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Network Recovery: Maximising the Educational Experience after Crisis Mode

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Various studies have focused on the impact of Covid-19 on teaching and learning. In *Wellbeing and Resilience Education: Covid-19 and its Impact on Education*, Mathew White and Faye McCallum consider the question of whether Covid-19 has been an education catalyst or crisis (White & McCallum, 2021). And now, 18 months after South Australian education institutions first dove into uncharted territory in response to the pandemic, lockdown, and the switch to online learning, we are closer to finding the answer to this question. For many institutions, however, the problem at the time was challenging, as executive, administration and teaching staff had to navigate how they might get on with the job.

White and McCallum acknowledge that wellbeing programs in places of education are critical for workforce planning and whole-school improvement (White & McCallum, p. 6). And while wellbeing theory was not developed in response to Covid-19, having been a focus of teaching and learning research for more than a decade (White & McCallum, p.6), it did become magnified as the risk of decreasing levels of wellbeing and resilience, caused primarily by isolation during the pandemic, rapidly became a reality.

Such was the case at Adelaide Central School of Art (ACSA), as around 200 students at the institution were faced with the prospect of online learning. As an independent Higher Education Provider, unlike its competitor institutions, the School simply had no precedent for this mode of delivery. How was ACSA to successfully implement change in course delivery whilst navigating in crisis mode, and how could it maintain wellbeing and embed resilience catalytically, to maximise the educational experiences for students and staff both during and on the other side of the crisis? These questions are considered throughout this paper.

It can be useful to chart the series of events using a timeline (Fig. 1). In March of 2020, Adelaide schools and tertiary institutions went into lockdown with stringent

restrictions. For ACSA, this meant an eight week term – that is, the second half of Semester 1 – engaged in online learning (20 April to 26 June). Due to the foresight of the academic executive in suspending the final two and a half weeks of Term 1, beginning 18 March, including classes and the assessment tasks associated with those classes, there was a reduction in the immediate pressure on teaching staff. This period of time, along with a two week mid-semester break that followed, provided teaching staff with four and a half weeks to prepare for Term 2. The switch to online delivery was then implemented school-wide, with the exception of some honours classes where two units were able to maintain partial access to campus, given the low number of students enrolled.

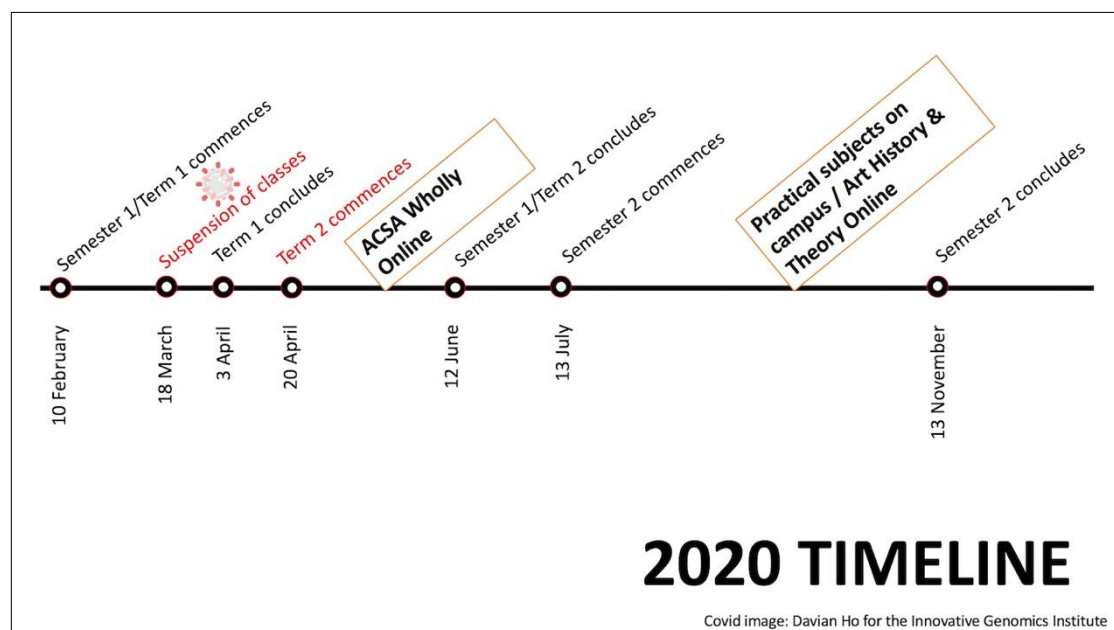


Figure 1: Timeline of online learning at Adelaide Central School of Art during 2020, courtesy of the author.

As an art school, pre-Covid-19, the teaching model was wholly face-to-face in all units across the Bachelor of Visual Art, Associate Degree of Visual Art, and Bachelor of Visual Art (Honours). The challenges of delivering sculpture, painting and drawing – all typically hands-on, practical, studio-based subjects – online, along with all art history and theory units, were significant.

Despite the seemingly rushed nature of rolling out online delivery, four and a half weeks was long enough for teaching staff to catch their breath. A significant amount of time was spent upskilling in using an online learning management system; tweaking the curriculum timeline, given the suspension of classes at the six-week

mark of term; and figuring out best practice pedagogy for online teaching and learning when classes resumed in their new format.

But what did this mean for staff and students who found themselves physically teaching and learning on their own, distanced from one another? Were they at risk of hyper-individualism? If hyper-individualism is interpreted as the 'behaviour characterised by the pursuits of one's own goals without reference to others', excessively or beyond an ordinary degree (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2020), then potentially, yes: staff and students were unable to meet and interact on campus, excluded physically to their individual zones.

Zachary A. Casey's definition sees hyper-individualism as the tendency, in a liberal individualist society, for social actors to understand themselves as disparate entities rather than primarily as members of collectives or groups, who find reinforcement in their individuality to the extent that social categories lose any and all meaning (Casey, 2020, p. 279). Casey goes on to describe hyper-individualism as a situation in which all members of a society are independent social agents, independently responsible for their social location and social realities (Casey, p. 279). Given that staff and students were aware of the immediacy of imposed changes to the social dynamic of ACSA, combined with the four and a half week break and isolation from the School's network, and the anticipation of an additional eight weeks of online teaching and learning that was to follow, the risk of hyper-individualism was high. Its associated negative outcomes, such as a lack of engagement and social disconnectedness, were a red flag, with the potential to undermine the wellbeing of ACSA's community.

ACSA's choice of learning management system was critical in addressing this concern. The School subscribed to the OpenLearning platform, the objective of which is to provide a social and engaging experience, prioritising collaboration and community for learners (OpenLearning, 2022). The intelligent software, when matched with ACSA's values, was a clever decision well suited to its purpose (Adelaide Central School of Art, 2021). Not only did the OpenLearning software facilitate online teaching and learning, but it allowed ACSA to establish and maintain online a strong social network, somewhat resembling that experienced on campus.

ACSA used the format of the OpenLearning platform advantageously for teaching by recording lectures and demonstrations and uploading these into organised folders,

along with additional audio-visual and text-based resources. Attendance at a weekly Zoom class was compulsory and students were encouraged to be available on both video and microphone during this class. Anticipating that access to OpenLearning and the virtual Zoom classroom could be challenging for some students, workstations were erected on campus where one or two students could attend at a time, in line with government restrictions. For those without technology at home, this option enabled all students to have access to class. One of the useful features of OpenLearning is the way discussion is configured as a forum, designed to build student interaction as an alternative to traditional topic-led conversations that would naturally occur in class. Across all subjects, whether in response to the teaching resources, class instructions, or posed reflective questions, students were highly engaged in this function of the learning management system.

Teachers were explicit in directing students to one another's forum posts to not only comment but also generate conversations online. These were organised by threads and organically embedded a sense of community into classes, despite the physical separations experienced by both staff and students. This in turn contributed to students feeling connected to one another (as noted in student feedback) and built wellbeing and resilience amongst classmates, demonstrated through their ability to overcome adversity and thus experience positive outcomes despite an aversive situation (Vella and Pai, 2019, p. 233).

Aware of various impacts of isolation, such as adjustment difficulties, stress and anxiety, ACSA put some additional supports in place alongside OpenLearning that helped students maintain connection with the School, despite the remote circumstances. The first was ongoing support from the Student Liaison Officer. Students were able to communicate with the Officer throughout the duration of online learning. Operations, facility and administrative staff were available for ongoing technical support over the course of the term and, finally, the School's Student Counsellor was available for phone consultations. Staff support was built through Zoom check-ins with leadership and peers.

Despite not being able to undertake excursions to Adelaide's eminent art institutions, as would typically occur at points throughout each unit, special guests in the way of artists and industry professionals were engaged to speak to students via Zoom or with recorded talks uploaded to the OpenLearning platform. These service and

academic supports contributed to both students and staff being able to continue to participate in ACSA's networks, maintaining community engagement in learning.

From the outset, as students were briefed on the delivery of online learning, expectations around inclusion were also set. This was established through reference to the School's Diversity, Inclusion and Equal Opportunity Policy (Adelaide Central School of Art, 2020a) as well as best practice for online interaction (Adelaide Central School of Art, 2020b). This attention to inclusive practice was deliberate, particularly intended as a means to encourage students to be self-aware as they interacted with one another and ultimately build care into both the staff and student community. Such a process also worked to reduce hyper-individualism.

The significance of this was that in terms of wellbeing, such practice contributed to a positive climate for learning. Obtained from the 2020 Student Evaluation of Learning, a few students' anecdotes express this positivity, demonstrating value in the online format:

'It was great to be able to interact with other students online and through the virtual class'

'I felt like I learned more as I could listen and read more than once. Also it was great reading everyone's posts'

'[I liked] the forum and reflection – this made for a more engaging/in depth study of the artists/art works and it was great to see/reflect on other comments too, as well as reflecting on our own arts practice'

With regard to the experience of teachers specifically, ACSA's lecturers had to revise their approach so that high impact strategies could be maintained through the change. This involved innovation and application across all subjects. In painting, staff made instructional videos and narrated slideshows that were uploaded as resources. In drawing, projects were adapted and substituted so that learning outcomes could be achieved in a student's home space. Similarly, in sculpture, new projects were established that allowed students to consider their entire homes and contents as studios. These changes had fruitful results.

Across each of these practical subjects, students were encouraged to document their work with both video and still images. All documentation, with the addition of reflection on ideas, methods and outcomes, were uploaded to the OpenLearning

platform for comment and feedback by their teachers and peers (Fig. 2). This process was complemented by the Zoom sessions, where students were introduced to the weekly topics and tasks, and were able to critique uploaded content, have lectures presented, and discuss content and resources.

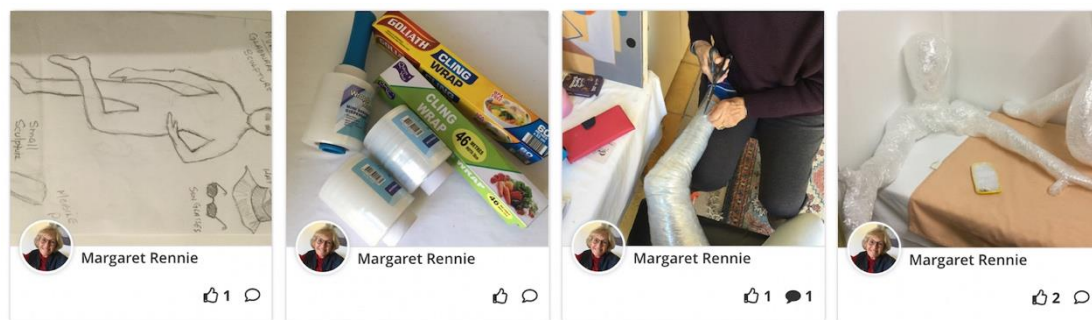


Figure 2: Project documentation uploaded to online class, Adelaide Central School of Art, 2020, courtesy Margaret Rennie (student).

In the second semester of 2020, the delivery of practical subjects returned to campus. The easing of some restrictions meant that low numbers of students in studios could be accommodated; however, this meant that teaching in multiple spaces was required. The impact of this was that delivery of Art History and Theory from first year studies through to honours had to remain online. Staff were confident that this dual split of course delivery would retain all the positive features and outcomes of Term 2, yet offer enhanced experiences of wellbeing for students as they returned primarily to face-to-face learning. While OpenLearning continued as the main space for Art History and Theory, for the practical subjects the platform became more of a resource repository, a digital space that pre-Covid-19 had never been utilised.

With the release of the 2020 results of the QILT Student Experience Survey, ACSA polled extremely well, coming in at number one in Australia for overall student educational experience for undergraduates studying creative arts; number one in South Australia for overall student educational experience for undergraduates of all courses; and, in a national context, second across both Australian Universities and Non-University Higher Education Institutions for undergraduate student experience (Adelaide Central School of Art, 2021). Across all areas measured for learning experience, including Skills Development, Learner Engagement, Teaching Quality, Student Support, Learning Resources and quality of entire educational experience, from 2019 data to 2020 data, ACSA's ratings rose (Quality Indicators for Teaching

and Learning, 2021). This improvement, which is an affirmation for the School, generates questions around whether both online delivery and the dual split delivery were critical factors in the success measured through the survey.

As planning for 2021 got underway, it was time to consider how the success encountered through a response to crisis could be maximised as the School shifted into a post-crisis period, or a period of recovery. The pandemic had forced change on the School but there was a continuing opportunity to use that imposed change as a catalyst for consolidating what it had learned through the experience. It was also important at this stage to reflect on the challenges that the new learning management system had prompted, notably the additional pressure on administrative staff with regard to its implementation and the ongoing support required. Consequently, an effective induction process for teaching staff was established so that they could self-manage the upload and presentation of content.

One aspect reinforced to staff was that strong pedagogical practice has the capacity to combat the risks associated with hyper-individualism, contributing to wellbeing and resilience regardless of educational setting. This starts with professional leadership from the top down, community engagement in learning, a positive climate for learning, and excellence in teaching and learning (see Department of Education and Training, 2020). Through funnelling these elements into the parameters set by Covid-19 in crisis mode, staff honed their abilities to build collectivity, social meaning and feelings of togetherness that manifested as genuine care for the wellbeing of students. As practical based subjects returned to their usual studios without space restrictions, and Art History and Theory was also welcomed back to campus, this recognised dimension of teaching and learning was applied at a macro level.

Finally, though the incorporation of an online learning management system was a necessity during crisis mode, this really did revolutionise aspects of the pedagogical model, simultaneously highlighting ACSA's flexibility and adaptability and its own institutional resilience, whilst circumventing hyper-individualism. Continued use of OpenLearning throughout 2021, though to a much lesser extent, has allowed staff at ACSA to centralise resources, be more targeted in how those resources are used, and ultimately to expand students' capacity to reach success in their respective courses. With unimpeded access to campus reinstated, OpenLearning has remained a complementary teaching resource as the network of students and staff, individuals and community, has recovered. More than just a safety net for curriculum delivery

through this period of recovery, it has been part of a process contributing to students' overall achievement and factoring into their feeling good and functioning effectively (Huppert and So, 2013). This general sense of wellbeing at ACSA, despite the pandemic, remains discernible.

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