

Editor's Introduction

Spring 2023 Editorial

A warm welcome to volume 16, issue 1, of Compass, Journal of Learning and Teaching!

We are pleased to present the spring 2023 edition of Compass, which looks at a range of current issues in learning, teaching and the student experience in higher education, through a mix of opinion pieces, case studies and articles. Topics include employability, transition to HE, inter-disciplinary learning, connectivism, delivery of asynchronous teaching and internationalisation of the curriculum. Two papers look at wellbeing – one focuses on an online space for staff to connect and the other explore the experience of post-graduate research students. A further paper investigates the use of freehand drawing as a teaching method, while another explores the use of drawings, combined with written responses, as an approach to understanding students' lived experiences. Here we provide a brief digest of each paper.

A study by **Steve Connolly of Anglia Ruskin University and Karen Wicks of the University of Bedfordshire**, explores staff and student perceptions of the engagement of non-traditional and distance-learning students with a virtual learning environment (VLE) drawing on connectivist concepts to analyse students' handling of technology and their relationship with it. The students concerned were part-time Education undergraduates, already working as teaching assistants. The data gathered are informative, but the broad thrust of this research became the acquisition of knowledge and understanding by means of a more complex inter-relationship between various 'nodes' (specialised information sources), whether face-to-face teaching, massive open online courses, VLEs, communities of learning or social media. If any one of these has limitations or presents barriers, then learners may choose alternatives to meet their own needs, so there are powerful reasons to look critically at how a VLE may be enhanced. The authors conclude that a more explicit pedagogical explanation to students of connectivist principles and also improvements to VLEs may lead to a more effective relationship between technology and learning.

It is more usually the case – and understandable – that *student* welfare is the focus of Compass authors' articles. However, this case study, by **Renu Bhandari of the Open University**, researched the value of creative arts activities for the wellbeing of associate lecturers – and particularly those teaching and supporting students on the Open University's 'Access' programme – whose work situation often leaves them feeling isolated. The author discusses the creation of the 'Hues' galleries, a safe and inclusive online space for Access lecturers to share with their peers examples of their personal creations in such activities as art, photography, poetry, prose and craftwork. Findings strongly suggest that resulting positive peer comments and emojis increased their sense of connectedness, of being away from work,

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of happiness and enjoyment and of openness to new experiences and ideas, all thus contributing to their wellbeing and sense of belonging to this online community. The article ends with some experienced-based recommendations to make such ventures succeed. All in all, it is a tribute to a very worthwhile effort that places proper value on the psychological welfare and health of those professionals in higher education who are exposed to significant stresses in their support of students.

Employability is something that higher education institutions have acknowledged and increasingly embraced in preparing their students for the realities of the working world. Professional practices are constantly evolving and graduates must accordingly be resilient and adaptable. This thoughtful study by **Laurence Pattacini and Hannah Beard of the University of Sheffield** reports on findings from two research exercises – involving both current students and alumni from the same five-year course in the field of design that incorporates a year (the fourth) in practice – to test student understanding of transferable skills and capabilities and their application in the workplace, with the aim of increasing proficiency in learning to learn through promotion of graduate attributes, such as strong communication, independence, autonomy, creativity and adaptability. The literature identifies reskilling and upskilling as essential in a working environment responding to such influences as climate change and the need for sustainability. The relevance to this research of the practical experience of alumni is clear. Participants' voice is a strong feature here and reveals: perhaps understandable lack of awareness of the relationship between study and practice; significant differences in the culture of British and overseas workplaces; and the challenge of the often hierarchical nature of businesses. There is much food for thought in this paper.

“From our own experience, peer support improves motivation better than anything else.” If you're a student embarking upon a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programme, this excellent, lucid and very personal opinion piece, authored by **Bethan Jones and Stephanie Brady at the University of Wolverhampton**, about the realities of the first year of PhD may well alert you to the challenges and tribulations to be expected. However, it is the higher education institutions (HEIs) which should take careful note of the key recommendations made here. The authors recognise that the literature on this particular transition is scanty and suggest that HEIs may make assumptions about the ability of doctoral students to function well – practically, academically and emotionally – in independent research, when their previous training has been highly structured. At stake is their mental wellbeing, which these authors see as fundamental to managing their work, with all its unfamiliarity, alongside the responsibilities of their personal lives. Academic networking, establishment of peer group interaction/support and involvement in activities are all vital and HEIs are here recommended to be open about

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their awareness of these students' needs and explicit about what they provide to counter isolation and mental challenges. Above all, they must actively promote a sense of community and encourage PhD students to realise it's normal to seek help.

Though the initial transition to university has been well researched, recent awareness that induction is not just for the first few weeks but a whole-year endeavour has sharpened up strategies for skilling students for the longer term. This case study, from the **University of Greenwich School of Accounting and Finance, authored by Lili Yan and Dawn Reilly**, shows how helpful it is to build, from the start, friendship groups, collaborative activities and access to and understanding of the library and its resources, as well as to introduce new students both to institution-wide services and academic and non-academic staff and to develop knowledge of campus geography. The authors describe clearly the nature of a particular activity designed to exploit students' existing knowledge and skills and also to give them the experience of working in new ways and to undergraduate standards in a subject-related topic area, *viz.* research into how large companies undertake corporate social responsibility. The students complete various tasks in different locations and can call for guidance from staff in person or by email and ultimately give group presentations. The reader is left with the impression that this particular school fully understands what was recommended by the doctoral students above, that establishing networks and a working community of peers best supports a sense of belonging.

Like all change, adapting the curriculum to prepare students for the global workplace through internationalisation faces challenge in a variety of forms. This interesting study by **Mazia Yassim of the University of Greenwich**, of an attempt to internationalise a postgraduate marketing programme in a United Kingdom business school makes it clear that no single model will suit all contexts, but the author (the programme's leader) recommends as fundamental "*a multi-level and [...] holistic approach with clearly defined learning outcomes.*" Three consecutive steps are outlined in this instance, each in turn having informed the next, so that the final one in this case proved to be the most successful. Since higher education institutions have an obligation to prepare their students adequately, they must equip them with a better understanding of the world and its issues and help them to be inter-culturally aware. The message here is that 'internationalisation at home' better supports widening participation than do unsustainable and expensive international exchanges, especially as technology now permits students from different nations to engage and collaborate with each other digitally and so acquire relevant inter-cultural knowledge and skills without having to spend time abroad. Perhaps even more crucial is the author's powerful emphasis on institutions' development of their faculty's own international knowledge, skills and attitudes, so that changes to teaching

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styles, learning and assessment may be achieved, for token gestures and lip service to the concept of internationalism won't do. Adequate resourcing is a must.

Ana Cabral and Stephanie Fuller of Queen Mary Academy, University of London explore what makes an effective asynchronous professional learning experience. Since the participants in this study, are already higher education teachers, but new to academic teaching – and therefore pursuing the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice – the value of this piece extends beyond what it clearly offers to course designers, as these practitioners can develop similar strategies for their own students. The authors were systematic in their incorporation into the module's design of the factors deemed by existing research as most likely to encourage successful asynchronous learning. To answer their research question – *Does an asynchronous teaching and learning approach facilitate effective professional learning?* – they were equally rigorous, with a mixed-methods online questionnaire, in gauging participants' perceptions of the teaching and learning involved. In general, responses delivered a largely positive answer to the research question, with tutor feedback and the asynchronous approach much appreciated as supportive of deeper reflection and learning, while peer feedback, tutor facilitation and improved building of learning community relationships remain, to these self-critical tutors, areas for further development.

From **Oliver Harrison and Martin Monahan of Nottingham Trent University**, in the discipline of social and political thought and international relations, comes a study of how freehand drawing may help students to interpret and understand complex primary text, in the context of a political theory module. The intention of the exercise, which aimed to teach "*the basics of Sigmund Freud's early topographical model of the human psyche*", was both to explore just how effective freehand drawing might be as teaching and learning activity and how students' perceptions of the usefulness of the drawing might relate to their own learning preferences. Qualitative data were derived from focus group discussion, following contrasting teaching methods for the text (*viz. "verbal explanation accompanied by two static diagrams and verbal explanation accompanied by a freehand drawing"*, making use of whiteboard software from Microsoft Teams). Clearly, depending on students' learning preferences, which did not necessarily fall into simple categories but were a mixture of those, and on their prior knowledge of the material, the benefits perceived of either method did vary. Perhaps, however, the most surprising aspect of what the students noticed (from unintended variation in the delivery of each method) was a relationship between the lecturer's learning preference and choice of pedagogy. Perhaps, therefore, lecturers' awareness of their own learning preferences might enable them to achieve more positive outcomes with their teaching. Finally, the authors counsel, as with other visual aids, carefully selective use of freehand drawing.

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The author of a further opinion piece argues, with three workable examples, that introductory economics may be an appropriate context for introducing undergraduates to interdisciplinary learning and thinking. Such an approach may draw on the frameworks and methods of other disciplines to explore a concept or problem and may improve the ability to “*synthesise and integrate information, think critically and holistically as well as develop self-confidence and a passion for learning.*” Acknowledging that there are some barriers to the adoption of interdisciplinary teaching, the author, **Nabeel Iqbal, of North South University, Bangladesh**, uses the specific gains to be made in economics because students of this subject typically bring with them a knowledge of mathematical and scientific concepts and so teachers may harness that familiarity, as in the case of applying input-process-output diagrams – well-known to computer science students – to the economics model for the transformation of factors of production into goods and services. The author now intends to evaluate the benefits of this strategy and determine what may enhance it in the future.

Another interesting case study, authored by **Poppy Gibson of Anglia Ruskin University**, looks at the application of ‘interpretative phenomenological analysis’ of a combination of semi-structured interviews and line drawings, the better to understand students’ lived experiences of university and thus to address barriers to their learning by means of appropriate support. The author encourages reader participation in this analysis by offering both spoken and visual data for consideration and giving practical guidance for the steps to be followed; she then identifies the most significant factors – both internal and external – which influence a student’s engagement: personal motivation, always stronger when a clear goal or pathway to, say, a future career, is envisaged; emotional investment by approachable, available and empathetic staff. Qualitative research into aspects of higher education is always powerful in the hands of someone with genuine commitment to the psychological welfare of students; this particular study is exploratory, placing a real regard for individual feelings and experiences at the heart of strategies to influence outcomes. In this case, the author’s powerful motivation comes strongly across.

We hope readers will find these papers informative and enjoyable.

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

The Compass team at the University of Greenwich