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Disruption as a Catalyst for Change? Effects of COVID-19 on the Perceptions and Approaches of Academics in Their Teaching

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Abstract:

Disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many university teachers to adopt new, often unfamiliar practices. We present results from complementary phenomenographic and thematic inquiry into how teachers experience and perceive this disruption, using the relational 3P model as a framework. Semi-structured interviews with academics conducted during the disruptive period (early 2021: complete) and over the longer term (late 2021 and mid-2022: planned) are examined. Employing a phenomenographic approach, we defined three dimensions of variation in perceptions and experiences: (a) teaching and learning; (b) institutional support, and (c) academic identity. Thematic analysis identified additional issues that influence how academics approach their teaching. A key emerging finding is that perceptions of support may mediate how the disruption affects academics' teaching approaches and their academic identity. Using complementary analytical approaches will allow us to build on emerging findings to design investigations into the longer-term effects of this disruption.

Paper:

Introduction

The disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the academic environment and necessitated the adoption by teaching academics of new and often unfamiliar practices. Our project in progress addresses the critical need to better understand how teaching academics are experiencing and responding to these challenges.

Change processes in higher education are typically internal, driven by management and top-down forces, and are not always successful or sustained (Trowler et al. 2002; Blackmore and Kandiko 2012). True transformational systemic change is often preceded by a destabilising disruptive force, yet such change cannot usually be planned (Fenwick et al. 2011). The pandemic therefore provides a unique opportunity to examine the impact of a strong external disruption on higher education systems, from which transformational change might emerge.

Using the relational 3P model (Trigwell and Prosser 2020) as a guiding framework, we examine academics' teaching context, their perceptions of this context and their role, and any resulting changes in their approaches to teaching and curriculum in response to the disruption. Both phenomenographic and thematic analyses are used to describe the experiences of individuals within the study cohort. We suggest these findings may be representative of the broader experiences of teaching academics.

Methods Participants were recruited from a cohort of teaching academics involved in curriculum change projects, across a range of disciplines and academic roles (Table 1). The first round of semi-structured interviews was completed in Feb-Mar 2021, with open-ended questions structured around key themes relating to academics' context, their perceptions of their role in a changing context, and the changes in their approaches to teaching and learning.

Using a phenomenographic approach, we defined dimensions of variation and categories within each dimension through iterative examination of interview transcripts, extraction of indicative quotes and validation through consensus across the research team. Thematic analysis identified further emerging themes within transcripts.

Early findings Phenomenographic analysis defined three dimensions of variation, describing academics' perceptions and experiences of: (a) teaching and learning; (b) nature and extent of support, and (c) their academic identity. Detailed examination of the teaching and learning dimension defined four categories describing a focus on: (i) technology; (ii) the teacher; (iii) student wellbeing, and (iv) student learning. Teachers commonly show approaches that are either teacher- or student-focused (Prosser and Trigwell 2014) and as such we anticipated individual transcripts to be skewed towards *either* a technology/teacher focus *or* a student learning/wellbeing focus. However, whilst five participants showed a technology/teacher focus, and six a student learning/wellbeing focus, eight showed a mixed focus across the categories (Table 2). Although previous research has argued that a mixed approach may indicate an incoherence (Prosser et al. 2003), we suggest the disruption may have brought about varied approaches due to the need to be adaptive to rapid change. Further analysis suggests that those teaching academics who perceived they experienced adequate support were more likely to show coherence in their approaches to teaching, were more positive about their experiences during the disruption, and were more positive about their academic identity. This analysis also suggests academics' perceptions and experiences of support can influence how the impact of COVID is perceived.

Thematic analysis extends these insights, revealing that the pandemic brought about changes in attitudes and approaches to lecturing and to assessment. Factors such as increases in teaching workloads, reductions in resources, the challenges of maintaining a life/work balance and the growth of precarious work caused shifts in roles and impacted upon academic identity. However, our analysis highlights the diversity of experiences, showing that while for many the pandemic produced fatigue and concerns of the wellbeing of both students and staff, for others there were positive job opportunities as well as the capacity to initiate and advance innovations in teaching and learning.

Implications and future work

This research will advance our understanding the global impact of COVID-19 on the higher education sector by providing in-depth analysis of the varied responses of teaching academics to the disruption and illuminate the potential for transformational change to emerge. While a phenomenographic approach elucidates the relationships between the academic context, academics’ experiences of that context, and their approaches to teaching and curriculum during a time of intense upheaval, a complementary thematic analysis draws out the impact of the pandemic on academics’ work and identity. This dual approach will inform a longitudinal study that aims to investigate whether changes in approaches to teaching and curriculum are sustained and examine the long-term impact of the disruption on academic identity.

References:

References

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Table 1. Descriptive demographics of participants recruited to the study.

	Discipline				
Academic role	Business or Law	Humanities and Social Sciences	Health Sciences	Science	Engineering
Teaching Specialist	2	3	3	4	2

Teaching and Research	1	1	1	4	-
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Table 2. Teaching and learning focal categories across the participant cohort, according to the academic role of participants.

Academic role	Teacher and/or Technology	Student learning and/or wellbeing	Mixed focus
Teaching specialist	2	3	5
Teaching and research	3	3	3