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Creating a Community of Practice to Re-define Undergraduate Nursing Teaching and Learning during the Covid –19 Pandemic: Use of Digital Technologies

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Introduction

The nursing profession globally is facing unprecedented times due to the coronavirus outbreak (Covid-19) that has been labelled a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). A pandemic describes an infectious disease where we see significant and ongoing person-to-person spread in multiple countries around the world at the same time.

The education of nurses also faces unprecedented times with schools, colleges and university closures, and most people within the United Kingdom (UK) and globally, working from home having to self-care or care for others. Within this content, the delivery of nurse education is more challenging than ever.

Undergraduate nursing programmes across the UK generally offer a range of teaching and learning strategies, recognizing that learning and assessment will take place in both practice and academic settings and will involve working and learning with students from other disciplines as well as their own. Indeed, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) and European Union are explicit in that undergraduate nursing programmes require proportions of theoretical and practical components of study totaling a minimum of 4600 hours and that each proportion is assessed (NMC 2018). Examples of approaches to teaching and learning are included in box 1.

More recently, the NMC have produced emergency standards for nursing and midwifery education, aimed to provide education providers and practice learning partners with the flexibility to enable students within their final six months of their pre-registration nursing and midwifery

programmes to complete their training within clinical placements, while ensuring all learning outcomes are met (NMC 2020).

Box 1 Examples of Approaches to Teaching and Learning

<p>Lead lectures – to provide foundation material for further study as well as exposure to notable guest lectures by key individuals from practice, service users and carer’s and academia and to ensure students are exposed to the wider national and international context of nursing.</p>	<p>Virtual learning environment – A blended learning approach making effective use of the University information technology to support and facilitate learning off site. This includes on-line discussions and collaborative working tutorials using conferencing, and projects.</p>
<p>Group tutorials & seminars – To enable students to further explore key topics with their peers and engage in open discussion, debate and collaborative learning activities.</p>	<p>Critical reflection – Reflection on practice experience and ongoing personal and professional development to develop and enhance both professional and ethical behaviour.</p>
<p>Enquiry focus learning – to expose students to real world problems and scenarios, supported in engaging in an in-depth exploration and discussion. This may take the form of a theoretical exercise or a skills-based or simulated activity.</p>	<p>Self- directed learning - essential for development of key skills and independence in choice of learning material as well as future autonomous practice.</p>
<p>Clinical practice experience teaching and learning will include exposure to a range of practice learning opportunities across a range of care settings within the NHS, Private and voluntary and independent sector where students learning will be facilitated by experienced practitioners in both specific fields of practice, and interprofessional learning experience as well as simulated opportunities</p>	<p>Independent study: to enable students to act as independent, autonomous learners of whom can utilise experiential learning to develop professional practice.</p>

The normality of the Higher Education Institution (HEI) has been challenged due to the sudden closure of universities as a result of the current coronavirus pandemic. This closure has disrupted teaching and learning, as we know it. Overnight there has needed to be a shift to the way that nurse education is delivered with nurse academics having to adopt a facilitator role, getting to grips with digital technologies as the sole means to deliver the theoretical component of its nursing curricula. Indeed, Standard 7 in the new NMC Emergency Standards states that theoretical instruction can be replaced with distance learning, where appropriate to support student learning, which meets the required theoretical hours and learning outcomes (NMC 2020: 10).

Distance-flexible learning, flipped classroom, independent learning are not new concepts in the educational world. The key challenge faced by HEIs is readapting overnight to a completely virtual

approach in that educators must revisit the process of delivery, the digital tools available, and own identity as a lecturer. And more importantly, the importance of self-care and the care for our students, colleagues, family and community.

We offer a few tips based on our experience here at the University of Salford, of using digital technologies to deliver the theoretical component of the curriculum. This includes a box of tools to support the process of for example: choosing which tool to use-the decision-making process; exploring the role of the lecturer as facilitator; creating the support processes for academics who are working and delivering remotely; and buddying with colleagues from technical disciplines to maximise programme delivery success.

Box 2: Box of tools when using digital technologies to deliver the theoretical component of the undergraduate nursing curriculum

The technology	With the evolution of technology and digital capabilities, new opportunities emerge daily. Sessions could be delivered either via established traditional methods including webinars on ZOOM, Blackboard Collaborate, Teams, or, go in the open, with a Youtube channel. Most of these tools are usable and accessible via a smartphone, tablet or a computer.
Planning and designing	To ensure a high quality and student-focused delivery, the classic process of planning and designing a distance-learning program could last up to one year. Since we do not have a year, it is important to revisit the programme learning outcomes and the student needs, including childcare and special needs. These considerations would help you decide what is possible to achieve within a limited timeframe. Define specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and, timely (SMART) objectives. Next, consider how you teach – the length of time, resources (presentation, whitepaper, recorded session, activities) and the technology at hand. The technology in this situation might decide the type of resources you create. For example, if you are choosing a webinar, using Zoom, Teams or Collaborate you might only require a presentation and activities to prompt discussions and apply learning to practice Or, if you opt for a flipped classroom, an array of resources might be required, such as a video or audio, with subtitles or a whitepaper for students with reasonable adjustments, activities and prompts to stimulate discussion. Assessment and supervision should be carefully considered, primarily, for example if the format involves oral presentation or poster. In this scenario, the format remains the same; the method of delivery should change. The presentation and the poster could be submitted via the HEI Virtual Learning Environment, and the oral exam or feedback could be delivered via Teams or Blackboard Collaborate, as both tools offer options for recording.
Facilitator	The sudden change to the wholesale online learning challenged our own identity as educators. We recognise that being a good virtual educator with limited time and resource brings with it many challenges and remains difficult. We might fear technology, the silence in the virtual classroom, or simply we are not comfortable with talking to a screen. In

	<p>this view, the Socratic method of open enquiry between the student and teacher would allow both, educators and students, to gain greater confidence in talking to large groups and stimulate critical thinking.</p>
<p>Buddy with colleagues from technical disciplines</p>	<p>We are very passionate about multi-disciplinary working and included is an example from a business degree, which successfully delivers distance learning. Designed as a flipped classroom module the taught content makes extensive use of external resources such as bespoke video content created using video creation Screencastomatic software, video hosting such as Microsoft Stream (or Youtube unlisted videos) embedded into the VLE and exercises carried out on cloud-based eLearning platforms aligned to weekly core module themes. Guided study activities carried out by the student cohort are tested through knowledge reviews in class, achieved through a virtual synchronous team-space; student guided study is coordinated through Microsoft Teams for module and assessment support allows student to share screens and talk to the teaching team in real-time. Ongoing, continuous assessment (using Blackboard tests) enables the students to progress whilst understanding their levels of achievement and through synchronous online support through Microsoft Teams digital drop-ins where they can take part in assessments they have missed and improve their outcomes until the final hand-in dates.</p> <p>Teaching of the module is carried out through facilitation of activities where student tasks are aligned to application of knowledge acquired through their guided study. Short video content to support specific technical tasks allows students to revisit core knowledge throughout development of final assessed deliverables. Peer learning is achieved through synchronous online support with previous students offering guidance to enable successful end-deliverables.</p>
<p>Virtual tea and cake: self-care and caring for others</p>	<p>Take time to enjoy and celebrate, use the technologies to promote a culture for virtual social gathering. Technologies such as Zoom, Skype and Teams provide the forum to chat, explore, discuss and to check in on lecturer's well-being and reactions to the sudden and wholesale shift in the delivery of nurse education. Remote working can bring with it, feelings of isolation- virtual tea and cake promotes that sense of virtual community, thus minimizing feelings of social isolation.</p>
<p>Students on clinical placement</p>	<p>Most undergraduate nursing students on placement, engage with the online practice assessment document, whereby the communication between the practice assessor, academic assessor and student are recorded in the electronic document. During these unprecedented times, students on placement are experiencing nursing from with rapidly changing practice learning environments. There are multiple ways that students can be communicated with using technologies, such as the setting up of Teams for students to communicate with their peers and academic assessor/personal tutor. The virtual learning environment such as Blackboard has its discussion and Blog facility that can be used to build that sense of community and support students integrate theory and practice. Electronic tools should also be used to connect the students' practice assessor with key personnel in the HEI.</p>

Student engagement and measurement	The use of online tools such as VLEs (BlackBoard/Moodle), Microsoft Teams and video hosting by their nature have functionalities to gather metrics of engagement. Activation of VLE stats produces statistics on engagement with learning material content and hosted video have statistics for watching of content and the facility to leave comments. Creating a team space for the class to work in allows students to share articles and ask questions of the teaching team and their own cohort; furthermore, the administrative functions of teams produces metrics for engagement of users within the team space.
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Provided in box 3 below are examples of digital technologies that can be applied to effectively deliver the theoretical component of the quality undergraduate nursing programme.

We have also curated a series of sources for inspiration and additional support <https://francesbell.com/personal-2/gradually-then-suddenly-caring-and-careful-responses-to-covid-19/>

<https://aboutmanchester.co.uk/how-to-learn-online/>

Free resources during The COVID-19 global pandemic include for example ones developed by Health Education England e-Learning for Healthcare (HEE e-LfH): <https://www.e-lfh.org.uk/programmes/coronavirus/>

Another useful online resource is twitter, for example Follow @LTHEchat on Twitter, or view tweets at <https://twitter.com/lthechat>. Keep a column open in TweetDeck for #LTHEchat or a browser tab for https://twitter.com/search?q=%23LTHEchat&src=typed_query

Read pinned tweet for slideshare that explains how it works normally. During COVID-19 operating differently eg <https://twitter.com/LTHEchat/status/1243130827996712960>. Also, worth visiting is: <https://lthechat.com/>

Box 3 Examples of digital technologies that can be applied to effectively deliver the theoretical component of the quality undergraduate nursing programme.

Purpose	Technology
Webinars/virtual classrooms	ZOOM, Blackboard Collaborate, Teams
Video	Screencast-O-Matic, Microsoft PowerPoint, smartphone
Whitepaper/blog	Sway, PDF file, Wordpress
Audio podcast	SoundCloud, smartphone
Group work	Collaborate breakout groups, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, Facebook private groups, Padlet

Curate	Wakelet, Pinterest, Youtube playlists, Sway
Activities (independent or group)	Projects, questions and answers, games, surveys
Engage (games, surveys)	Kahoot!, Mentimeter, Blackboard Collaborate whiteboard, chats via Teams
Virtual tea and cake	Teams, WhatsApp, Facebook private groups, Twitter

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is not clear when universities will re-open, allowing for the resumption of the delivery of nurse education that provides the face to face and online theoretical learning opportunities. What we do know is that our students need to develop a clear sense of professional identity and that this is best achieved through nurse educators co-creating with its students and other key stakeholders such as practice partner organisations, a vibrant, active and stimulating teaching and learning environment. Demonstrated in this paper is how such an environment can be achieved through the application of digital technologies used to effectively deliver the theoretical component of the undergraduate nursing curriculum. Our box of tools should be used flexibly, taking into consideration the programme aims and intended learning outcomes, but also considering the well-being of nurse educators and students alike, all of whom are rapidly adapting to this whole new world of engaging with nurse education.

Finally, our box of tools extends to using digital technologies when engaging with students and those healthcare practitioners who support students teaching and assessment from within the clinical learning environment. Crucial is the need for students to feel supported by both practice and academic staff whilst they are undertaking clinical practice during these unprecedented times and indeed the NMC emergency standards make clear that placement allocations take account of current, relevant public health guidelines, with due regard to the health and well-being of individual students (NMC 2020:9).

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