

Pandemic experiences of teaching academics are critically important as universities move towards their 'new normal'



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As our vaccination rates in Australia reach levels sufficient to begin a slow reopening of businesses and borders, the higher education sector too is readying itself to emerge from the most intense upheaval of the century. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a strong disruptive impact on Australian universities, resulting in a range of concerns from the sector, around mass job losses, the decrease in international students, and the drop in student satisfaction owing to the challenges of keeping students engaged online.

Despite these negative impacts, many commentators have remarked that this time of intense disruption has been a catalyst for the [transformation of the sector](#).

As universities prepare to enter a new phase, it is important to understand the rationale behind those predictions and to explore on-the-ground changes that might represent such a transformation.

Universities are complex

We know that universities are complex organisations, with multiple faculties, departments and units that operate according to different priorities and processes and are often moving in different directions from different starting points.

We also know that trying to achieve organisation-wide change in universities is difficult given these multiple perspectives, and may be particularly difficult – and possibly met with resistance – when enacted from a top-down or [management-directed approach](#).

However, if we apply some systems thinking to the ways in which we describe change processes, we can start to see how these changes might be enacted.

For example, in complex systems, changes to the overall state of that system, what might be described as transformative change, is often preceded by disruption that destabilises the system. As a strong disruptive force that is external to the university system, COVID-19 has the potential to bring about the transformative change to which the system might otherwise be resistant.

In order to better understand the effects of the external disruption of COVID-19 on university teaching and learning, our research seeks to define [both the magnitude of the changes](#) that our academics have managed to achieve across our University, but also how these academics [have experienced this disruptive phase](#).

Insights from this work will help us understand how university teaching and learning has changed and the potential for this change to be sustainable. They will also help further articulate the practices and experiences of teaching academics and highlight how they might be better supported as universities head out of crisis mode and into what some have called a [‘new normal’](#).

How are academics experiencing the COVID-19 disruption?

Our project examines the ways in which teaching academics approach their teaching and respond to the challenges of COVID-19. A [large body of evidence](#) from educational research shows clear relationships between the ways in which teachers experience their working environment and the ways in which they approach their teaching, with the ways in which students approach their learning, and their eventual learning outcomes (see Fig. 1).

This model provides an informative framework for exploring how academics are experiencing the COVID-19 disruption.

Our expectation was that COVID-19 would affect all aspects of academics’ teaching experiences. But we are especially interested in how these effects varied across academics’ experiences, and their potential to be retained over the longer term.

We interviewed a selected cohort of teaching academics already involved in curriculum projects at our University, to further explore their experiences during the initial crisis of 2020 and into early 2021.

These are academics who were already implementing creative changes to their curriculum, who were well-versed in reflective practice, and who were, in many cases, at the forefront of guiding their courses and students through the disruption of the pandemic.

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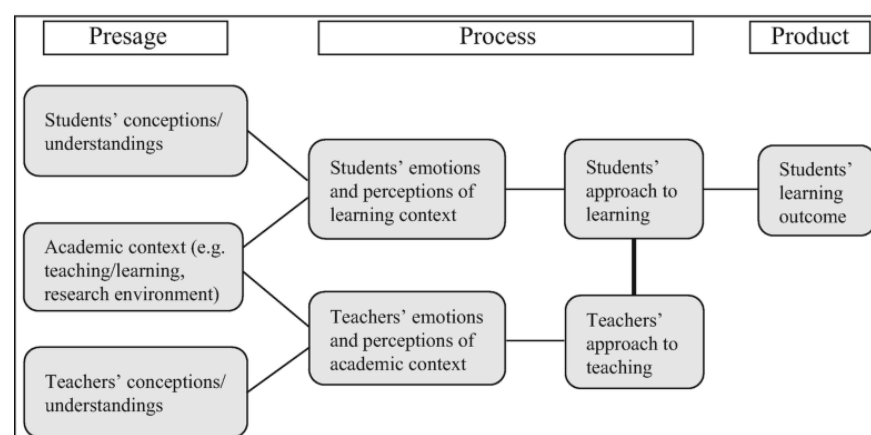


Figure 1: Relational 3P (presage-process-product) teaching-learning model.

Source: Adapted from Trigwell et al., 1999, p. 60); Trigwell K., Prosser M. (2020) Exploring Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. In: *Exploring University Teaching and Learning*. Palgrave Pivot.

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Teaching approaches in a crisis

Early findings from our research emphasise three main areas in which the pandemic has impacted on teaching academics' experiences: in their (1) approaches to teaching; (2) perceptions of support from peers, departments or the university, and (3) perceptions of their own role, their job security, and their identity as academics.

Participants' teaching approaches were often necessarily focused on overcoming the challenges of the demands of technology and on their own performances as teachers.

Many also expressed concerns for their students' learning and wellbeing and the challenge of engaging and supporting students in a format that was often unfamiliar.

Challenges, but also opportunities

Although participants showed a range of responses to the increased challenges of the pandemic, a consistent impact was a significant increase in their workload as they [moved their teaching online](#). Others reported reduced resources available to their subjects, including a reduction in tutors. Driven by the significant job losses in [casual and sessional staff](#), this resulted in the remaining academic staff having to take on more teaching.

The precarity of academic work also affected participants themselves, with many experiencing delays in contracts or uncertainties as to whether their contracts would be renewed.

Whilst these experiences were challenging and distressing, many participants reported the emergence of new opportunities in their teaching, including an increased appreciation for their skills.

For example, those who were already well-versed in designing and teaching online curriculum found they were called upon by colleagues to provide advice and assistance, which for some led to new roles and responsibilities. Others reported the formation of peer learning communities during the pandemic, which provided key sources of support.

These latter findings – of the emergence of supportive learning communities from the pressures of an external disruption – are in line with those predicted from complexity thinking. They also highlight the need for universities to recognise the work that teaching academics are doing on the ground – right now – to improve not only the learning experiences of their students, but the experiences of their peers.

Any definition of a 'new normal' for universities' teaching and learning practices therefore needs to incorporate support for these activities and an understanding of the range of challenges that teaching academics face.

The next phase

The disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the academic environment, necessitated the adoption of new and often unfamiliar teaching practices, and [profoundly impacted academics' wellbeing](#). The efforts of

academic staff to provide engaging and supportive learning experiences for their students – in the face of increasing workloads, job insecurity and personal pressures – have been immense.

Although the pandemic may have provided some [opportunities for teaching innovation](#), these innovations [have not been universal](#) and our research findings suggest they cannot be achieved without a supportive academic environment.

As universities plan to rebound from the crisis phase of the pandemic and [enter a new, rebuilding phase](#), universities need to understand that the effects on academics may be diverse, reflecting the [divergent experiences and perceptions](#) of academics across the complexity of the university. They also need to recognise and embrace the ground-up formation of [communities of practice amongst academics](#). Changes emanating from these communities may well be more informative for longer-term curriculum transformation, and [more sustainable](#) than changes initiated from the top down.

Campuses are planning to welcome students back on campus, and plans are afoot to [bring international students back to our shores](#). How the sector rebounds from the upheavals of 2020 and 2021 will depend in part on how those on the ground respond, and how they are supported by their institutions. ◆

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