

AFTERWORD

Persistence, the Pandemic and PGR Pedagogies

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Abstract

In this afterword, I reflect on my involvement in one element of Warwick's pandemic contingency work and how PGR tutors made a significant contribution. I consider this in light of the pieces in this inaugural JPPP issue, looking at what this tells us about the value of working with postgraduate researchers who teach, with reference to recent activities, events and surveys and through the lens of persistence in learning.

Keywords: *online, learning, tutor, PGRs, persistence, teaching*

Introduction

As has been so ably reflected in the pieces in this journal issue, we faced many disorienting truths about our teaching practice just over 18 months ago. As a sector, we encountered a sudden shift in our perception of higher

education learning and teaching. Universities like Warwick had to act fast. Decisions had to be made in haste; decisions as educationalists we would all rather have spent longer considering, planning and enacting. My final words here look back on my experiences of one element of Warwick's response to the

pandemic and consider the vital role PGRs can play as institutional colleagues.

New Territory: The Warwick Online Learning Certificate

In the face of the unprecedented national lockdown, with thousands of students both physically and conceptually at distance, Warwick embarked upon some ambitious and untested projects. The Warwick Online Learning Certificate (WOLC) was one of them.

WOLC brought together a team of around 40 members of staff, from departments and professional services, to design an online course to equip first year undergraduates with the skills, knowledge and confidence to be online learners. While departments grappled with additional pressing issues, such as the pivot to online for finalists' exams, WOLC was to provide a unique space for all first years (around 6000 students) to learn together. Five units of study, with new content released every week, would:

- introduce students to the mindset of learning away from campus,
- equip them with the technology tools to help,
- invest in them a sense of Warwick's key pillars of internationalisation and interdisciplinarity, and,
- support them to think about their employability and skills.

Writing started in earnest. I was invited to contribute and I watched with fascination and admiration as colleagues shared and created brilliant, imaginative learning materials, Warwick-focused, and from scratch. They were situated in the moment; they reflected learning right then and there. There was a buzz. We were working hard and fast to author, proofread, edit and publish. It was one of the most unique experiences of my professional career.

Established assumptions: persistence

But as the resources came together, in spite of their quality, I had a nagging doubt. Would students 'just do this work', outside of their usual course context, and independently? This felt familiar. In spite of successes, the early promise of the *Massive Online Open Course* (MOOC)ⁱ has not quite come to fruition: one of the biggest complaints about the MOOC phenomenon has been attrition and challenges around engagement and completion (**Aldowah et al 2020; Liyanagunawardena et al 2014; Penstein Rose et al 2014**). I returned to thinking about the importance of persistence, a concept which has shaped my understanding of how my various cohorts of students have learned over the years at Warwick. Persistence, or how students 'keep going' to succeed with their learning, both in general and online is much explored in the literature (**Akyol et al, 2008; Croxton, 2016; Lakhal et al, 2020; Su and Waugh, 2018**). There is wide agreement that persistence leads to success. And although the literature examines persistence from a range of perspectives, a point of agreement is that students fair best when they have successful interaction with both the digital space and with other people. So how do students persist? I have previously considered persistence in online domains as three types:

- cognitive – knowledge and content which make sense together and build students' learning of concepts and ideas, structured around well-designed activities,
- physical – clear access, predictable navigation, accessible interfaces that work and make sense to students), and,
- affective – learner motivation, self-esteem, efficacy, self-confidence (**Hattersley: 2016**).

Whilst WOLC had the first two in spades, I began to think that something was needed to ensure student success in the third domain. So I asked a question.

Apposite Appointments: PGRs as online tutors

WOLC was to be a self-access, self-paced course, with flexible deadlines. All of those attributes felt right in the dire circumstances of April 2020, but if nearly 20 years of running blended learning courses had taught me anything, it's that teachers still matter. And the teachers I cared most about at Warwick, the PGR community, were also displaced, with closed classes and loss of earnings. I saw an opportunity. It took one proposal, one supportive decision from executive colleagues, one brilliant HR representative and one week, to design a unique online tutoring role, advertise positions, recruit and employ 60 PGR teachers from across the Warwick community to support the 6000 undergraduates on WOLC. Red tape? I'm sorry... what red tape?

The WOLC PGR tutors each led a mixed disciplinary cohort, of around 100 undergraduates, formed group identitiesⁱⁱ and

coached them through the course. As tutors, we worked together as a community of practice, as new study materials were released, to work out how best to support students and maximise time. WOLC tutors engaged in informal dialogue, reflected in writing on Moodle tasks and forums and offered encouraging words and updates. Viewing online learning through a Community of Enquiry lens, these kinds of interactions have been identified by Akyol et al (2008) as 'social, cognitive and teaching presence' which come in and out of focus at different times. Whilst no such analysis took place of WOLC tutor-student interactions, Moodle data is clear: relationships built and conversations grew. It wasn't perfect (because we would never have designed it in such a rush!) but student evaluation tells us that these collaborative opportunities were welcomed (Figure 1) and Moodle course analytics show that student engagement in this online space was at its best when online tutors were present (Figure 2). Persistence, then, was supported.

I enjoyed the activities where I had to contribute to an online forum, sharing ideas about all sorts of things, not only about the material we were learning. For example, people shared some top recipes or recommendations on where to travel. I feel as though contributing to online forums helped me to feel more like part of an academic community in this rather isolating time, especially because it is normally just as part of my study group so I am starting to recognise the faces and names of other students.

Wow. You opened my eyes to a new perspective that I never considered before! Thankyou.

Fig. 1. Responses from undergraduates on WOLC, demonstrating the impact of collaboration online

Hey guys, if you're having an issues with the course feel free to post them in here! Hopefully I'll be able to help and if not I'll be able to find someone who can!

Genuinely loving all your messages, everyone! Thank you for your thoughts, reflections, tips, and candor. In keeping with the latter, I'm not living up to the aspiration of my own top tip recently - I keep waking up at 6am no matter what this last month or so, which is completely new for me, and quite frustrating. Feels like my body is going through the early stages of some Kafkaesque metamorphosis... But I'm trying to listen to my body and adapt, and when I manage it, it's actually quite nice going to bed early and getting up with the sun. Not something I ever used to do, back when evening socialising was more of a thing. Anyone else seeing changes in their circadian rhythms?

I'm really learning a lot about online pedagogy just reading your posts, and hopefully you all are too, so keep them coming - and feel free to reply to each other if you are interested in something someone has said or you have another top tip that might help them out with what they're struggling with working at home and online, etc. Lots of you are missing personal interactions as part of your learning, so maybe we can replace at least a bit of that here?

Fig 2. Interactions from PGR tutors with undergraduates in their groups, encouraging dialogue and affective persistence

The value of the PGR online tutors didn't end there. To enable the best possible understanding of the materials, online tutors had access to content prior to release. This opened up the opportunity for their critical appraisal of our work; their ideas and suggestions were incorporated. They became co-producers. PGRs brought their current research to bear on several aspects of the programme, particularly in dialogue with the undergraduates. And when WOLC was done, in realisation that this was a resource and approach that could go further, it was carried forward successfully into departments in discipline-specific Moodle spaces as *Warwick Online Learning Fundamentals* (WOLF). Several PGRs I know continued this work.

Ongoing strengths: where persistence in learning can continue

Which brings me, neatly, to the value of our PGR teachers. What we had in WOLC was a microcosm of what we are blessed with every year at Warwick: the opportunity to employ, work alongside and co-create with talented postgraduate researchers. The perspectives shared in this journal have demonstrated that they bring strengths and insight to our learning and teaching work. PGR teachers often work in other educational contexts: this brings an ability to learn from other sectors, beyond the HE bubble. PGR teachers who are engaged concurrently in their own professional learning can reflect on and apply new ideas, pedagogies and tools in a meaningful and immediate manner. PGR teachers, as current students themselves, bridge these two identities, and as such have a unique perspective and closer, shared understanding with our undergraduates (Clark, 2021; Elliot and Marie, 2021).

What is also apparent, reflecting on the accounts in this journal, is just how much PGR teaching during the pandemic, alongside that of other colleagues, has been about supporting persistence. A persistence (and learning success) which has, no doubt, gone

some way towards the university's recent positive results in the National Student Survey (NSS) and the accolade of Sunday Times 'University of the Year for Teaching Quality'ⁱⁱⁱ. Back to our journal contributors then, persistence was felt in many ways: sorting out technical and access errors (physical persistence); providing additional tutorial and contact opportunities (cognitive/affective persistence); problematising and adjusting the online environment to enable disciplinary pedagogies that work (cognitive persistence); establishing online community spaces (affective persistence); and rethinking approaches to interaction and dialogue through novel technology tools (cognitive/physical persistence). All of this has kept students going; kept them learning. And if further evidence were needed, as someone privileged enough to see the *Warwick Awards for Teaching Excellence* (WATE PGR)^{iv} nominations from students, I have encountered many times the support of persistence by PGR tutors, especially in the affective domain:

She regularly emails to answer any questions that she couldn't answer during the seminar and her response time is very quick. She makes an effort to check the wellbeing of the students at the beginning of each seminar and tries to include everyone in the subsequent conversations making the seminar engaging...

He is undoubtedly, an empathetic, understanding, and caring seminar tutor. He demonstrated a genuine level of concern and care for personal circumstances that rendered me unable to attend one of his seminars, and also ensured I could catch up on the content.

Persistence in learning is not just for unprecedented times. It's a concept which should permeate all of our curriculum planning and work. It should be built into modules as part of a culture that wants students to succeed. It is proactive, deliberate, purposeful, and kind. PGR teachers are ideally

placed to enable this persistence and support more senior colleagues in departments, who have a range of other duties and pressures. There are mutual benefits for those senior colleagues too: the opportunity for dialogue and team teaching; bringing module content up-to-date; additional support in formative assessment and with large groups of students; and supporting conceptual understanding through PGRs' own research and knowledge. Many of these affordances are expressed in WATE PGR nominations from *staff* members:

(She) has taught [...] on a regular basis throughout her PhD and is an outstanding teacher. She is incredibly proficient in her subject of expertise, and highly adaptable to new topics. This intelligence, coupled with her personable and approachable nature, has made her a very effective teacher and one of my first choices when assigning a demonstrator.

What particularly impressed us about (X), beyond his excellent teaching practice, was that he brought new ideas for relating these topics to students that we had not previously considered. This will leave a lasting impact on the ways we can adapt how this is taught to be even more inclusive of different learners.

The opportunity to mentor more junior colleagues is also a benefit to staff, enhancing their own professional development and even supporting a case for promotion or professional recognition. All of this, of course, is recognised and already enacted by many at Warwick. But are we doing enough to ensure equitable access to teaching opportunities and sufficient development and mentorship of our PGR teachers? Recent evidence from the PRES survey and our own Survey of PGR Teaching^v shows that PGRs would like more opportunities to teach and would welcome more support. Taking seriously the professional learning of PGR teachers is also vital – not just as a 'nice to have' or an institutional tick box, but as a chance to develop and encourage teaching identities, reflective practice, innovation and curriculum

change. And to ensure we are offering a high-quality learning and teaching experience for our students (you know... the one that won us the accolade...). We should not hesitate, or wait until our postgraduates have passed their vivas and joined us in formal early careers positions. Developing PGR teachers *now* is not only 'growing our own' but investing, longer term, in the sector more widely.

Closing remarks: a vision for PGR teaching

I'm an idealist (can you tell?). I want all PGRs who would like to teach to have the chance. When the WOLC tutor roles were advertised we received a plethora of strong applications, not all of which could be successful and I was heartbroken to have to turn down good tutors, especially in a time of crisis. But alongside a drive for increased opportunities I am also acutely aware of precarity in PGR teaching: fairness, wellbeing, workload and adequate compensation are all essential components of good employment for these colleagues. We should insist on this and call it out when it falls short. Now more than ever, as we emerge into new ways of working as an institution, we will need a range of colleagues, who can work in nuanced ways and adapt to changing times. We should agitate for genuine opportunities for PGR teachers in our departments (**Jordon and Howe, 2018**) and plan for this; encourage them when they want to teach, see them as integral to our teaching teams (**Kajfez and Matusovich, 2017**) and invite their expertise. They're an asset, our allies and our friends. And I, for one, would not have achieved as much in the last eighteen months without them.

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ⁱ Massive Online Open Course or 'MOOC' is an open-access, online course. MOOCs originated in the Open Educational Resources movement in 2008, growing significantly by 2012. In principle of MOOCs sought to open access and liberate knowledge making it available to the masses, and beyond formal institutions, although many Universities have written their own MOOC content. MOOCs are often free for students

although there may be certification fees and charges for other institutions to use materials. Although still widely available, MOOCs have never replaced traditional HE institutional courses.

ⁱⁱ WOLC tutor groups were all given animal/bird names (e.g. the Armadillos, the Frogs, the Sharks) by the key colleague from Academic Technology who led the building of the WOLC Moodle. This successful strategy not only meant quick and easy identification and assignment of groups on Moodle, but fostered a collective identity in these cohorts, online tutors often referring to the species in question in posts and discussion, all of which supported group cohesion.

ⁱⁱⁱ The University of Warwick has recently been recognised (September 2021) as the best university in the UK for teaching quality, by The Sunday Times Good University Guide. This is attributed to positive National Student Survey results where the response to the pandemic was positively endorsed by students: Warwick named University of the Year for Teaching Quality.

^{iv} The Warwick Awards for Teaching Excellence (WATE) is an annual event where both staff and students can nominate teachers who have made a difference to their learning experience. A cross-University panel then engages in two rounds of judging, to decide the winners. There is a separate category for PGR teachers, this year seeing 11 winners. Warwick Awards for Teaching Excellence.

^v The Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey (PRES) is a national survey of postgraduate research. Just under 100 Higher Education Institutions took part in 2021 and Warwick's response rate was above the national average. Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (warwick.ac.uk) PRES contains few specific questions about experience of teaching, so in 2021 Warwick PTC gained ethical approval to carry out its own survey, initial results of which are reported here in the JPPP and more substantial analysis of the data is now taking place.

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