Just-in-time, low-tech pandemic CPD using short screencast videos

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The challenge

When the pandemic started, suddenly our previous staff development provision (for instance the PGCert) did not seem that relevant. We needed to provide on-demand – indeed, just-in-time – CPD for the job at hand: the sudden switch to digital teaching and learning. In our case, our very identity as a *making* Art and Design university was at stake: studio spaces and materiality are at the core of who we are and how we prompt learning – this is very hard to replicate online.

Finding out what was needed was the first challenge. I set up a shared Google Doc asking all staff to offer 'hot' pedagogical questions. As I compiled the list of questions and found common threads, I realised that most of them were in fact 'threshold concepts' regarding online teaching (Land et al., 2018). This meant that they would resonate with a wide variety of colleagues and would cover some of the points where many teachers get stuck when new to online teaching.

Another challenge was the way those questions should – and could – be addressed when everything was on fire professionally speaking. I was aware there would be issues of access and accessibility, for staff as well as for students. I wanted to produce a set of resources that would directly respond to staff's hot pedagogical questions and would also model the approach being discussed.

The response

I needed a fast and efficient response. Although I could have organised online meetings, written blogs, or created one-pagers, I was looking for a more personal way to reach all staff without forcing them to connect 'live'. I also wanted to show my face, share a smile, and use a supportive tone of voice. So, on the basis of colleagues' suggested questions, I set out to very quickly produce a series of five minute screencast videos called 'Fast switch to e-learning' (I think I would use 'digital learning' now). I wanted to talk about practice more than theory but at the same time use the outcome of research-informed current best practice(s). Inclusivity and emotional intelligence (Mortiboys, 2005) were my main drivers. In both content and mode of delivery, I was determined to promote Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and practices (Lieberman, Lytle and Clarcq, 2008).

To supplement the short asynchronous videos (see Table 1), I also organised a few longer, collaborative live webinars on 'A menu of practical lesson activities in e-learning mode', and presented activities for lesson starters, main activities, and lesson closures.

Table 1. Screencast video series 'Fast switch to e-learning'.

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1. Introduction about the series

The basics

2. Where do I start from, when switching to e-learning?

3. How do I support students' emotional wellbeing at this time?

4. How do I set up students for e-learning?

IT tools

5. Which platform should I use for video-conferencing?

6. How do I up my IT capabilities to cope with e-learning? Adapting teaching and assessment

7. How do I adapt my teaching to e-learning?

8. How do I adapt my assessment to e-learning?

9. How do I prevent plagiarism in e-learning?

VLE

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10. How do I set up my VLE space to support the switch to e-learning?

11. How do I support students' academic skills development in e-learning mode?

E-learning activities

12. What would be good 'week 1' activities to start the Unit?

13. How can students work in groups and share work in real time?

14. What best practice in feedback can I embed in e-learning?

I deliberately chose to take a low-tech approach. In order to produce something which would resonate, reassure, and inspire teachers, within a tight timeframe, I decided that at a time when many were hailing 'technocracy' to sort out the new challenges of remote education, I was going to go against the grain and use a low-tech approach. Using my kids' felt tips, I hand-drew mind maps which I then discussed in the short screencast videos. The mind maps guided my video discussion and served as user-friendly one-pagers. This provided dual-code access to the resources, which supported various types of colleagues, hence providing a model of UDL principles in practice (Novac and Bracken, 2019). The talking head on the side (myself) helped articulate the ideas and slightly expand on them.

This approach was welcomed and resonated with many colleagues. The videos are hosted on my website and have been added to several university teaching and learning platforms. They have also been translated into Arabic and Swedish and hosted on global websites. The webinars were attended live by nearly 300 colleagues and have been watched by over 1000 viewers each.

Some colleagues printed the mind-maps to hang around their workspace as reminders. One colleague wrote that she found the videos not only relevant and supportive, but also reassuring because of the way the ideas were presented: she felt there was a human touch due to the talking head over a hand-drawn diagram. My low-tech, dual code approach made her feel that she could also do it, at that difficult time. It was evident that the videos promoted a humanitarian view of education both in the medium and in the content itself.

Recommendations

It is imperative to find out from colleagues what their actual CPD needs are. Going forward, I have embedded this approach in our wider CPD offer: colleagues articulate their own outcomes at the start of the course, which helps me tailor the course to their needs and gives colleagues agency.

It is crucial to 'walk the walk' by producing materials which are dual-code, if at all possible, based on UDL principles, and emotionally supportive. For example we can make videos with their script, or videos and infographics, or written text with accompanying audio files. Providing just in time CPD can be taxing. Making the videos was both practically and cognitively challenging. Practically, my kids' felt tips were the wrong hue and started fading. I had to set up a corner of the living room as my recording corner but had no curtains to reduce glare. At times I had to video myself three or four times as I was talking too much and the video was too long; I recorded one of the videos at 2am, as I was determined to release it that day. Cognitively, in spite of the time-pressure, I had to ensure I was up to date on current best practice(s) for each question I was addressing, so I spent hours reading and researching for each five-minute video.

Of course, the intensity at which many of us worked (and overworked) at the start of the pandemic is not healthy and cannot (indeed should not) be sustained long-term. However, my own professional resilience did not happen in a vacuum, but within our collective professional resilience. I asked and received lots of support from many colleagues such as the SEDA list, Twitter, educational chats, and other networks. They provided ideas, feedback, and commendation. While making and disseminating the videos I forged many fruitful professional relationships, which are still going and growing. Hence, my final recommendation is: seek support when embarking on a new professional project, it will be both more rewarding and it will result in a distributed effort.

References

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Author details

Virna Rossi is a passionate teacher educator, with 23 years teaching experience in all sectors. Since 2016 she has lead the PGCert at Ravensbourne University London. She is particularly interested in inclusivity. She is co-creating a book on inclusive learning design with over 80 contributors from all the continents. Her motto is 'learn to thrive'.