

Creating Belonging in a Changing World: Moves to Refashion the Higher Education Context by Making Space Online for Inclusion, Care, and Connectedness

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During the lockdown, while the online delivery of the curriculum was prioritised in 'saving' the academic year within higher education, little published literature reported on how lecturers can connect with students emotionally within the virtual space. The online environment can be developed to establish a connection between the students and the lecturer, thereby creating a space of belonging for undergraduates. The affective domain is linked to academic success. This study shows how the online space can establish a sense of trust between the lecturer and students, and how this space supports students to express any vulnerabilities, in the emotional and academic sense. Activities designed by the lecturer were provided weekly, online, over six weeks for a class of 522 first-year biology students. Students voluntarily responded and the lecturer provided follow-up and feedback each week to connect with students in a social space and provide support for their cognitive development. When lecturers create a space for belonging in first years, students are more open to the communication of their cognitive needs.

Keywords: online learning, pandemic, social and emotional connectivity, belonging, Pedagogy of Care

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The move of traditional universities towards offering a blended approach is necessary as teaching and learning evolve to benefit from online learning platforms. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the resulting influence of lockdown on student learning (Cranfield et al., 2021; Neuwirth et al., 2020), it is necessary to consider what the emotional needs of students are in current times, i.e. 2 years into lockdown. Universities were mostly concerned with the delivery of the curriculum when traditional, contact institutions moved teaching and learning into the online space at the onset of the lockdown (Neuwirth et al., 2020). However, little has been reported since then on how digital technology can be practically used as a platform by lecturers to provide emotional support to students. This is important because there is a strong link between the affective domain and academic success (McConnell & van Der Hoeven Kraft, 2011).

Emotional support is closely linked to academic achievement (Händel et al., 2020). In traditional, large-class settings, it is difficult for lecturers to establish individual connections with students; this problem became even more prevalent in the move to online learning during the lockdown (Cranfield et al., 2021). Digital technology and online platforms offer a way for lecturers to connect with students individually by establishing a line of communication that allows students to voice their emotional or academic concerns. This study demonstrates how I, as the lecturer used digital technology to connect with the students in my

first-year biology class of 522 students. The impetus here was to provide a space where students' concerns could be acknowledged and addressed at the level of individuals; therefore, this space was created to help students to express their vulnerabilities and feel heard, while also allowing me insight into the challenges that they faced. The creation of this virtual space can allow trust and care to be promoted between the lecturer and students so that student well-being and cognitive development are nurtured as part of the learning process (Rose & Adams, 2014).

In this paper, I argue that the blended approach can be further extended when lecturers consider initiatives that can be used to actively connect with students on an emotional level while still maintaining a focus on student cognitive development. Providing emotional support to students could mitigate feelings of isolation and alienation when they enter into the new university environment (Händel et al., 2020), particularly due to insecurities that may have emerged due to learning development during the pandemic and lockdown (Ruhalahti et al., 2021). The digital, online space is yet to be fully utilized in creating this line of communication between students and their lecturers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Usually, lecturers focus on content delivery, but with the onset of the pandemic, it was also necessary to determine how students were coping since their emotional state has been shown to influence their academic development (Händel et al., 2020). Noddings' Pedagogy of Care (2005, 2013) is a framework that informs teaching concerning student wellbeing. The move to the online teaching and learning environment requires the formation of a social connection between the lecturer and students for effective teaching and learning to occur virtually (Händel et al., 2020). The Pedagogy of Care (Rose & Adams, 2014) speaks to the embodied nature of individuals (Ignatow, 2007), especially in environments where undergraduates have been accustomed to in-person classes throughout their years at school and now need to independently adapt to learning online. In traditional, in-person classes, lecturers and students have a social presence that connects them emotionally (Händel et al., 2020). This affective space facilitates communication, reflection, and learning (Rose & Adams, 2014). The online environment can provide this opportunity, as evidenced in my study.

This study focuses on my connecting with students in a virtual, social space in parallel with monitoring their learning progress as they moved through the six-week course. Active, compared to passive learning approaches can be influenced by digital technology. Petronzi and Petronzi (2020) show that blended learning approaches could mitigate passiveness among students. When lecturers find ways to encourage students to reflect on their current knowledge structure relative to the new knowledge that is taught; then, active learning approaches can be encouraged among students. Class interactions or discussions also stimulate active learning (Petronzi & Petronzi, 2020) since students can use the questions and prompts from peers to develop their understanding.

As much as there was a swift move to the online learning platforms by traditional universities due to the pandemic, and many challenges needed to be met urgently, this occurrence also prompted learning opportunities that could enable a more integrated and supportive online learning design for the way forward with blended practices in higher education, especially for large, first-year classes where transitional issues have been widely reported. The move to the online environment necessitated a rethinking of lecturer-led initiatives to connect with classes, particularly where teaching and learning were mostly asynchronous, and issues with data costs, access to devices, and connectivity were widespread. The pandemic and lockdown which caused many courses to move online also prompted the surfacing of a new way to inherently engage with students so that they receive the emotional support which supports their cognitive development as well. Digital online technology can offer these opportunities when integrated into the teaching of a course. This study demonstrates how a digital, online learning platform was used to develop the lines of communication within the teaching and learning environment, by providing a space for the student's voice. This online, virtual platform provides space for students to be vulnerable based on their emotional and cognitive needs, and thus have the opportunity to voice their needs.

METHOD

In 2021, over 6 weeks, an online class of 552 biology first-years at a South African university was invited to complete weekly activities. The activities were designed by the lecturer to monitor how they were coping with learning online and to engage with them on their learning progress. Asynchronous lectures were mostly provided using online videos. Workbooks, in the form of pdfs, were constructed to enable the students to respond to prompts and thereby construct their study notes, and reference was made to relevant chapters in the textbook. Three virtual sessions were run synchronously, which students could voluntarily attend. Additional weekly activities were designed to enable engagement between the students and the lecturer on the students' expectations of the course about their learning development. The students' responses to the activities were confidential and visible only to the lecturer when submitted via the online platform. The online class discussions that took place were visible to all students on the course and all students could contribute.

During the first week, the questions provided on the activity prompted students to reflect on their expectations of themselves and the lecturer, as well as any changes they anticipated for their study approaches as they moved from high school into university. Questions that followed on another activity midway through the course probed what elements of teaching design, presented on the online platform, students found valuable and which ones they found unsatisfying. Towards the latter part of the course, students were prompted to reflect on how they found the different learning resources that were included in the course helped in their understanding of course content, and how they had brought together the different resources provided on each topic for the course. On average, 302 students voluntarily responded per week to the activity. A total of 1 808 student responses were voluntarily submitted on the university's online platform.

RESULTS

By having a platform where students could voice their feelings and concerns privately to me, i.e. their lecturer, they were provided a space to express any vulnerabilities, but trust needed to be established between the lecturer and students for the effective use of this space. The prompts contained in the activities for the first week were offered to build this rapport. The follow-up and feedback that I provided were critical to forging this environment and allowed me to validate and acknowledge the students' concerns. The voluntary number of weekly responses from the students (i.e. an average of about 300 responses per week) showed that students valued this avenue of communication on their emotional and cognitive needs, and this initiative thus enabled the creation of a safe space in the digital environment. In a traditional, in-person, 45-minute lecture usually around five questions come up, which means that over the course of four lectures per week, I usually engaged with about 20 questions from the class. However, the use of digital technology resulted in about 300 responses per week. The online environment was effective in unearthing questions that the cohort wanted to engage in.

Details follow on the type of questions that were posed to students over the course. The questions offered in the first week included:

- *My expectations of myself in this course are ...*
- *In terms of the way that I approached my studies last year, I think I could continue doing this to meet my academic expectations of myself:*
- *In terms of how I approached my studies last year, I think I need to consider changing the way I do this to meet my expectations this year:*

These questions give me a sense of what students' expectations were of themselves regarding self-regulation. I replied to responses via the online learning management system to scaffold the students' understanding of the differences between active and passive learning approaches. Providing this level of individual, personalized feedback is not possible within a normal 45-minute teaching session in the traditional contact class. Students' responses remained confidential and in this way, a foundation of trust was built while illustrating to students that there were open lines of communication as well.

The following questions were provided midway through the course:

- *What would you like your lecturer to start doing?*
- *What would you like your lecturer to stop doing?*
- *What would you like your lecturer to continue doing?*

As much as I conscientiously prepared each lesson for online teaching, it was necessary to evaluate how well my design of content was received by students. The types of questions posed above helped me gain these insights. This information was used to shape my lecture preparation according to the needs of the cohort.

Towards the latter part of the course I used the following questions to engage with students on how they were progressing:

- *How are you doing?*
- *How do you find working with the pdf?*
- *How do you find reading the prescribed textbook?*
- *To what extent have you been able to construct your responses to the pdf as you work with the textbook?*
- *What other resources have you used to supplement your understanding?*

As lecturers, we are often fixated on the students' learning development and keeping them on track relative to the curriculum. However, it is equally necessary to have insight into the students' emotional well-being as they work through the academic content within the online space. Toward the end of the course, it was necessary to gauge how the different scaffolds (i.e. the videos, workbooks, prescribed textbook, and weekly activities) that I integrated into my course design for online learning were received by students. The above questions allowed me to do this.

In addition to the online, weekly activities that I provided, I encouraged students to engage with peers via an online discussion forum provided by the university's learning management system. I constructed a page per topic where students could comment or pose questions on lecture content. In this way, students communicated with each other based on questions or comments posted by their peers. This space for discussion allowed students to build on their knowledge and reflect on the understanding of their peers. This engagement provided for the development of social connections among the students within the online space. In this way, students received feedback on their comments from both their peers and me, as they actively engaged in their learning.

DISCUSSION

Considering the substantial number of responses that were provided by students over the six weeks, it is evident that they valued the activities which allowed them the space to engage online with their emotional and cognitive needs. By using this space, students had access to a setting where they could voice their needs which allowed them to be vulnerable within a safe space of trust (Dallimore et al, 2004). The key message here is that students needed to feel heard. Crucially, follow-up and feedback from me on their responses to the activities could create trust and a safe space for students to be vulnerable as the course progressed over the six weeks. The acknowledgment, support, and encouragement in the feedback provided can facilitate the formation of this safe space (Ruhalahti et al., 2021).

Lecturers can also use the online space to monitor student learning progress (Neuwirth et al., 2020) and encourage active learning practices (Petronzi & Petronzi, 2020). Here, students engage in active techniques employing prompts that the lecturer offers for the students to reflect on regarding their learning (Ruhalahti et al., 2021) and by student contributions to class discussions that are encouraged by the lecturer. Lectures could also use prompts to gain insight into the students' level of understanding and the challenges that undergraduates are experiencing when making sense of course content. These observations can then be used in preparation for lecture content that follows and builds on this knowledge.

It is also necessary within the realm of cognitive development to understand how the students have received the course delivery, and what level of value they have found when teaching activities are designed

for specific learning outcomes. Therefore, student reflections on what works and does not work for their learning development, based on the course design, can make explicit to lecturers which aspects of the course design need further consideration. The online space provides a way to elicit these responses from students so that lectures can be customized according to the needs of the cohort. Usually, in large-class settings, there is limited space for this level of individual engagement to occur between the lecturer and students (Mahmood, 2021), but this study shows that the online environment or digital technology can be effectively used to gain these insights.

The lines of communication which the lecturer opens up with the students can enable students to feel a sense of connection with the lecturer and their peers (Ruhalahti et al., 2021). The online environment allows this level of connection to be established in a new and enriching way that is not usually available, due to time constraints, within the in-person, traditional contact setting (Mahmood, 2021). The environment that is enabled by digital technology can therefore establish a sense of trust within a safe space for students such that care and empathy create a foundation for connectedness between the students and the lecturer and between peers (Ruhalahti et al., 2021). This creation of a line of communication between students and the lecturer and among students allows for a social-emotional opportunity that connects students thus mitigating a sense of isolation and alienation which has been reported by studies such as Händel et al. (2020), especially in the first-year environment at university (Ruhalahti et al., 2021).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown have implications for teaching and learning at the university. While much reflection in literature is offered on how lecturers can meet curriculum demands during the pandemic where teaching and learning moved online, more reflection needs to go into what can be done to provide for the emotional needs of the students concerning their academic progress, which stemmed from the pandemic and lockdown. The online, virtual environment can be used effectively to provide a safe space to engage and connect with students emotionally and socially to provide them with the necessary support for their cognitive development. In this way, the use of digital technology is recommended so that students can be provided with the space to share their thoughts, engage with their fears, and explicitly and openly acknowledge that this is not a sense of 'normal' that they are experiencing.

Considering the time and effort it took for me to comment on individual students' responses for the weekly activities, I recommend going forward that students are put into small groups. They can then discuss responses, and a group representative can liaise with me on the group response.

CONCLUSION

As much as initiatives from the lecturer can provide a social network for students, it is vital to acknowledge that none of the strategies presented here is meant to be a form of counselling. Most lecturers are not likely to have professional expertise in the area of counselling; any students who are identified as in need of this support should be referred to the relevant authorities. This study recognizes that the teaching space should be seen as a place to facilitate and nurture learning development rather than a space to try to catch up on the curriculum based on omissions that may have occurred in previous schooling years. Connecting with the students emotionally and socially can enable them to engage with concerns around their cognitive development and challenges.

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