Supporting the transition to remote learning following the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Higher education has a rich history of championing blended and online learning but the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic required quick action to enable programmes to move to remote delivery – almost overnight. Following this initial shift and with a new session on the horizon, academics and professional services staff prepared for the biggest challenge facing universities in more than a generation. This paper shares two models created out of the process of supporting this transition at a Scottish university, which can be applied to any academic discipline. The first model provides a route and process for shifting degree course components (i.e. courses or modules) to remote learning and teaching, which can also be used to provide consistency across a degree programme to enhance the student experience. The second model was inspired by a cycle used in professional media practice and was adapted to encourage active learning to be embedded at the grassroots of the curriculum and in every teaching and learning event. This paper outlines the various stages of each of these two processes that were developed to support the transition of delivery of courses, which mainly had an on-campus first approach (with varying elements of blended learning), to one that features pedagogical innovation at its forefront and are now set to remain permanently in the curricula. It will also demonstrate how the process of revamping teaching and learning due to short-term necessity provided an opportunity to revisit various aspects of academic practice including: active learning; establishing effective communication channels; community building; managing students' expectations; and retaining jewels of the curriculum.

Keywords: blended learning, remote learning, curriculum development, active learning, communication

Introduction

In the past decade or so, higher education institutions have gradually shifted from traditional approaches of education to more engaged and active learning. "The pedagogical changes ushered in by new student-centred models as well as new digital technologies, inclusive pedagogy, global networks, and ubiquitous information access have changed not only *what* needs to be taught but *how* best to teach" (Kim & Maloney, 2020, p. 4). Prior to the pandemic, blended learning was already so fully embedded into universities' offerings, and technology into all areas of our lives generally, that it was predicted by Stein and Graham (2020, p.9) that "education will eventually abandon the term *blended*". However, the spread of COVID-19 from early 2020 onwards caused massive disruption to all areas of everyone's lives globally, and in a way that had not occurred for the majority of people within living memory. Higher education institutions were facing difficult decisions about how to continue with teaching and learning, while keeping their staff and students safe at a time when there was a lack of understanding about the virus causing a massive public health crisis. Given the existing use of blended and active learning in colleges and universities, higher education did have a firm foundation to build on when compared to other areas of education, such as statutory education in schools etc., but it still required a shift in delivery that, in some cases, needed to happen overnight. Three approaches to making the transition were identified globally by Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust and Bond (2020), which were: maintaining in-class teaching with social distancing; creating hybrid models (blended learning, limitation of students in campus); or moving to online instruction. In the United Kingdom (UK), universities had to move their teaching, learning and assessment, to remote delivery in March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced a lockdown across society in all four nations of the UK.

At the University of Glasgow (UofG), as was common in many universities, efforts were put in place centrally and locally in schools and colleges, to support academic staff to move teaching and learning to be delivered remotely and on March 24 the campus closed. Initially much of this shift involved curating and updating existing resources into one place for ease of access and circulation, as well as creating resources to support new challenges, such as online assessment – given the time in the academic year that the crisis took hold. Following on from the end of the academic session, efforts were made – again locally and centrally – to support academic colleagues to plan for remote teaching in the forthcoming academic year and in a way that was in line with teaching and learning strategies and active learning principles. This needed to be undertaken in a way that would allow for any further unknown developments, given the unprecedented nature of the situation and as the potential for future lockdowns remained unknown.

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This paper will outline the experiences of an academic developer working to support academics and professional services staff to plan for the forthcoming academic session of 2020/21 at Glasgow. The approach taken was to support colleagues in a way that could enhance approaches to teaching and learning and could be sustainable and provide resources that could be used going forward. In terms of scenario planning, the stance adopted was to advise colleagues to "prepare for the worst and hope for the best" (Pickles, 2006, p.784), which is an expression used in relation to previous guidance about pandemic planning in the UK. Out of this project, two models emerged from the process: one for moving courses, and also programmes, to remote delivery, and the second for planning teaching sessions. This paper will outline the work undertaken, explore these models and demonstrate how they can be used in any academic discipline having been used for planning the remote delivery of teaching and learning in an academic year that proved to be like no other before.

The remote learning challenge – institutional context

By late April 2020, plans were underway at an institutional level to start to think about, and move towards, design of remote learning for the forthcoming session due to physical distancing. The institutional guidance was that the over-arching principle was to be one of "active learning, which has blended learning at its core (e.g. the use of rich media for student preparation before an active problem-solving class)" (University of Glasgow, 2018; University of Glasgow, 2020a) and this was to be valid for learning in a digital environment, as well as for learning on-campus and blended learning. Blended learning being defined as the "thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, pp. 96-7).

Members of the academic development team were tasked with supporting the university's four colleges to move to remote learning, which involved subject areas identifying two courses (known as modules in some institutions) per college where close collaboration could help to provide exemplars of remote courses for wider distribution. The approach taken was in line with a research-led approach to curriculum design and with a specific focus on active learning that could support active learning in physical spaces in the future (University of Glasgow, 2018; University of Glasgow, 2020a). The criteria for these projects could be one of the following: a large undergraduate or postgraduate course; a course that had previously been delivered *traditionally*, and perhaps had not included blended learning to date; a course that was expecting new students to the University; a course with laboratory-based teaching and learning and/or practicals; a course that included performance or some kind of material objects; or any other course with potential for benefitting from the exemplar process.

The focus of this paper is the project undertaken with UofG's College of Arts (CoA), where academics welcomed support from the central academic development team, as well as working together within their own subject areas and the four schools within the college as part of the transition process to provide effective remote teaching, learning and assessment experiences for their students. The two courses chosen to serve as exemplars in CoA were both large courses (anticipated to have around 70-100 students). The first was a postgraduate taught (PGT) course (known in some institutions as a module) in *Managing and Using Collections*, which is part of the Museum Studies MSc and involved the use of objects and artefacts for teaching and also professional and practical skills and experience were key to the programme. The other course was an undergraduate degree course in Theatre Studies that had a strong performance element to it. It presented challenges in terms of providing the student experience remotely centred around having the opportunity for in-class performance and also for assessment of these skills.

Supporting the transition to remote learning in practice

In practice, the process of supporting the transition to remote delivery in the case of these two courses centred around collaboration and co-operation (Sargeant, 2016; Voogt, Pieters, & Handelzalts, 2016). The process commenced in May and ran until late August, in time for the start of the academic year. It involved a series of regular remote meetings that involved identifying subsequent steps in the form of actions and achievements, as well as the academic practitioner identifying where there was a need to bring in specialist knowledge and working to facilitate these connections, as necessary. On reflection, it can be identified that the project underwent four stages.

The first stage commenced with a considered approach to communication about the exemplar projects. It was agreed that a MS Teams channel would be created for all those working on developing each exemplar course. Going forward, the MS Team was used as a portal for: institutional guidance documents e.g. on remote and blended teaching and learning and digital accessibility, as well as for course documentation; for collating and sharing external materials and guidance, relevant to the subject specialisms e.g. QAA guidance, as well as from partner organisations. It was also used as the main platform for asynchronous communication among the team, including for provision of any updates and developments on guidance/policies/materials, as they emerged. In addition, it served as a repository for the meeting agenda and minutes in order to ensure there was an accurate record of the process. Furthermore, the channel allowed for *live* documents to be updated as the planning process for remote delivery commenced.

The second stage involved a series of regular video conference meetings facilitated by the academic developer with the teaching team and course convenors – the PGT course had a large teaching team made up of academics and professional practitioners and therefore also involved a number of sub-meetings that had a particular focus and where specific expertise from across the University was brought in e.g. this included meetings with the CoA eLearning & Innovation officer, CoA's Effective Learning Adviser from the Student Learning and Development team, as well as connecting with colleagues from the Disability & Inclusion and the

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Media and Digital Development teams. At each of the meetings, the agenda followed a set pattern that included updates and progress reports, as well as identifying next action steps. The meetings were the life-blood of the process and drove each project forward.

The third stage emerged unexpectedly out of the meetings. It became apparent there was scope for systems and processes that could be documented as a result of the experiences of these projects and could be beneficial to other courses and programmes who were transitioning to remote learning. Therefore the *Remote Learning Process* (Figure 1) and the *Cycle of Learning* (Figure 2) were developed to help support the curriculum design process, which were used to guide each of the course teams going forward.

The fourth and final stage was to gather informal feedback on the process in order that other academics could benefit from the lessons learned by those involved in the project to identify good practice, as well as any opportunities for improving the experiences of other academics who were set to commence the transition of their own courses and programmes to remote learning.

Models for reworking the curriculum for remote teaching and learning

The two models that emerged out of this project served as a roadmap for both the exemplar courses and have potential for other courses moving to remote delivery. The first of these focused on curriculum development at course level, and the second was aligned to each teaching event and maybe seen as akin to each week in the teaching schedule.

The Remote Learning Process

The first model that emerged was the *Remote Learning Process* designed to provide a route and process map for shifting degree course components (i.e. courses or modules) to remote delivery, the aim being to provide a step-by-step guide for addressing issues for consideration in taking courses from face-to-face or blended delivery to remote teaching and learning experiences. The 16-step process (Figure 1) follows a proposed chronological order, although stages can be addressed in any order suitable to each individual course or programme.

Figure 1 The Remote Learning Process

The approach taken commenced with the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs), also known as Learning Outcomes or LOs in some institutions. The rationale for starting with the learning outcomes was informed by a constructive alignment approach (Biggs,1999; Biggs & Tang, 2011), which suggests curriculum design uses "an outcomes-based approach to teaching in which the learning outcomes that students are intended to achieve are defined before teaching takes place. Teaching and assessment methods are then designed to best achieve those outcomes and to assess the standard at which they have been achieved" (Biggs, 2014, p. 397). This is also supported by Knight (2002), who suggests an assessment-led approach to course design, i.e. one that starts with ILOs, then addresses assessments before moving onto course materials and finally teaching methods.

In order to start the process, course teams were advised to examine the course documentation – usually termed a course or module descriptor or specification document – and look at the ILOs. Given that this formal paperwork is akin to the promise of

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delivery to students (Harden, 2002), ensuring accuracy was regarded as paramount. It was regarded as important to go through each learning outcome one-by-one and ensure there was nothing in the course documentation that stated the course could not be delivered through remote delivery. The language used in the learning verbs was a focus here as there was potential for issues particularly in courses that involved practical skills or performance elements. If there were challenges then it was important to identify if the course documentation needed to be revised/amended through any of the formal institutional quality assurance processes and to share what measures were available to course teams in this event.

Assessment was the second area to be focused on in the process. Again the course documentation was key, both in relation to the formative and the summative assessment approaches outlined in the documentation. It was considered crucial to ensure any assessments were still viable remotely e.g. group work or practical professional skills could be more challenging to assess remotely. There was also wider concern in the institution about high stakes assessment and academic staff were encouraged to reduce and remove unseen time-constrained assessments including face-to-face invigilated exams (Sambell & Brown, 2020). In terms of formative assessments, academics were also tasked with identifying any challenges when it came to students engaging remotely and it was made clear it was not to be a case of scrapping these altogether, but of identifying viable alternative approaches as formative assessment has long been proved to be fundamental to students' learning (Race, 2019).

The third stage of the process addressed the level of study that the students were at, including whether courses were undergraduate or postgraduate level. Sector guidance on quality sets an expectation that the more advanced students are, the more advanced their independent learning skills should be (QAA, 2018). Also, students new to an institution – no matter the level of study – will not necessarily be familiar with its processes or of the expectations of the programme and this should be factored in, especially given the lack of opportunities to be on campus. It was suggested that it would be beneficial to provide extra guidance at induction.

The fourth step in the process focused on identifying all members of the teaching team to be involved in the delivery of the course remotely and to identify if it offered fresh possibilities for co-operation and collaboration in the curriculum design process. Discussions on course design are often led by course convenor(s) but other academics may also be involved, as well as Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), lab demonstrators and/or tutors. It was suggested that it was worth considering different expertise within the teaching team, as well as how roles undertaken during face-to-face delivery may need to be altered during remote delivery. Furthermore, it also provided an opportunity for students to be involved in co-creating courses –an area of teaching and learning practice where there has been rising interest in the past few years with students being seen as partners in the curriculum design process (Bovill, 2020).

The fifth stage of the process emerged out of the discussions with the academics from the exemplar teams. They were keen to protect what they described as their *unique selling points* or (USPs) of their courses when it came to moving to remote delivery. This may be seen as akin to the 'jewels in the curriculum' identified by Cousin (2006) in that they allow for rich and complex insights into a particular subject area or specialism. It is an approach to curriculum design that is in line with the idea of 'threshold concepts' (Meyer & Land, 2003; Land, Cousin, Meyer & Davies, 2005; Meyer, Land & Davies, 2006) in that certain concepts are regarded as central to the mastery of a particular subject. Of course, this *special* knowledge, skills or experience may also be impacted by the expertise or research interests of those who deliver the curriculum, as well as being influenced by requirements of professional, regulatory or accreditation bodies – all of these need to be considered in the transition to remote delivery.

Teaching teams were also encouraged to consider harnessing any existing good practice in their subject areas as part of this process of review. This was to be seen as an opportunity for enhancement and course teams were encouraged to reflect upon any formal and informal evaluations of this and other courses in their subject area as part of this process.

Although the circumstances that had prompted the institutional transition to remote learning had occurred due to circumstances beyond any institution's control, academic staff were encouraged to embrace the remote learning journey and to specifically identify both the challenges and opportunities that the modifications were set to generate. Possible areas that emerged were: practicalities of delivery; undertaking assessment; accessibility and inclusion. Once identified, it would allow for any challenges to be addressed in a focused way in order that they could be addressed as opportunities for curriculum enhancement.

The following two stages involved a focus on the practical delivery of the course. Again, it was important to refer to the course specification documentation and look at the breakdown of the types of teaching used e.g. lectures, seminars, tutorials, labs, workshops or other practical classes. The challenge at this point was to consider how these might be delivered online, with the key being not to take a 'shovelware' approach (Deuze & Dimoudi, 2002; Morrison & Anglin, 2006) and simply recreate the content of these sessions by directly moving them to an online space. As part of this process, course teams were asked to review and share what online tools and platforms they were already using in any of their teaching or that they were aware of from elsewhere in their school or college. Course teams were also encouraged to consider whether teaching would be synchronous, asynchronous or even bichronous (Martin, Polly & Ritzhaupt, 2020), and to have a pedagogical rational for why each approach was to be adopted.

Academics then identified what online resources they would use for the delivery of the course. This stage was also an opportunity for staff to look at what other online resources they had access to. Some resources were available through institutional licenses, others through collaboration with other institutions or professional bodies, e.g. videos, audio, images and also reading materials. It was proposed that the Virtual Learning Environment, Moodle at UofG, should serve as the gateway to the course and links to any other technology should be embedded from there in order to avoid confusion. A key theme was to consider how they might communicate with their students, how students could communicate with the teaching team, and also how the students would

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communicate with each other. A united and consistent approach was recommended in order to manage expectations and to avoid confusion and overwhelm, which has long been regarded as a challenge for learners in higher education settings (Dhillon, 2000). It was suggested to the teaching teams they agree what approaches they would be using e.g. emails, messages, posts or forums, etc. and which platforms would be used. In a course where multiple staff were to be involved in teaching, it was felt this would be beneficial to students as they could expect the same approach across a programme.

The subsequent stage focused on purposeful community building among the course participants (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). It was recommended course teams look at how they fostered communities of learners prior to the pandemic and if there were elements that might be retained. It was also acknowledged it was set to be especially challenging to establish new communities among learners who had never met previously. Suggestions included establishing peer groups, where membership could be created by tutors or students could self-select; encouraging dialogue and discussion in forums, through setting aside time for undertaking group work and tasks; as well as providing guidance around how students might interact and engage with the learning materials prior to the sessions.

It was also recognised that induction time would be especially crucial in this climate. While inductions are commonly run for new students at programme level, there may often also be a small element of *housekeeping* at the start of any new module or course. This involves the teaching team outlining what the course involves, the content, the assessments, and also what is expected of the students. The concept of a *week zero* prior to the start of each course was recommended in order to prepare the students to learn. As part of this community building, it was recognised that there was a need to replace the opportunity for students to hang back at the end of a live face-to-face session and ask questions. It was therefore recommended time be allowed at the end of a synchronous session to take any questions, or in asynchronous learning that there be clear signposting in terms of how and where questions may be posed.

The course team were also urged to examine the teaching schedule closely to see what they wanted to retain in terms of content. Teaching teams were asked to consider following a consistent format for their teaching that would be in place week-by-week, with sessions having a clear beginning, middle and an end – in line with the *Cycle of Learning* model (Figure 2). Due to the uncertainty about future lockdowns, caution was also advised where some academics were relying on some face-to-face teaching being possible at a later point in the academic year that could allow for specialist equipment and spaces to be used. However, teaching teams were advised to "prepare for the worst and hope for the best" (Pickles, 2006, p. 784) in order that every eventually was covered.

After much consideration, reviewing and planning, the next step was a far more practical one and this was to create the teaching and learning resources in advance of the session starting. Academics were advised to work through the schedule week by week, starting with *week zero* and to embed active learning principles throughout, as well as building in synchronous and asynchronous approaches, as had been identified earlier in the process. Conventions such as ensuring videos were made available in short bites, around 5-10 minutes in length, was recommended in order to be realistic with regards to students' attention spans (Mazur, 1997), as well as ensuring digital accessibility policy and guidance were also followed (University of Glasgow, 2020b; University of Glasgow, 2021). This involved offering practical guidance and tips for producing teaching, learning and assessment resources using technology. There was extensive institutional guidance available that had been enhanced by the academic development team and other colleagues from across the university in the form of 'Glasgow Anywhere' (University of Glasgow, 2020c).

Having created these resources, the process progressed to ensure that clear signposting was built in at the outset. Academic colleagues were encouraged to make it clear to students on the VLE what was being asked of them and when. Practical approaches were encouraged, including using headings, larger font sizes and colours in order to make clear the order the instructions were to be followed, what needed to be done and when, as well as ensuring that resources were accessible – Blackboard Ally was a useful tool in this process.

The penultimate phase involved encouraging the course teams to review their course and the modifications made as a result of completing the *Remote Learning Process*. It was recommended that this should include the planning resources and also sharing the platform where the course was to be delivered and that it should be tested from a student-facing view or perspective. It was also suggested the proposals and resources be shared with the wider teaching team and colleagues, former students and critical friends, in order to gain further feedback. It was also important to ensure that time was built into the schedule for any amendments to be made. Academic staff were also reassured that as all courses and programmes evolve over time, it was only to be expected that this remote delivery version of their course would too. Enhancements being a natural part of teaching and learning (Salmon, 2011) and they should expect changes to be made in any future iterations of the course.

The final stage of the process involved the launch phase. This would include ensuring both staff and students were enrolled on the course prior to it starting, as well as on any other technological platforms e.g. the communication channels. This process included ensuring that students were kept in the communication loop about what they were being enrolled on and which platforms were being used for what purposes. There was concern more broadly that students may feel isolated during the pandemic, which could potentially impact their wider wellbeing.

The Cycle of Learning

The second model that emerged out of this remote learning transition project was inspired by a *cycle* used in professional media practice. The "cycle of news" (Ward, 2002, p. 41) is focused on an approach to covering breaking news through four stages of a news event and includes: preview, event, reaction and further development; and anniversary. It was therefore adapted to be the

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Cycle of Learning, with the aim of providing guidance for planning learning for remote delivery and it was proposed these could include four stages: Preview; Event; Reaction; and Reflection. The aim being to encourage active learning to be embedded at the grassroots of the curriculum – essentially in every teaching and learning event.
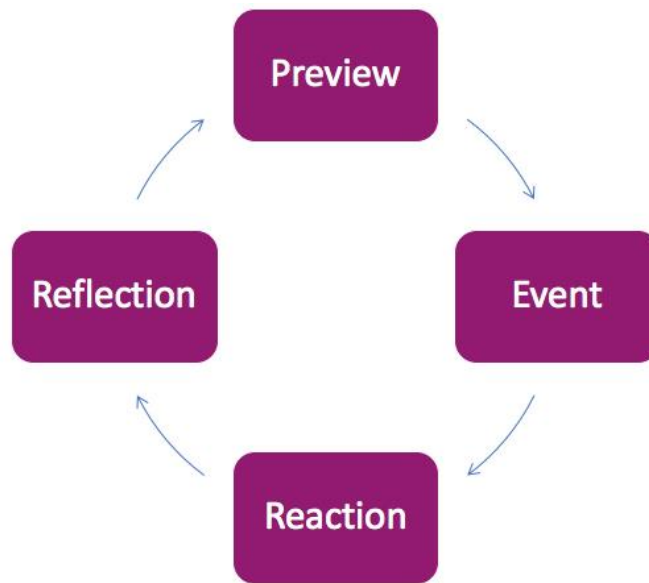
Figure 2 The Cycle of Learning

The *Preview* stage involves designing an activity that students can undertake in advance, this may be seen as akin to flipped learning (Bergmann & Samms, 2012). It encourages students to engage with related materials prior to the session and may take the form of a reading or writing activity or watching a video or listening to audio etc. and this may be done individually or as part of a group.

Second is the *Event* stage, which is the actual *teaching* session or event, or a single unit or topic, and may be delivered synchronously or asynchronously. It is acknowledged that there are many different views on what *teaching* is, but this *event* is about striving to create a quality teaching activity that enhances the learning experience. Ultimately in line with Biggs' (1999, p. 58) definition that "good teaching is getting most students to use the higher cognitive level processes that the more academic students use spontaneously. Good teaching narrows the gap".

The third phase is about providing an opportunity for students to share their *Reaction* or to respond or clarify any issues or thoughts that came up during the session. This could take the form of a task or an activity using technological tools and may even involve an element of formative assessment. What is key at this stage is that the reactions are not just left to hover in the ether, they should be encouraged to be aired and allow for clarification and feedback to be shared.

The final phase in the cycle is to allow for *Reflection* and for this deeper engagement also to be built into the session design process. Compared to the previous stage, this is not designed to be immediate but is proposed to take place at a later point when students will have had the opportunity to reflect further on what has been taught or to have undertaken further study that may have enhanced their perspectives. It may take place at the end of a topic or a unit or at the end of a course. It may involve reflective activities too, perhaps in line with the approaches devised by Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (1988), with formative and/or summative assessments providing methods for gauging the students' understandings once a period of deeper reflection and further engagement has had the opportunity to take place.

Identifying lessons learned from the remote learning process

To identify lessons learned from the process and to evaluate the practical experience of using the *Remote Learning Process* and the *Cycle of Learning* models, informal feedback was gathered from participants at the end of the project. This stage of the process was considered useful both for those involved in the exemplar redesign process project, as well as to the facilitator in order to support others undergoing the process in the future. This approach is in keeping with common pedagogical practice with feedback being seen as "a fundamentally important component of education" (Hoon, Oliver, Szpakowska and Newton, 2015, p. 755) that has value both to those undertaking the feedback and to those receiving it.

The approach taken to gather this informal feedback involved a series of open-ended qualitative questions that could be answered anonymously, if desired, and were collated on a Padlet board that could then be shared more widely. The questions produced were broadly akin to the *Stop, Start, Continue* model (Hoon et al., 2015), sometimes referred to as the *Start, Stop, Continue* approach (Cunningham & White, 2020). This approach requires participants to respond to three different open-ended prompts

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about their experience of the remote learning transition process – an approach recognised as resulting in quality feedback (Hoon et al., 2015). The comments from academic staff identified what worked well, what could be improved or done differently, as well as advice to others going through the remote learning process, which attested to the value of the process outlined and refinements were proposed that were then able to be taken into consideration going forward.

This informal feedback was also shared across the institution as part of a more extensive resource, alongside the two models, the planning documents and videos made by some of the teams involved. The aim being to support others going through the remote learning transition process in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the experience of working closely alongside academics in course teams and professional services staff from different areas of the university was productive in that the short-term goal of supporting these subjects as they moved to remote delivery was achieved. Furthermore, it can be seen that out of unforeseen necessity an opportunity for curriculum development and enhancement also arose. Moreover, and in keeping with strategic priorities, active learning and technology-enhanced learning had the potential to be embedded in the foundations of curriculum development and these priorities were escalated in courses by default.

While it had not been a deliberate intention to produce models or process maps at the outset of this project, these models emerged and served to provide signposting for those working towards remote curriculum delivery and kept discussions and the projects themselves on track. This was especially valuable given that the project was taking place at a time when the majority of staff were experiencing one of the biggest challenges they had faced with their educational practice to date, alongside other pressures caused by the pandemic and the lockdown. Additionally, the academic colleagues involved also embraced many of the key themes of the models into the spirit of the project itself e.g. effective communication, community building and of managing expectations – making connections with colleagues (and teams) in the university who they had not had the opportunity to work with previously.

It is therefore argued these models are effective and sustainable in that they may be used going forward by any academic subject or discipline where curriculum development for remote learning is a key focus and that they are relevant and transferrable to the wider perspective of courses or modules being delivered by universities. It is also recognised that the *Remote Learning Process* and the *Cycle of Learning* models could also be used by academic programme teams across all levels of degree programmes in order to provide consistency for the student learning experience. Although this approach was not fully explored as part of this study, it could provide an avenue for future research.

Biography

Amanda Geary Pate PhD is a senior academic and digital development adviser/lecturer at the University of Glasgow. A former multimedia journalist, Amanda has almost two decades of experience of using her digital skills for delivering and supporting pedagogical innovation for those enhancing professional practice, as well as in developing communication strategies – in both media and academic practice.

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