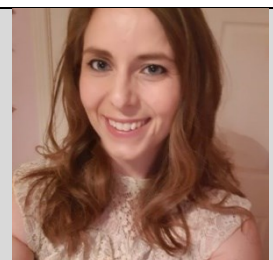
List of Tables

Table 1: Online Delivery Challenges & Potential Resolutions

Table 2: Emerging Delivery Challenges & Resolutions

References

Barnes, L & Hicks, V, 2022. *Covid: Uni Students' Legal Action over Pandemic Education*. BBC News, 1 November. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-nottinghamshire-63434284 [Accessed: 1 November 2022].

BBC News, 2021. *University of Manchester Remote Learning Plan Criticised by Students*. BBC News, 7 July. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-57746712 [Accessed: 1 November 2022].

Bhardwa, S, 2017. *Why do students go to university and how do they choose which one?* Times Higher Education, 6 June. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/news/why-do-students-go-university-and-how-do-they-choose-which-one [Accessed: 7 November 2022].

Cambridge Dictionary, n.d. *Metamorphosis*. Available at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/metamorphosis [Accessed: 25 October 2022].

Kowalczyk. Exchanges 2023 11(1), pp. 66-76

74

Department of Education, 2022. *Higher Education COVID-19 Operational Guidance*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1096882/_WITHDRAWN__20220223_HE_guidance.pdf [Accessed: 27 October 2022].

Donnolly, K, 2014. *'Chalk and Talk' Teaching Might be the Best Way After All.* The Conversation, 23 November. Available at: https://theconversation.com/chalk-and-talk-teaching-might-be-the-best-way-after-all-34478 [Accessed: 3 November 2022].

Hubble, S, & Bolton, P, 2021. *Coronavirus: Higher and Further Education Back to Campus in England in 2020/21?* House of Commons Library Briefing Paper No. 9030, 6 January 2021.

Kowalczyk, A, 2020. *Moving to Online Teaching in Warwick Foundation Studies*. Available at: https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/staff/window-on-teaching/window-on-teaching-database/202007151549/ [Accessed: 27 October 2022].

NASUWT, 2022. *Teachers Burnout due to Excessive Workload.* NASUWT, 16 April. Available at: https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/article-listing/teachers-burnout-due-to-excessive-workload.html [Accessed: 3 April 2023].

Office for Students, 2022. *OfS to Launch Review of Blended Learning*. OfS, 17 March. Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-to-launch-review-of-blended-learning/ [Accessed: 1 November 2022].

Office of the Independent Adjudicator, 2022. *Case Summaries*: *July 2021-May 2022*. Available at: https://www.oiahe.org.uk/resources-and-publications/case-summaries/?keyword=coronavirus&type=&sort=desc [Accessed: 1 November 2022].

Petty, G, 2004. *Teaching Today: A Practical Guide.* Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes.

Sands, L, 2022. *University Student Complaints Over Courses Hit Record*. BBC News, 4 May. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-61314662 [Accessed: 1 November 2022].

University of Edinburgh, n.d. *What is Hybrid Teaching?* Available at: https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/learning-technology/more/teaching-continuity/teaching-continuity-overview#:~:text=Hybrid%20teaching%20will%20consist%20of,in%20a%20different%20time%20zone [Accessed: 27 October 2022].

University of Warwick, n.d. *Blended Learning at Warwick.* Available at: https://warwick.ac.uk/students/news/newsevents/what_is_a/ [Accessed: 27 October 2022].

Wilkinson, M, 2022. *Disabled Students Still Need Online Learning Options*. Times Higher Education, 21 May. Available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/disabled-students-still-need-online-learning-options [Accessed: 1 November 2022].

Kowalczyk. Exchanges 2023 11(1), pp. 66-76

76