Responding to COVID-19 through Continuing Professional Learning & Development for Emergency Remote Teaching: A bi-continental comparative analysis

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Abstract

This discussion evaluates institutional action to advance and sustain a remote teaching model as the primary mode of teaching during COVID-19 restrictions. This comparative analysis explores the COVID-19 Continuing Professional Learning & Development (CPLD) response of two Higher Education Institutions (HEI's), one in the UK and one in the Caribbean. The discussion evaluates institutional action of both institutions to advance and sustain a remote teaching model that values resilience discourse. Authors make a case for the building of resilience as a comparative factor for the development of skill through an open and critical discussion of lessons learned. We propose a framework for the development of CPLD that equally considers resilience with the development of skill for sustainable learning and development. The discussion draws on best practice and reflection from both institutional approaches, while evaluating challenges and opportunities, to develop a stronger model of practice for resilient teaching and learning.

Introduction and Problem statement

Higher education (HE) institutions globally were required to halt face-to-face operations with many opting to transition to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERT) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. ERT meant that many institutions had to design a plan that would address teaching and learning continuity, while acknowledging that the majority of faculty and students were not typical online/distance learners. Continuity in this setting therefore required taking into account the varying levels of lecturer skill, the discipline specific requirements, institutional resources to support ERT, and the overall level of uncertainty that COVID-19 presented.

In March 2020, Government guidelines in the UK and Caribbean, advised organizations and individuals "to start working from home" (Johnson, 2020; Maraj, 2020). In both the UK and Caribbean, HE institutional lockdown began in mid March 2020, and as a result, Universities had to design new ways of working while supporting teaching and learning continuity. The guidance from the governments of both the UK and Caribbean set into motion a series of events for university-wide planning and subsequent implementation. As its core product, teaching and learning was on the list of priorities for both institutions and it meant that faculty and students had to be upskilled to meet the demands of ERT. This discussion conducts comparative analysis and evaluation of the COVID-19 Continuing Professional Learning & Development (CPLD) response of a University in the Caribbean (CU), and a University in the UK (UKU). The inclusion of resilience as a factor in learning and development varies widely in the literature (Chow, Lam & King 2020; De Kraker 2017; Mansfield 2020; Sriskandarajah et al., 2010; Wang 2021). It is clear however, that resilience, while being a difficult concept to translate universally, is a recurring concern for those who design and deliver CPLD in higher education (HE) institutions. Authors make a case for the building of resilience as a comparative factor for the development of skill through an open and critical discussion of lessons learned. We therefore propose a HE CPLD framework that equally considers resilience with the development of skill for sustainable learning and development.

Pre COVID approach to Teaching & Learning at the UKU

The UK University is a research intensive University that prides itself on its speciality subjects, and recruits international and domestic students because of its unique approach to matters of democracy, development, economy, finance, public and corporate policy, human rights, migration, identity, legal systems, poverty, religion, and social change. While the institution has recognition for world leading research on the above matters, institutional reflection realised that there was a need to strengthen its approaches and outcomes around teaching and learning.

For general teaching development, the institution drew on the externally accredited taught courses for professional development, and offered regular Professional Development workshops on Academic practice. With a new Educational Development team in 2018, came a more strategic approach to this professional development, where the team were able to embed development into a wider institutional framework for improved student outcomes using data driven reflective practice. At the time of transitioning remote teaching, there was not a large uptake of externally accredited provisions, and so it was evident that another approach was necessary to meet the lecturers that were in the classroom, but not in training. The urgency with which the move to remote teaching occurred provided a vehicle for both COVID responses, but also access to those 'hard to reach' lecturers for general teacher training. Specifically in the context of remote teaching, Moodle was largely used as an information repository, and until remote teaching became a necessity, there was very little engagement with Moodle. We drew on this understanding of engagement with CPD in designing the institutional response to COVID-19.

Pre COVID approach to Teaching & Learning at CU

CU is a longstanding HE institution, located in the Caribbean with a number of campuses across the English speaking Caribbean. The institution, as a way of supporting the growing demands of learners, adopted the use of a university-wide Moodle Learning Management System (LMS) in 2008 and in 2015, the first fully online programme was established. A number of advances in policies, guidelines, and other support systems in 2017 propelled further adoption of online and blended courses which supported the effective expansion of distance and online learning at the CU. Prior to the pandemic, faculty were encouraged to use the LMS to supplement and enhance their teaching and learning. The use of the LMS allowed faculty to develop blended and online courses for their face to face programmes. However the effective use of the LMS improved over the years with drastic improvements taking place due in part to the greater level of support and CPLD offerings as well as the policies and guidelines needed to address quality assurance concerns in the blended and online setting. Consequently, by the time the pandemic began in 2020, blended and online teaching was well established at the CU.

Institutional responses & CPLD

CPLD is necessary to address human performance and learning gaps in higher education and this was even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic (Schildkamp et al., 2020; Cartwright et al., 2020). Varying levels of skills gap existed within both HE institutions and it was natural to address this through CPLD arrangements that adopted best practices and approaches to provide rapid tooling of faculty and students to effectively transition to ERT. Given the relatively wide and varying skill gaps and the level of support needed, many institutions sought to diversify and supplement CPLD approaches that provided in part to create and sustain communities that allowed faculty to make connections as a source of professional learning (Duncan Howell, 2010). COVID-19 therefore presented an opportunity for both institutions to reflect on, and address the organisational, technological, and pedagogical skill constraints and opportunities that ERT motivated. Preliminary discussions, observations and review of data provided a clear idea of some key CPLD themes: competence in using delivery tools to conduct synchronous sessions, competence in use of LMS, translating assessment practice in the remote teaching and learning context.

The UKU response

Several institution-wide committees were developed to consider and plan for effective delivery of ERT. The UKU's transition from face to face to ERT was managed by the newly formed Educational Development Team (EDT).

Training was developed through ongoing dialogue with faculties from across the institution, and using the principles of Equivalency theory (Simonson, 1999), sought to provide students with as equivalent a learning experience as possible. To build on the relationships that were already developed with academic departments, the EDT created a number of engagement mechanisms for teaching colleagues including: a shared google sheet for regularly updating departmental training needs; a weekly 'airing and sharing' session that was a one- hour open forum for discussion on innovations and challenges with online learning; and a weekly working group to design the curriculum and monitor the implementation of the CPLD mechanism put in place to manage the transition to online teaching.

With ongoing guidance, the EDT developed an online course - in large part because there was no other medium to access lecturers, but also because it is imperative to put the lecturers in the place of the students and expose them to what would be a new online environment. The course was designed on the basis that "Instructional design procedures should attempt to anticipate and provide the collection of experiences that will be most suitable for each student or group of students" (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009). A framework for professional development in online learning at UKU was developed and aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) for HE Teaching. The framework provided a roadmap for teaching staff to become internally certified to teach online. It integrated key elements of existing training and resources, with newly designed training that met the bespoke nature of COVID-19 responses. The framework had four pillars:

1. Online Tutor training from the student perspective
2. Online/Blended lecturer training
3. Non-Institutional designated professional development
4. Department/Discipline specific training

Caribbean University Response

Institutional response to COVID-19 focused on increasing capacity of both faculty and students to effectively transition to ERT. However, there was a major challenge of faculty and administration translating face-to-face teaching and learning without considering the different affordances and constraints of distance and online learning. For this reason, we wanted to be guided by distance education theoretical frameworks that would provide a basis for allowing faculty to reflect on best practices that would allow for addressing the sustained positive impact on teaching and learning during the pandemic. Interestingly, Moore (1993), contends that educators and instructional designers should be more concerned about the pedagogical than the geographical aspects of distance education. These pedagogical aspects, if not addressed, create a level of transactional distance that may impact the teaching and learning experience and as such, should be considered when designing online and distance learning courses (Moore, 1993; Shearer 2009). Guided by Transactional Distance Theory (Moore 1993, Moore 2013) the COVID-19 Teaching and learning continuity and CPLD was developed to allow facilitators to address structure, dialogue and learner autonomy.

Since we had a relatively short time, we implemented a ERT CPLD framework where face-to-face modality was deconstructed as ERT where student and faculty interfaced synchronously using Zoom. We also wanted to support the asynchronous ERT services to students so all faculty were required to adopt the LMS as part of the ERT services to learners. Remote Teaching faculty were therefore trained to use the LMS (Moodle) and Zoom as the primary environment for ERT. Besides the focus on technological tools, both institutions had to provide additional support in areas of online pedagogy to include providing support for assessment in the remote teaching and learning environment. A key challenge for both institutions was supporting faculty developing appropriate means of assessment in the ERT setting. This is discussed in the next section.

Assessment: issues, strategies & approaches

When ERT became a requirement, it was close to the end of the term, and as such, a major thrust in ERT CPLD response was remote assessment. At the time, assessment and feedback at the UKU was nationally benchmarked as low and declining (OFS, 2017-2020). There was a stronger emphasis on traditional assessment practice at both

institutions but more so at the UK where the written final exam or essay was the core assessment practice. Both institutions recognized therefore that there was a need to refocus attention on assessment and consequently this led to the strengthening and development of policies, guidelines and CPLD agenda to provide clear support for equivalent and alternative assessment methods, particularly in the case of exams. This forced many faculty to either transition from exam-based assessment to course work, or to diversify their assessments offerings. Popular alternative approaches included: a focus on authentic assessments that are tied to course outcomes and 48-hour exams. The capacity building sessions and encouragement offered to faculty by both institutions focused on online assessment and constructive alignment taking the view from equivalency theory (Simonson, 1999) that academic rigour can still be achieved in the online environment. Additionally, instructional designers and learning technologists spent a lot of time coaching and conducting hands-on diagnostic and support for faculty during the exam period. As a result of the lack of clarity and concern that existed around preparation for, and delivery of assessment, both Universities were able to identify a further development area in the pedagogy of the institution.

Faculty response to CPLD: Cross-cultural analysis and discussion

As previously mentioned, both institutions had ongoing engagement with teaching staff through online (synchronous and asynchronous) forums and activities and working groups. As a way of deepening the understanding of how faculty were coping with the transition to remote teaching and learning, both institutions conducted surveys with faculty to assess their perspectives on the transition to remote teaching and learning in comparison to pre-COVID teaching. The surveys were not identical as they had to take into consideration the differences between institutional culture, approaches, and resources i.e., different student management systems. However, the surveys were identical in thematic items. Themes used were:

1. Transition to online teaching
2. Teaching strategies & approaches
3. Areas of consideration for further Learning Development

Transition to Online teaching

At the UKU, there was a significant uptake of the developed training course, where enrolment was full (80 participants) within 3 days of opening the registration portal. Before the course started, feedback from academic staff indicated that there was little time to undergo training, and little will amidst the amount of psychological pressure due to lockdown restrictions. Despite the trepidation evidenced in conversation with academic departments, and the opt-in design of the course, there was representation from all departments among these participants, and a waiting list for those who could not fit into the first iteration. The course has been run three times since its first iteration. The UKU survey was administered at the midpoint of the first term of remote teaching, with 55 total responses: 43.6% female, and 56.4% male. CU had a very short time to equip faculty with the necessary understanding and competency in basic online teaching in the ERT setting with the strong focus on the use of tools (Zoom, LMS) to effectively support the CU ERT framework.

CU conducted a survey of faculty and students in April 2020. The survey revealed that faculty at CU felt that there was an effective transition of all classes to the ERT framework, and this was supported by 94% of those surveyed. Notwithstanding this, anxiety levels increased in 41% of the respondents. Some faculty (33%) felt overwhelmed and despite the CPLD provided some faculty did not fully understand what to do. A substantial percentage (67%) of faculty had technology access issues as well as inability to implement practical aspects of courses. Faculty at UKU believed they were able to meet their course objectives through the transition process with 83.6% stating they believed they were able to transition well from face-to-face teaching, and 85.5% believing they were able to accomplish their course objectives online up to that point. Most staff felt that their anxiety had not been affected by the training offered (58.2%), while 18.2% felt their anxiety decreased, and 23.6% felt their anxiety increased.

Teaching Strategies & Approaches

Both institutions shared similar pre-pandemic approaches and experiences regarding teaching strategies, and it was clear at the point of educational pivot that faculty did not have a shared understanding of what should constitute

effective practice for the ERT environment. Notwithstanding this, both institutions for the most part, used lecture methods (CU 85%; UKU - 74.5%), some faculty complemented their lecture with PowerPoint presentations (CU-89%; UKU-72.7%). At CU, faculty indicated that they used interactive sessions (CU-74%) while it was not clear what 'interactive here means' it contrasts the different 'pre-recorded' approach (49.1%) of UKU faculty. Group discussions accounted for (CU-62%; UKU-76.4%) while cooperative learning accounted for 38% (CU), and 25.5% (UKU), with a relatively low percentage (CU-13%; UKU-9.1%) indicating the use of role playing.

At UKU, the online course was designed to cause faculty to reflect on their approach to teaching and take into consideration the discipline specific needs of their students. The reflection was assisted through forums, quizzes, and interactive activities on Moodle, engaging colleagues in both internal and community dialogue around behaviourism, constructivism, and cognitivism, principles of student engagement and active learning. Feedback from colleagues within the course showed that they valued this reflective exercise, and that it was much needed at this time of reconsidering their academic practice. Colleagues also shared that they felt the dialogue would be better continued in spaces that allowed them to engage within their disciplines due to the widely varying approaches to teaching across disciplines. This reflection allowed departments to collaborate stronger than in some cases, they had before.

Reflections and recommendations for CPLD

Decrease in learning incentives: Readiness, anxiety, and transition. Both institutions recognised the importance of readiness, but there was a mixed level of preparedness based on previous engagement with ERT and capacity building in this area. At both institutions the challenge was creating a support that would allow for the urgency in time, staff wellbeing, but also for the various skill levels at which the faculty were engaging at the time. Consequently, resilience in ERT setting emerged as a recurring theme that needed to be interrogated and integrated in the ERT CPLD response of both universities. Beltman (2021) gives account of 4 dimensions of the person-focused thinking that supported teacher resilience: emotional, motivational, professional-related and Socia. These dimensions are illustrated in Table 1 and makes a good case for the agency of resilience from the individual level. Equally important is the role of the wider context - the organization or wider socio-cultural setting in which individuals are situated. For this reason, the organisational context is responsible to provide support for the development of resilience through the provision of a wide range of support services and conditions. For this reason, it is felt that the ERT CPLD response of both universities should factor support at the individual, and the organizational levels.

Table 1. Beltmans (2021) Aspects of resilience

Dimension	Aspects of resilience examples
Emotional	not taking things personally, sense of humour, ability to bounce back, emotion regulation
Motivational	self-belief and confidence, persistence and perseverance, having realistic expectations, being positive and optimistic
Profession-related	teaching competence and skills, classroom management, facilitating effective learning, being flexible and adaptable
Socia	asking others for assistance, interpersonal skills, ability to take advice from others, professional and personal support networks

Physical barrier: According to Chow, Lam, and King (2020), "in adversity, the main challenges we face are the physical barrier and the decrease in learning incentives." (p.385). This was evident in both institutions where the physical barrier presented was more of a technological barrier. In the case of the transition to remote teaching, access to and use of technology comprised the physical barrier. There were no longer physical classrooms available for teaching and engaging with students. Given the relatively low percentage of faculty that needed access technology in both universities, and the provision available for those who needed devices to enable remote teaching, the institutional focus in both universities was on capacity building for use of relevant online teaching approaches as well as software tools. Interestingly, faculty at UKU felt that their greatest concern after assessment, was how to use technology. This fed into the discussions and planning around CPLD that was offered. However, it was not long before it was clear that most colleagues were comfortable with the tools once they practiced using them, and the feedback on CPLD needs quickly shifted from a tool's focus to a focus on student engagement using the tools.

Assessment. A key finding for both institutions was the need to find ways to better embed research and practice-based assessments into the online learning environment. While innovation was difficult to aspire to under the difficult circumstances in the pandemic, there were faculty who did innovate and found ways to engage their students meaningfully through online assessment. Simple solutions such as increased frequency of low stakes formative assessments have proven to be valuable in engagement with students. There is still significant development needed in the methods of assessment used, and in both institutions, there is commitment to deepen adoption of alternative and authentic assessment. Research has been commissioned at the UKU to understand how to enhance student experiences online through assessment, and changes to policy and QA practices are constantly changing to reflect this research. Key foci of this research are work-based/related assessment, and racial attainment gaps that have been found to decrease during online assessment.

Deepening value for Resilience ERT CPLD framework

What was an initial and clear lesson learned, was that both institutions focused on skill development without fully addressing resilience. It is important to note that as institutions, both UKU and CU were able to demonstrate resilience in their ability to respond, adapt, and continue to offer assessments and teaching for students. This resilience filtered through the design of CPLD and was demonstrated by the individual teacher commitments to innovation, change, and student success. However, neither institution was able to articulate to teaching staff, nor clearly embed resilience as a critical factor in the necessary adaptation of ERT. Likewise, Chow, Lam, & King, (2020) argues for the need in developing a Crisis Resilience Pedagogy (CRP) through careful attention to a range of elements: adaptability, creativity, connectivity, diversity, endurance. Developing Crisis Resilience pedagogy is "a teaching and learning approach that enables teachers to act rapidly and to adapt creatively in navigating through any critical situations or emergency circumstances" (Chow, Lam, & King, 2020, p. 348). Both CU and UKU recognised the value of embedding resilience in ERT CPLD framework before crisis to ensure that faculty are equipped to be resilient when crisis comes.

While the COVID-19 challenge required both institutions to present a feasible ERT CPLD response, it was expected that faculty would have varied response rates regarding transitioning to a ERT model that was technology and web dependent. This level of response rate is supported by Walker & Jenkins (2016), who, for example, confirm that adoption of delivery models that are technology enhanced as being typically slow. Notwithstanding this perception, we recognised the value to ground a CPLD response that encouraged faculty engagement in resilient teaching practice that focused on student-centredness which according to Harwood & Clarke (2006) provides for more enduring professional development. This would have been an opportunity for both institutions to engage for example with the dimensions of personal resilience practice as illustrated by Beltman's (2021) dimensions.

The need for a sustainable professional development framework required well thought out planning, a strong monitoring and evaluation framework, and longevity in the reflection on resilience in academic practice. Furthermore, both institutions recognised that the transition to online teaching in 2020 was an emergency response, and while the principals of CPLD were used in the respective courses and training that was offered, the CPLD provided by both UKU and CU was not intended to be a comprehensive CPLD programme in its ideal state. For this reason, effective CPLD programmes should be designed with crisis resilience pedagogy as an underpinning principle. Meaningful CPLD should be designed taking into consideration relevant and appropriate assessment practice, innovative teaching approaches, while balancing the overall wellbeing of the faculty and to meaningfully address student outcomes, success, and positive learning experience both before, within, and after the ERT setting. Figure 1 below illustrates the major themes and focus of a ERP CPLD framework that values resilience.

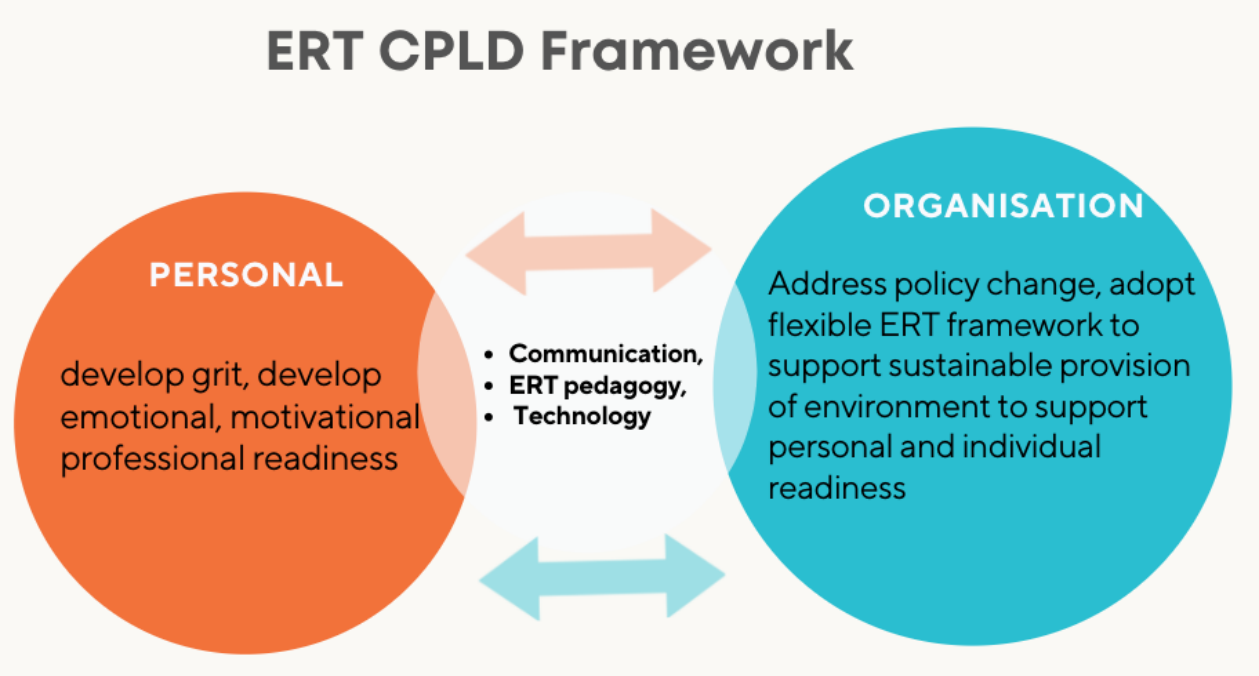

Figure 1 - Conceptual ERT CPLD Framework

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