

### **A warm welcome to volume 14, issue 2, of Compass, Journal of Learning and Teaching!**

This edition of Compass includes our usual mix of research articles, case studies, opinion pieces and reviews on current topics. Many of these papers reflect on the teaching strategies used and the outcomes obtained in the context of blended delivery of teaching in 2020-21, including student as well as staff perspectives. Topics include the use of cameras in online teaching, how to support student well-being and how to engage students' affect and create a sense of belonging, as well as facilitating their learning. There are two reviews of technology which may be helpful for teaching online in the future. Other papers focus on topics such as relating assessments to the skills needed in employment, the tacit knowledge of markers and how best to support students with their resit assessments. Here we provide a brief digest of each paper.

In a thoughtful and balanced appraisal of blended-learning and COVID-19-driven online learning, Jason Jeevaruban and Gemma Boden, of the University of Greenwich, present an opinion piece from the point of view of an undergraduate student on a paramedic science course. It is extremely valuable for course designers to hear the voice of students, for they speak with authority about what it is like to learn on a range of programmes, each with its own set of appropriate pedagogical strategies. In this case, though online learning has much to offer, the author fully appreciates the importance of being on campus, of hands-on opportunities for building practical clinical skills, working as part of a team and making mistakes as a fundamental element of learning. There is no doubting, here, the powerful endorsement of blended approaches for their combining (especially for vocational courses) face-to-face sessions with the flexibilities of online learning, but the author remains objective in offering the advice that the choice of mode of delivery should not be made without consulting the views and experience-rich understanding of learners. The succinct detail of this paper deserves scrutiny.

Alison Gilmour, from the University of Greenwich, reminds us that obliging students to use webcams as part of online or blended-learning activities (perhaps because we would like to know that they are present or because we wish to avail ourselves of non-verbal insights into how they are learning) does not take into account the fact that access to and familiarity with this technology are not equal for all students, nor that some students may not wish to have their personal domestic situation exposed to view. The pandemic has drawn attention to the material and lived experiences of a diverse student body and the author of this paper advocates the adoption of a 'pedagogy of kindness' that recognises that a blanket requirement to use webcams may well counter a commitment to inclusion and may damage or destroy trust. "Active engagement," the author says, "does not depend on having your camera on" and we ought to be much more aware of social disadvantage, especially at a time when students certainly need support for managing their learning in digital spaces, support that is not universally forthcoming.

Does assessment within higher education (HE) degree courses adequately prepare students for the tasks they will be given to do in the workplace? Debbie Bartlett and Deborah Sims, of the University of Greenwich, joined forces to research this question in the context of ecology/environmental management and civil engineering courses and jobs, seeking

responses from newly employed graduates and from their employers. By means of a well-selected range of reference to the literature on this topic, the authors of this interesting study draw attention to the need for HE assessment – if it is to tackle the ‘skills gap’ – 1) to develop learning, not just measure it, and 2) to emphasise the acquisition of transferable skills, alongside technical skills. The findings from the surveys conducted are thoughtfully presented and considered and will provoke thought about the clear value of competency-based assessment strategies, involving constructive feedback along the lines of that used by employers to their employees, that really will enhance employability.

A project by Catherine Farrant, Raluca Marinciu, Dawn Reilly and Liz Warren at the University of Greenwich set out to improve the quality of support offered to students for resits on business programmes. By exploring second-year student experiences of resits at the end of year one (with information gathered from interviews and discussion forums), the authors demonstrate their determination to improve existing support and, therefore, outcomes. This case study focuses on Bandura's ‘self-efficacy’, a positive emotional state created perhaps by the supportive comments of lecturers, peers or friends and family, but certainly by ‘mastery experiences’, or prior success in a similar situation. Self-belief and self-confidence can help to improve preparation for resits and students’ willingness to set personal goals and can reduce procrastination. These research results illustrate the need for a range of strategies, including past paper question practice and good, regular communication between tutor and student, which may include re-visiting and explaining previous feedback to help with a coursework resit and conveying to students the meaning and extent of the ‘resit support’ available.

“*[T]he journey has been a transformative one for me and my pupils*” is a telling comment made by one of the 150 schoolteachers who took advantage of a professional development opportunity with a research team (Adewale Magaji, Ana Cabral, Andrew Lambirth, Roger McDonald, Ashley Brett and Christopher Philpott) from the University of Greenwich to explore aspects of their own practice by means of action research. Conventional personal development for school teachers has not normally extended over four years, as this did, and participants have not usually registered as university students, which suggests that the Greenwich collaboration indeed marks a transformative stage in giving practitioners in the school sector agency over their own learning to foster change, for their findings will be contextually informed and relevant and therefore likely to result in measurable improvement in their own classrooms and schools. This case study paints a very positive picture of the benefits of providing teachers with the tools to undertake effective action research, when the process is supported by a university team to guide, advise and manage challenges and involves constructive interaction between all the participants.

A cross-disciplinary team at the University of Leicester (Kerry Dobbins, Neil Adams, Ellen Bishop, Mehman Ismayilli, Martha Papadopoulou, Megan Phillips, Nadine Tauchner, Elizabeth van Wesseem and Joe Watkins) placed graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) as co-designers, -evaluators and -disseminators of an equal-status project to support them in their roles by means of developmental peer observations of teaching across the disciplines. Like the academic coach in the previous paper, the very liminality of this role demands that institutions create opportunities to succeed for such PhD students as these at Leicester, who undertake a great deal of teaching. The value of this project is abundantly evident in the very informative comments and summaries of the eight GTAs involved, providing an authentic

insight into various significant aspects of the learning involved, not least the self-reflective element so fundamental to effective teaching throughout a career.

It is unsurprising that many current academic papers are addressing and assessing the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning. This one, by Poppy Frances Gibson and Amber Bale of the University of Greenwich, differs from most in offering direct advice – relevant to students also – about how to embrace a personal 'body-healing' (a holistic mind-body approach) method to counter emotional distress – and possibly psychiatric illness – resulting from loss of the usual human contact and, consequently, the normal patterns of socialisation and collaboration. The authors recommend choosing from a range of possible mind-body therapies, explaining that to adopt some simple adjustments to our behaviours, especially at the beginning and end of the day, can revitalise us and help our ability to teach, to be better role models and to encourage our students to prioritise their emotional wellbeing.

Feeling more positive now?

At the University of Greenwich Business Faculty's virtual Teaching and Learning Festival 2020, Xiaowen Gao made a presentation on personal strategies for affective engagement of students in wholly online learning. Reflecting on other presenters' methods for stimulating active learning in this pandemic-engendered context, where inequalities in high-speed internet access so obviously exist, the author emphasises the necessity for creating in students a sense of belonging, to counter feelings of isolation. Though there are such student-centred, text-based, asynchronous online collaborative learning activities as wiki pages and discussion forums, synchronous occasions are inevitably more challenging. With genuine passion, the author addresses the difficulties by adopting measures to establish, for all participants, social presence, so each becomes real to the rest, as in a physical classroom.

Sustaining student engagement in longer modules constitutes considerable challenge for academic teaching staff. However, for those in computing-related subjects, the authors of a very interesting article about the co-organising (students and staff together) of 'hackathons' may have found a solution. Nuno Correia, of the University of Greenwich, offers experience and best practice gleaned from three such events – occasions when participants gather to collaborate in teams to design and develop products and services, usually digitally. The activities, with their tight time constraints, are short, intensive and competitive, and have broad appeal, but especially popular for those who perform best on tasks that do not require lengthy attention spans. Rewards take various forms (gift voucher prizes, sense of personal achievement, camaraderie, recognition) and the author sees plenty of evidence of strong motivation.

Assessment literacy and, specifically, its importance in enabling students to grasp *fully* the criteria used by markers, are the focus of Gemma Mansi of the University of Greenwich, with reference to those learners following extended courses, having entered higher education via a BTEC national route. The author argues cogently – based on the findings of qualitative research, with data collected from informal discussions with both students and staff – that several tactics to make assessment expectations explicit need to be adopted, from thinking about the assessment type (especially for those students less familiar with written essays and exams) to giving students practice opportunities to develop their assessment literacy.

Through open dialogue, markers must help students to understand the markers' *tacit* knowledge of what is required and students should have active experience in engaging with the marking process. When the *language* of assessment is not understood, this too must be discussed. Until staff cease to make assumptions about students' prior assessment experiences and instead build in time for crucial academic literacy skills, learners will continue to be frustrated.

What and how we teach are always central to sound educational practice, but never more so than when decolonising the curriculum is at stake. Monica Fernandes, from Brunel University London, knows well that: devising curricula with a diverse – not merely Western – range of subject matter, contexts, perspectives and voices will develop independent learning and critical thinking; redesigning curricula with teaching methods that diversify assessments, use inclusive language, review the skills to be acquired and make the study materials accessible to all will overcome inequalities between students, whatever their backgrounds and circumstances. Furthermore, consulting students about what they would like seems very logical indeed. The author's emphasis here is upon Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects – not widely seen as lending themselves to decolonisation (being about technical knowledge and problem-solving) – and she provides a powerful set of suggested ways that demonstrate that they are not exempt from a holistic, inclusive and creative reappraisal, a re-think that may well create greater coherence between STEM subjects and the humanities.

Colin McClure and Paul Williams, of Queen's University, Belfast, explore educator and student opinions of the proximity-based video-conferencing platform 'gather.town' in a study striking for its thorough and objective analysis. The current pandemic-driven move to distance learning has led educators in higher education to seek platforms that will support synchronous and asynchronous tailored learning, enable educator-student and peer-to-peer interaction and encourage the development of successful learning communities. Findings indicate that gather.town has much to offer both groups. Nevertheless, the authors are at pains to identify the platform's limitations, to acknowledge that other technologies have some similar capabilities and to make clear that such resources are not a substitute for face-to-face teaching and learning and are not to be regarded as a sole teaching tool. The paper's conclusion, that gather.town will be very useful as one of a range of strategies in a blended-learning approach post pandemic, captures its potential value precisely.

Another innovative strategy for getting online learning to function much more nearly to the physical classroom experience is the brainchild of Gerhard Kristandl from the University of Greenwich. The pleasant fluent style of this article engages the reader from the start, suggesting that students will be similarly fascinated by the author's application of role play to an online session on how to prevent internal fraud in a business, so that accountancy and finance information systems students will grasp the fundamental concept of 'internal controls and segregation of duties'. Translating the activity from real classroom to screen was the challenge the author met by means of the free 'Open Broadcaster Software (OBS) Studio, with its ability to overcome the restrictions typical of other video-conferencing software. Clearly able to empathise with teachers who struggle with the demands of hardware and software, the author provides an exposition that is informative, clear and supportive, outlining the method and appraising OBS simply and precisely.

## Editors' Introduction

In a reflective piece from the University of Greenwich, authors Poppy Gibson, Robert Morgan, Andrew Sinclair, Rachael Hartiss, Agnieszka Kosek and Ashley Clark consider the efficacy of a partnership between academics, academic skills staff and students to support the latter – following an accelerated two-year BA – in acquiring a range of skills to achieve independent learning. The authors are convinced that, when the staff work together to provide consistency of message and approach and there exists a culture of effective communication between them and the students, entry-level inequalities are evened out and all learners benefit from individually tailored support. At the Greenwich 2020 SHIFT teaching and learning conference, a team representative of all parties involved presented, as a proven means of promoting student success and outcomes, the partnership's model for embedding skills.

We hope that Compass readers will enjoy reading these papers and will find them informative and helpful.

With best wishes to all Compass readers, contributors and reviewers,

Rachel and Yang

Editors