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Harnessing Online Course Development Skills: A crisis-prompted but carefully planned EAP course

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how lessons learned from developing a fully online course were employed in the momentous move to online delivery in the late spring and summer of 2020. Our context was one in which, rather than having to get through to the end of the last teaching semester of the year, we were about to commence large-scale, intensive academic English courses, delivered throughout the summer. While the pivot online did mean as Gacs, Goertler and Spasova (2020, p. 380) say 'crisis-prompted remote teaching', our previous experiences enabled us to provide effective, principled support to course designers, and induction for teachers who would deliver courses. Drawing on principles of effective online learning, constructive and social constructivist pedagogies for both language and content learning, we show how these newly flipped courses were planned and scaffolded. We also illustrate how teacher induction was designed to incorporate not only pedagogical and content knowledge but also aspects of technological pedagogical knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Support was also provided by organising teaching teams with diversified skills and encouraging the sharing of expertise.

The resulting courses were quite different from the previous face-to-face classroom-heavy immersive learning provision. Yet our reflection will show how the careful but essentially simple approaches used to course design and teacher induction afforded engagement and ultimately very successful outcomes, at scale. We identify aspects that we believe can be applied in different contexts, along with areas that need further development and which can be built on as colleagues develop the skills and confidence to continue online delivery. This paper, then, aims to show that essential skills sets can be developed with relatively minimal but carefully thought out principled, structured and streamlined support from the outset.

Keywords: online pedagogy, online course design, flipped learning, TPACK, teacher induction

Introduction and context

The move to online teaching in the spring and summer of 2020 prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic provided both challenges and opportunities. Transitioning online involved a temporary pivot for some, a full-scale re-development or something in between for others. For many the scale of the task was daunting, exacerbated by the speed at which change and developments were required. Helpful guides (e.g. Gacs, Goertler & Spasova, 2020; Nordmann, Horlin, Hutchison, Murray, Robson, Seery, & MacKay, 2020) were not initially readily available and so any previous experience in online design became highly valued. In this reflective analysis, we first outline our context and the development of a fully online postgraduate content course (Teaching English for Academic Purposes, 2016). We then discuss how lessons learned were applied to support the redesign of a set of large, highly intensive pre-

sessional English for academic purposes (EAP) courses for summer 2020. We also explain how the online teacher induction was constructed in order to support a large cohort of lecturers in the delivery. We round up with what we believe are the most useful lessons that can be transferred to other contexts.

The internationalisation of higher education (HE) has led to the proliferation of EAP courses both in countries where English is the majority language and in English-medium instruction contexts, where it is not (Dearden, 2014). These EAP courses aim to develop academic language, study skills and literacies for students in order to facilitate study on English-medium degrees. When taken prior to the degree, these are, in the UK at least, known as pre-sessional courses and are often short: typically five to ten weeks. They are also very intensive and aim to maximise opportunities for interaction, which in turn facilitates language development. Success requires engagement with input that typically guides students to the production of an academic essay, presentations, and effective seminar participation. Pre-sessionals are nearly always high stakes: success in the final summative assessments of academic skills confers entry onto degree programmes. Lecturers (also referred to as teachers here) are specialists in EAP, often working with bespoke course materials. While EAP courses may include some elements of blended learning such as forum discussions, only a handful had been fully or partially delivered online by spring 2020. Most of them, like ours, build their reputation on the quality of face-to-face contact in the classroom. As these courses are for the most part delivered face-to-face, they may require relatively little in the way of online expertise.

In the spring of 2020, as with all HE providers, we faced a number of challenges. The most substantial in our specific context was to develop a suite of three five-week courses that would make the complete 15-week summer pre-sessional programme for up to 1,000 students: high-quality courses that would deliver on the intended learning outcomes, that could be designed at speed, delivered to scale and that would be sufficiently familiar and deliverable online by a large cohort of up to 60 lecturers who would have a limited period for induction (around two thirds join only for the summer period on short teaching contracts).

Where to start? We were fortunate in being able to draw on our recent experience of designing and delivering a fully online Teaching EAP (TEAP) postgraduate course from a face-to-face mode. We now discuss the relevant key principles underpinning the design of that online course which lay the foundations for the set-up of the online pre-sessional course and teacher induction.

TEAP Online as a case study in online course design: Focus on principles and practices

The TEAP course is a 20-credit option on our Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) masters. Recognising the need to reach a wider audience in a flexible and stand-alone format, we designed the course as a fully online offering, TEAP Online, as part of a university internally-funded project. From the start, the project team were acutely aware that successful online course development requires principled and informed adaptation rather than just depositing existing handouts and readings in the course virtual learning environment (VLE) (Rovai, 2003; Rovai & Downey, 2010). To ensure meaningful blending of technology with pedagogical and content knowledges, as stipulated by Mishra and Koehler's (2006) Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPCK) framework (now known and so hereinafter referred to as TPACK, Koehler, Mishra & Cain, 2013) devised to facilitate effective technology integration, it was deemed necessary to understand the factors which made the face-to-face version successful.

The face-to-face TEAP course aims to investigate links between theory and practice. Students complete readings and associated tasks presented in part through the VLE and then discuss their practical applications in a lecturer-facilitated workshop. This set-up is broadly akin to the flipped-classroom approach (Kerr, 2020, van Alten, Phielix, Janssen, & Kester, 2019), one which requires

careful consideration of what can be studied out of class to maximise the potential of group learning opportunities in class, e.g. in applying this learning, engaging in problem solving. The rationale for taking this approach lies not only in the value that the course leaders put on active learning approaches but also to reflect practices in EAP which favour communicative language teaching, guided discovery, learner autonomy (BALEAP, 2008). It is hoped that by experiencing a range of relevant teaching methods and engaging with academic genres and practices, the students will find it easier to apply learning to their future practice. So the signature pedagogies (Shulman, 2005) that characterise and which lie behind the success of the TEAP course include active learning and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), with the lecturer acting as the guide on the side (King, 1993) and scaffolding self-study tasks (Walqui, 2006).

In their guide to online teaching, Boettcher and Conrad (2016) identify emphasis on active learning, linking to peer and independent learning, as well as teachers embracing coaching and mentoring techniques as key characteristics of online courses. Since both were already prominent in the face-to-face TEAP, we needed to decide how they would manifest themselves best in online environments. For practical reasons (time zones, flexibility to accommodate work), and because online written forums are argued to "engender more and more meaningful participation and interaction" (Comer & Lenaghan, 2012, p. 262), the TEAP Online was to rely on asynchronous discussions. In such discussions, the students could also draw on previous learning and/or teaching experiences and so establish a community of practice to learn from and with each other, especially useful when the lecturer response was delayed due to time difference (Han & Ellis, 2019).

While interactivity and interconnectivity of the face-to-face TEAP were the priority for the online version, we recognised that online too many postings could easily contribute to students feeling overwhelmed and confused. The asynchronous nature of discussions could further exacerbate the impression of fragmentation. The fact that online contributions were often more frequent and considered (Putman, Ford & Tancock, 2012) meant an exponential increase in the reading load (Hew, Cheung & Ng, 2010). As a result, there might be a temptation to talk 'at' rather than 'to' peers, resulting in "a series of parallel monologues" (Wise, Hausknecht & Zhao, 2014, p. 2), an instance of non-collaborative and non-constructivist interaction. The redesign demanded a finely-tuned selection of course activities which would provide scaffolding to engage students with the course readings. It was hoped this would promote student engagement and ascertain higher quality postings (Han & Ellis, 2019). Moreover, we streamlined all the instructions, checked them for clarity, added approximate timings and word counts, included question prompts and examples whenever appropriate as well as clarifying rules for posting, replying and tutor commentary. This was to help the students direct their focus on the task at hand, i.e. the developing conceptions of content knowledge rather than waste time constantly trying to figure out the context, requirements and participation rules (Darabi & Jin, 2013).

These changes echoed some of the best practices for online instruction, such as the clarity of learning objectives and outcomes, cohesive structuring of the whole course and realistic workloads for faculty and students (Bates, 2019) and so required further fine-tuning of the TEAP Online design. For example, we agreed on stylistically and visually consistent layout, and wording of intended learning outcomes (ILOs), and to help the whole team to adhere to the stylesheet, a useful template was designed. Furthermore, all the activities were carefully reordered so they were progressively more challenging. Some of the tasks earlier on in the unit which are perhaps more concerned with recognising terms and definitions, i.e. necessitating lower-order thinking skills (Lee & Choi, 2017), were made into learning quizzes (which offer feedback on both correct and incorrect answers and thus serve as consolidation of understanding opportunities) or accompanied by answer keys so that the students can revise and so learn from their responses straight away without waiting for the teacher's explanation. This also meant that lecturers' time was freed up for engagement with the students' comments and contributions to tasks involving higher-order thinking skills, including the end-of-unit milestone activity with a strong focus on knowledge application. Lastly, we carefully balanced different learning modes, for

example independent versus collaborative. ABC curriculum design method (Young & Perović, 2016) introduced to us by in-house educational technologists proved useful in mapping out the latter at the level of the course and so, for example, helped to avoid too many collaborative tasks per unit.

The visual presentation of the online course was considered important. In reference to online educational environments, David and Glore (2010, np) argue that "design and aesthetics have a profound impact on how users perceive information, learn, judge credibility and usability, and ultimately assign value to a product". In terms of visual identity, apart from images of the university to help the students develop a sense of belonging, we extensively used bespoke icons to create a user-friendly look reminiscent of social media, provide direct routes to different parts of the course VLE (e.g. announcements, resources) as well as signifying various modes of learning (e.g. reading, pair work) and approximate times for task completion. It was hoped that the icons would help the students develop an overall picture of the units, what is required, when and how. In other words, the students would be enabled to build schema constructions and so the extraneous load would be reduced giving more "sufficient capacity for maximum germane load" (Darabi & Jin, 2013, p. 23).

Finally, we decided to introduce week zero for student induction, a series of community-building and climate-setting tasks where students used relevant Moodle functionalities without the pressure of the tasks being overly academic. The main aim of this induction is to introduce the students to the lecturers, each other and the course and to make the technologies more familiar and even transparent. The added bonus was an extra week to troubleshoot e.g. any issues with technology, accessibility, or registration.

TPACK (Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Koehler et al., 2013) was mentioned earlier as a framework underlying the TEAP Online design. Briefly, the framework looks to promote meaningful integration of technology into learning and teaching and requires a careful and principled consideration of how to blend pedagogy, content and technology. A frequent problem noted by Mishra and Koehler (2006) arises from distribution of knowledges and skills within a course design team. In the case of TEAP Online, the team consisted of two leads: content and educational technology. However, both of them are highly experienced EAP practitioners and HE educators and each has knowledge and experience in some of the aspects of the other's expertise. This solid blend of knowledges and skill-sets seems to have stood the team in good stead to ascertain effective fusion of technological, pedagogical and content knowledge. The remaining two lecturers within the teaching team were also curious and appreciative of the affordances of online learning. In initial formal meetings, we discussed the ideas around establishing and sustaining teaching presence in online environments, mainly in line with Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer's (2001) Community of Inquiry Model. This coupled with frequent informal exchanges later allowed us to form a small community of practice where we could share practices and learn from each other how to make the teaching presence visible and supportive, with a particular focus on managing and making meaningful the forum discourse.

Applying lessons learned from TEAP Online

In spring 2020, when we made the decision to re-design the pre-sessional course (as opposed to emergency pivot), we first reflected on which lessons from the experience of the TEAP Online development were particularly applicable to the new situation. As with the TEAP redesign, the starting point was to recognise the strengths of the face-to-face pre-sessional provision in order to translate them carefully to online delivery and in the process identify the challenges and fine-tune the solutions accordingly.

Briefly, the face-to-face pre-sessional course is a well-established course which has undergone quality scrutiny and is accredited by our professional body, BALEAP. It has clearly set out and aligned ILOs, teaching activities and assessments, based on extensive and regular needs analysis, and grounded in current theories of effective EAP teaching and learning (e.g. engagement with academic genres, development of autonomy; Hyland, 2016). It has to be emphasised too that the success of the course relies on high levels of quality interaction with peers and teachers in daily classes.

So even a cursory analysis of the two courses reveals that although their aims differ in aspects of subject content knowledge (albeit with overlaps), one focusing on content knowledge and EAP teaching applications, the other developing the ability and skills to communicate effectively in academic contexts, both prize interaction and engagement with content and peers. Similarities could also be found in assumptions of general pedagogical knowledge and, in terms of facilitating engagement, cross-overs in pedagogical content knowledge, i.e. how best to approach the teaching of the subject matter (Shulman, 1986). We thus recognised that the most prominent impact was in relation to overall pedagogical approaches of engaging learners with content and each other, as outlined below.

Of course we could not replicate the exact way of delivering the activities as there was considerable variation in the balance of tasks and expected interaction patterns between the two design endeavours. The TEAP Online course essentially integrates input and tasks and could be completed asynchronously and if desired, individually. Hence, it relies on forums for interaction with peers. For the online EAP course, we needed regular, synchronous activities to provide output practice and feedback, to monitor progress, and not least to meet student expectations (they had after all originally signed up for a full-time, intensive face-to-face course). A different technology-enabled solution was needed. Regular live class time was necessary to ensure language development and facilitate ongoing formative feedback and assessments; due to time differences between learners and teachers and potential screen fatigue, real-time contact was reduced to 1.5 hours a day. This, in turn, required careful consideration of which tasks called for synchronous interaction or detailed, complex feedback, and which are most suited to independent self-study work, and how both types could be scaffolded appropriately. For example, parts of the face-to-face course that made use of interactive lectures were sectioned into smaller recorded chunks built around worksheets with clear specific tasks. Since all the pre-sessional students were on a full-time course, we were also able to retain group project tasks that required additional out-of-class interactions. This would then mirror study patterns they would go on to encounter on their degrees and also maintain a focus on more independent learning. The overall decision-making process was similar but implementation was different to account for contextual factors. Compared to the TEAP Online, the online EAP course reflected more closely a flipped learning approach outlined above (Kerr, 2020, van Alten et al., 2019); and since students would have daily in- and out-of-class opportunities for interaction, forum-based activities were not heavily used.

Similar to the TEAP Online development project, a set of core content resources were available to base the new online pre-sessional course on but as with the TEAP Online development we needed a clear, consistent, planning framework with agreed parameters and timeframes. This was not only to ensure the pre-sessional courses would be designed on time but to guide the range of platforms, tools and activity types to use. Although this may sound mundane, it meant that course designers of the different parts of the course were all on the same page, work could progress and that crucially the different blocks would look similar. To facilitate the coherent narrative and planning, the need for clear instructions and layout of materials was again paramount and so, similarly to the TEAP Online, time was spent in agreeing the framework and format for lesson design templates. These templates again built-in pedagogical decision-making in consideration of aims, ILOs, activity type and timing, and balance, proving highly effective in developing coherent lessons and courses. Also, as with TEAP Online, it meant that there was a clear visual identity to manage students' expectations and develop their schemas (Darabi & Jin, 2013) and so similar visual icons were

developed to help the teachers and students quickly distinguish between different types of activities. However, because of the different context, conditions and level of user expertise, the solutions had to be tailored for the EAP course. For expediency in design, it was decided to develop a simple framework that would require relatively minimal support in terms of Moodle use and formatting (on TEAP Online we had used the Moodle book tool but since not all lecturers were familiar with this aspect of Moodle, while it is not overly complicated, it would have added an additional layer of complexity, and possibly stress, at an already fraught time). We were also aware that many of the students and indeed lecturers would perhaps be studying or working online for the first time, that internet connections might be unstable and that access to hardware may be limited. Flexibility and simplicity in format were deemed important, as were formats which could be downloaded and worked on. This was not least to reduce time online but also to allow learners to complete and annotate worksheets and listen to downloaded recordings.

Lastly, as with TEAP Online, we needed to consider how to best support teachers. On the small TEAP Online course we had an established team working closely with each other and an induction week for students. On the pre-sessional course we had a much enlarged teaching team all embarking on this particular endeavour for the first time, online. How to do this at scale for teachers and to also ensure they were prepared and supported for working online is the focus of the next section.

A principled approach to induction

Following on from the TEAP Online course and cognisant of the fact that we would be requiring a notable amount of interaction in most likely unfamiliar formats online, we developed both teacher and student inductions. The student induction focused primarily on self-access worksheets and a general introduction as they would then get to know each other and their teachers in small-group daily lessons. For reasons of space, we concentrate here on the teacher induction which required much more front-loading to ensure they would feel confident and supported in teaching online from the outset.

Each year the teaching team includes many returners but also a cohort of teachers new to our centre and possibly new to EAP. In 2020, the format of the course and content would be new for all and technical expertise and experience of teaching online was not aligned to levels of EAP experience. Based on an initial survey, in the early part of the summer for the first of the three teaching blocks, at least one third had no or limited experience of using collaborative online documents or Zoom breakout rooms. In planning the teacher induction, along with the need to become familiar with the course content and assessment (content knowledge), we were guided by the need to provide opportunities for interaction and development of personal relations between teachers and team leaders, to support for use of technology and teaching online (pedagogical content knowledge), and also to facilitate sharing of expertise (Gacs et al., 2020).

Structuring and designing the content: Mirroring and modelling

Using a format that mirrored the student experience, we used the same planning template and set pre-workshop, flipped tasks, for example identifying how the course was constructively aligned (Biggs, 2014) by identifying ILOs and matching to content (and so also providing familiarisation with course content for the first few days), and relating these to student needs and assessment. The actual online workshop then allowed for a more in-depth discussion of underlying pedagogical principles, typically in small groups, and sharing of comments and questions via a range of online tools including collaborative OneDrive documents, Padlet and mentimeter. In sharing views on assessment of student work, MS forms were used to quickly survey and compare results followed by more analytic discussions. In this way, not only was the content ordered and structured around specific tasks but specific aspects related to technology were incorporated, thus integrating content knowledge and technological pedagogical knowledge (Koehler et al., 2013). At the end of the day, we ran technology enhanced learning and teaching (TELT) sessions where, through a

set of screenshots and a verbal walkthrough, teachers were guided through technology 'how to' tasks and given time to practice with a more experienced teacher on hand. In induction for the second block, we added in live demos and voice overs for teachers to refer back to (and to make more sustainable) and a TELT drop-in slot every day was set up. Thus induction tilted towards a stronger focus on technology and how it could be integrated meaningfully into teaching, although maintaining a favoured approach in our induction of experiential learning. This modelling of use of technologies through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) also helped familiarise teachers with tools they could later employ in their own classes and planning. Thus as with TEAP Online, careful consideration was given to how best to use opportunities for interaction with teaching peers and facilitators and on which skills.

Developing effective teaching teams and online communities of practice

Not only did we need to develop familiarity with course content and confidence with the affordances of technology, but we also wanted to develop teams that could support each other and share expertise in relation to planning and the effective use of technology in EAP teaching. Typically on face-to-face induction programmes, we would have a series of four or five one hour to 90-minute workshops over three days. Even at the early stage of the summer, we were very aware of Zoom fatigue and the need to build in breaks from each other and the screen. The informal opportunities for coffee breaks, lunches or time to hang out were absent. However, from our online teaching experiences we also knew the importance of developing social presence and developing online communities, on or off-line (Kear, 2010; Khoo & Cowie, 2010; Stein & Wanstreet, 2003). To do this we first thought about how to organise small teaching teams. Each group would have a team leader (TL) and sub-groups would have at least one teacher experienced in EAP, one very familiar with our course and expectations and one with technology (established in interviews). Teachers may have one or a combination of skills and knowledges, but by developing these small support networks with diversified skill-sets from the outset, we aimed to build on previous initiatives on our face-to-face course in sharing good practice, and fostering effective working groups and learning communities. Over the three blocks, each induction developed to allow for more sharing of expertise, more teacher-led sessions on planning and use of technology based on their experiences. Also, as the summer progressed TLs set up their own daily drop-in slot and some teachers set up their own coffee drop-in slot.

Reflections and lessons learned

This article discusses the development of guidelines for switching to online learning and for supporting teachers, rather than an in-depth consideration of the course content and design. In this section, we seek to identify transferable lessons for other contexts.

While it was crisis prompted, we would argue that by building on previous experience, we managed to take a principled and planned approach and moved towards a course that reflects more extensively planned online teaching. The strengths of the approach we took were, we believe, in establishing a number of key tenets. Emerging from an investigation of the specific context and stakeholder needs, in our case these were simplicity in design, principled selection of technologies, scaffolding materials and tasks, modelling and mirroring in lecturer preparation, and in doing so making a course fit for its context.

Gacs et al. (2020) in their discussion of planned online learning include the importance of preparation and design. While it may be very tempting to cut down on preparation, we found again that this is not time wasted. While it may slow down the process at the beginning it is more likely to contribute to building something more robust and sustainable. One early principle had been to limit the platforms to Moodle as a one-stop-shop for resources, course communications and assessments, and Zoom for online lessons. This helped manage expectations and kept to a minimum cognitive learning load for lecturers and students. In lesson design,

careful scaffolding of tasks using familiar formats and layouts not only supported session design by building-in the pedagogy and facilitating the development of schemas, but also provided a clear visual identity and the sense of coherence.

Simplicity brought with it some tensions as lecturers who already had experience teaching online were more ambitious, wanting to make use of more technologies, for example MS Teams. Having oversight of large courses and teaching teams, and aiming for a relatively equal parity of experience for students and indeed teachers can be a challenge in any context. Accountability and transparency are always necessary and with a very real concern that lecturers may fall ill, maintenance of relevant records of student work and communications was even more important. Compromises were made to allow for creativity and autonomy among teachers by requiring all core communications to be on the shared platform (Moodle), but for them to make use of additional tools that they felt enhanced learning in lessons (e.g. MS teams). As we progressed, we became more ambitious and harnessed such experience, for example making use of SharePoint for records, and developing online tests. Over the three blocks, these incremental developments enhanced our provision and approach to course management. Acknowledgement of the skills and experience also meant that with each successive course, more and more of the team were confident with the tools and could support teachers joining at later stages.

Gacs et al. (2020) also comment on the need for professional development and support specific to online teaching and technology. Our summer programmes already included induction although there is always a challenge in balancing what to cover with time to digest. This was no less the case here. While we dropped some elements to allow for more technological skills development, more time for familiarisation and in-depth consideration of digital skills and literacies (for teachers and students) would have been useful. We can also reflect on the extent to which we managed to support teachers in considering the approach to teacher induction through the lens of TPACK (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). In planning the induction programme, the aim was to integrate not only knowledge of what technology may be used to best pedagogical effect but also to replicate aspects of the face-to-face course that were still deemed as highly important, in particular opportunities for active learning and to provide feedback. Tools we used included polls, MS forms, reporting on collaborative tasks via shared documents and Padlet. Technology and pedagogy, and content and pedagogy were not treated as separate, then but as aspects that should be considered together and integrated. We also aimed to develop collaborative learning communities making use of diversified teams. Making use of in-house expertise to develop skills proved time-efficient for integrating TPACK and collegial in approach.

This integration into our workshops through experiential learning, and specific TELT slots did include direct instruction for expediency, aimed to reduce anxiety, increase confidence and a sense of preparedness. Teachers had limited time to explore tools themselves in the induction period, and we felt some targeted instruction would be useful (cf. Mishra and Koehler, 2006, who comment on the limitations of direct teaching). In order to show relevance, there were specific opportunities to plan together and to consider when and why tools may be integrated into lessons. This last point, the detailed exploration of the *why* was largely implicit and tacit. A fuller exploration of which technologies to use and how they can transform learning and thus inform the development of effective pedagogical approaches is still needed.

Concluding comment

In our reflective account, we have shown how the expertise gained from earlier experiences of online course design and delivery was utilised in the redesign of a large face-to-face highly interactive course. The small team at the heart of the first online course were able to use their experiences and belief in the power of online learning to set a vision for this crisis-prompted endeavour. By providing an overarching infrastructure, breaking the design into manageable chunks of work with clear templates that baked in

pedagogic decision-making, we successfully delivered to nearly 1000 students with over 50 EAP lecturers. By carefully considering how to provide a clear but basic framework and integrating technology and pedagogy, and establishing small teams with diversified skills, we built confidence and skills in both course designers and lecturers. Over the summer this developed further and our colleagues were then themselves called on to share expertise across a range of other programmes commencing online delivery in the autumn. Carefully planned online courses can take time to develop but the skills and expertise required can also be built incrementally with a core team to lead the way.

Biographies

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