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Learning development in a time of disruption

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Presentation abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic had (and continues to have) a significant worldwide impact on higher education (Watermeyer et al., 2021; Sharaievska et al., 2022). How Learning Development responded to this challenge varied considerably across the sector.

Many of the challenges and solutions for Learning Development are represented in the Compendium of Innovative Practice: Learning Development in a Time of Disruption, a special issue of the Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (*JLDHE*, 2021). The Compendium issue of *JLDHE* contained 102 peer-reviewed reflections, identifying numerous challenges and responses to teaching in Covid-19.

This conference paper will share the findings of a research project that has systematically analysed all 102 contributions to the compendium. Each reflection was analysed using structural, topic and thematic coding to identify common responses and challenges to pandemic teaching.

The findings of this study have identified a range of individual and shared challenges for both students and third space professionals. One of the core findings relates to the diversity of responses that have been designed to meet these challenges, with over 100 distinct pedagogic and technical solutions to pandemic teaching. From these, five core themes have emerged: emergency remote teaching, reflective practice and evaluation, pedagogy and technology support, collaboration and shared practice, and course design for the long-term.

This paper will reflect on implications for future practice in times of disruption and provide delegates with the opportunity to consider how it relates to their institutions.

Keywords: higher education; covid-19; learning development; learning spaces; adapting to online teaching.

Community response

The impact of Covid-19 has had long-lasting global ramifications on education (Image 1). In response, students (see, for instance, McGivern and Shepherd, 2022), academics, and colleagues working at all levels of education, including HE, had to very quickly adapt and find new ways of working. The impact was profound and evident in the innovative ways educators and students responded to these challenges.

Image 1. Presenter's slide: Covid-19 had a significant, global, impact on access to education.
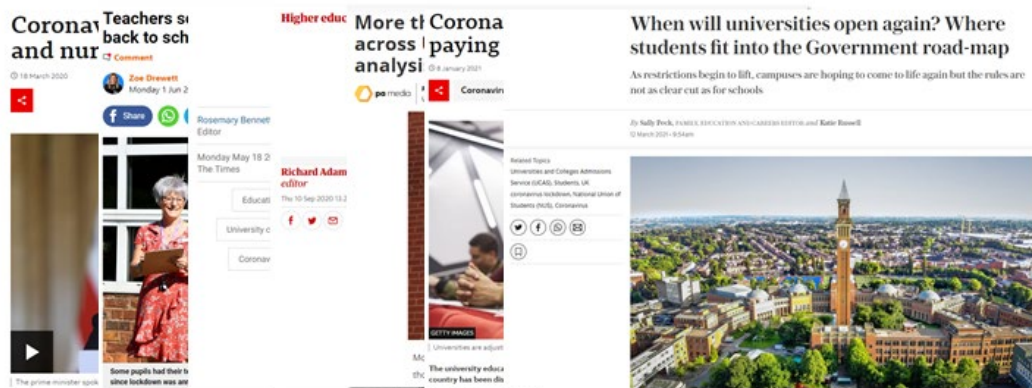
In his painstaking analysis, presented in this paper, Lee conducted a meta-analysis of the LD community response to the pandemic, initially catalogued in the No. 22 Special Issue of *JLDHE* (Image 2). The 102 peer-reviewed reflections were analysed to explore the impact of Covid-19 on LDs, as third-space professionals. Challenges identified by the community were broad and overlapped with those simultaneously experienced by students (Image 3).

Image 2. Presenter's slide: The *Journal for Learning Development in HE* published 102-peer reviewed reflections on pandemic practice.

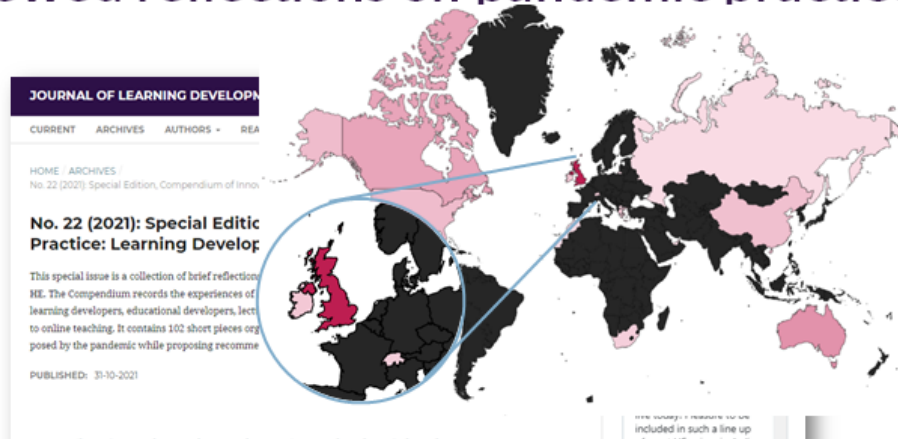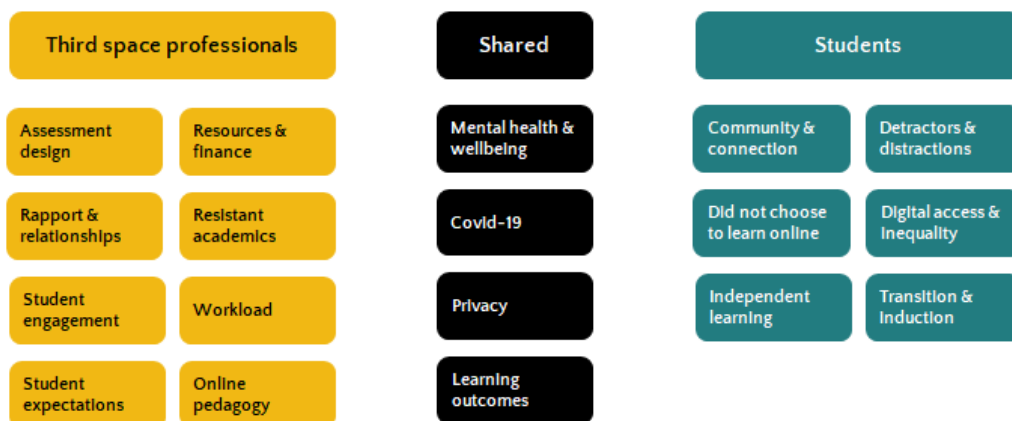**Image 3. Presenter's slide: The analysis identified distinct and shared challenges for students and third space professionals.**

To deal with these challenges, the LD community, ever-resourceful, responded rapidly with fundamental changes to teaching and learning practices. Lee's analysis categorised these responses under five key themes: emergency remote teaching, reflective practice and

evaluation, course design for the long-term, collaboration and shared practice, and pedagogy and technology support (Image 4).

Image 4. Presenter's slide: Five overarching themes were identified.

Five overarching themes were identified:

Emergency remote teaching	**Reflective practice & evaluation**	**Course design for the long-term**	**Collaboration & shared practice**	**Pedagogy & technology support**
Short-term changes to curriculum & assessment in response to lockdowns and other Covid-19 regulations.	The pivot to new teaching methods & assessment strategies requires constant evaluation & reflection	Redesigning beyond the emergency to facilitate more blended, flexible and hybrid approaches to teaching.	Emphasis on Covid-19 as an international, sector-wide problem & that shared practice could help.	Specialist support from third space professionals was essential to support teaching staff technically & pedagogically.

Of the themes raised in Lee's paper, one participant was particularly struck by the notion of the pandemic having drastic impact on our reflective and reflexive practice:

> From the five key themes identified by Lee, for me the most interesting one was the idea that the experience of the pandemic has encouraged, or maybe forced us all to be more reflective and reflexive in our practice. I hadn't really thought about the experience in those terms, but in hindsight, it seems clear that such a major upheaval demanded deep reflection and creative solutions to meet the needs of students who were at times deeply unhappy and vocal about their challenges with the learning experience. I wonder whether this enhanced reflective practice is most strongly present in Learning Development, or is identifiable across the sector. Are we seeing an improved quality of learning experience for students in consequence, or are we just about keeping pace with the new normal? In terms of my own practice, this session has made me think about how to build more on that experience and the narrative of reflexivity in supporting academics going forward, so thank you very much Lee. (Catherine Turton, Solent University).

Colleagues present were heartened, enthused, and reinvigorated by the findings. This enthusiasm was encapsulated in Ian's response:

> Lee, so much credit for attempting such a big and mind-blowing meta-analysis. I especially like your finding that it is not so much the technology itself, as how everything in the bigger picture was re-designed, that was what people wrote about. The technology became a bit all-consuming at the start of the pandemic, especially for those of us who had to learn a lot of it fast – but I think it is really important to (as you have done) get past that phase of thinking about the 'emergency response' flip to tech, and into how it has reshaped the landscape post-pandemic. I think these are all things that would have happened eventually anyway, but the pandemic put them all on speed. (Ian Johnson, University of Portsmouth).

Next steps and additional questions

Lee's meta-analysis presents a rich and nuanced overview of how we as a Learning Development community collectively responded under incredibly difficult circumstances. It will be interesting to see how this analysis might be developed further. Indeed, Lee is interested in potentially pursuing research into the impact of lockdown learning on spaces for teaching and learning.

Next steps for our community are perhaps best summarised by this response from Sandra and Tom:

> What an amazing project! Congratulations on thinking of doing this project Lee – and then for putting all that outstanding and impactful hard work into your analysis. This is definitely something thought-provoking and publishable in its own right.

> And perhaps – a #Take5 blog on it – like your inspirational one on AI and LD: #Take 5 #82 – What does AI mean for Learning Development? It makes us think of all those other Special Issue journal editions and edited books out there that are also ripe for this sort of meta-analysis. (Sandra Sinfield and Tom Burns at London Metropolitan University).

Thanks Lee, for undertaking such a huge scale and important project which will have demonstrable impact on how we as an LD community think about and approach our future practice. This will also be a very fruitful starting point for discussions about how the LD community can continue to act together reflexively to gain further insight into new ways of working and being in a post-pandemic world.

Questions for the LD community:

- What key takeaways have you gleaned from Lee's analysis?
- Do you agree that our 'enhanced reflective practice' in response to the pandemic 'is most strongly present in LD' or have you seen this more widely across the HE sector?
- How might new ways of working as identified in this meta-analysis be galvanised by the LD community to manage potential future 'threats' and societal upheavals?
- What Special Issues of the JLDHE do you think might be 'ripe for this sort of meta-analysis'? For example, the most recent Special Edition, No. 26, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion could be a very interesting one for undertaking this form of meta-analysis.

Author's reflection

It felt really good to share the findings of this research which originated as part of my Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice research (see Fallin, 2023). It was, however, a much more significant undertaking that I realised. When I planned this project out and submitted ethics, I thought my analysis would be over in a month. It took me at least three months – nearly four! I really appreciated the acknowledgement of my work from attendees, especially Ian, Sandra and Tom for your kind words above. It really was a LOT of work.

Image 5. Presenter's slide: Relationship between 'real' and virtual (Soja, 1996; Lefebvre, 1991, 2013; Kosari and Amoori, 2018; Fallin 2020).
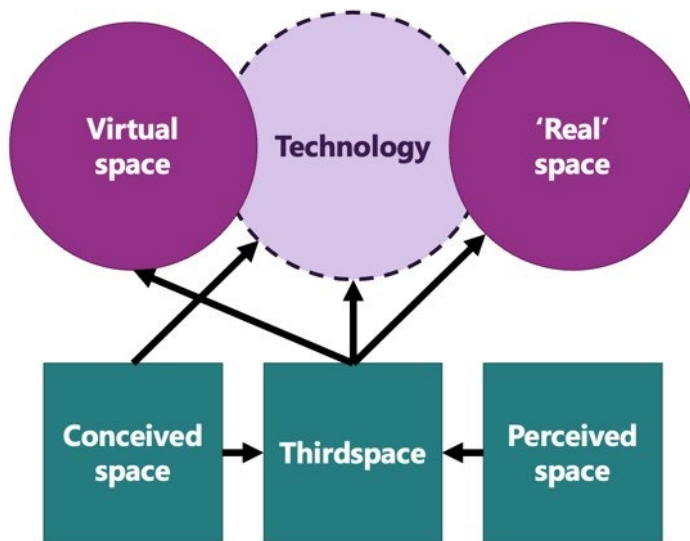
(Fallin, 2020; Soja, 1996; Lefebvre, 2013, 1999; Korsari & Amoori, 2018)

One thing that surprised me the most was how well the findings linked in with the theoretical framework from my thesis (Fallin, 2020). The pandemic changed the way people experienced both virtual and 'real' spaces. The difference in this research was that technology was the facilitator of it all. The 'real' spaces became bedrooms, kitchens and gardens – while the virtual spaces become the route through which we all connected across disparate spaces. It also made me revisit my reading of Levebfre (2013) and Soja (1996) – specifically thinking about the role of power. The more I reflect on the research and the conference session, the more I recognise the power imbalances. For all there were significant and emerging themes across the institutions represented in the *JLDHE* special issue, Educational Technology (or EdTech) played a significant role. As I said in the session, I wonder who had more control over learning in the pandemic – students, educators or the technology firms that build and define services. The more I reflect on this, the more I believe technology providers had a bigger stake in the experience than universities and members of our communities. It was particularly interesting to see Ian's reflection on how technology became 'all consuming' at the start of the pandemic, further demonstrating the significant role of technology.

I particularly appreciated Catherine's contribution, acknowledging the significance of reflective practice. It almost feels poetic given this proceeding is a collective effort: 'I wonder whether this enhanced reflective practice is most strongly present in Learning Development, or is identifiable across the sector'.

I quite like the idea of 'enhanced reflective practice' and wonder how we can encapsulate that? The *JLDHE* (2021) Special Edition felt like a unique way to capture the learning from this significant moment in time. It makes me wonder if this endeavour should be repeated in the future? While these proceedings capture one form of reflective practice, the compendium felt different – distinct. I'd certainly love the opportunity to analyse something similar in the future.

Acknowledgments

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Author details

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