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A moment in and out of time: precarity, liminality, and autonomy in crisis teaching

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores tensions and ambiguities for UK HE teachers during COVID-19. It analyses changed behaviours and routines for existing hybrid workers experienced in online pedagogy through three core axes of *precarity and security*; *time and perceptions of time*; and *communication*.

Twelve participants supplied photographs and written narratives depicting their teaching during the pandemic. To understand working lives at this liminal time, we undertook three-level photographic and content analysis, examining the interplay between homeworking challenges and extremities with an accompanying range of emotional responses.

Findings include changed routines, new independence, and tensions around resulting autonomy in a liminal lockdown phase when everyday life was anything but. Recommendations for HE management are to ensure that effective communication and collaboration are privileged between management and academic staff. Moving forward, the value of academic judgement and voice should be acknowledged as much as teaching capacity in strategic planning and tuition delivery.

Introduction

This study explores HE teachers' responses to abrupt transitions to online-only teaching from a hybrid distance-learning model during the uncertainties of the early weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the micro-level of teaching interactions, temporary intersection of liminal social instability, sudden extremity of workload and abandonment of routines provoked emotionally-charged responses, professional dissonance, and varying feelings of precarity. Using the concept of liminality, defined as a 'position of ambiguity and uncertainty' (Beech 2011, 287), we examine responses to the pandemic. This crisis state of betwixt-and-between can be described as a liminal (Turner 1982) phase, where

abrupt lockdown breakdowns of defined roles and organisational routines generated widespread confusion and labour intensity (Cai et al. 2021).

Whilst pre-pandemic, Collins, Glover, and Myers (2022) had argued that managerialism and standardisation were hastening diminishing employment conditions for those teaching in digital spheres, arrival of the liminal lockdown state also brought fresh forms of precarity into professional interactions. Previous research from Stewart (2012, 519) examines composites of precarity, arguing that whilst some are obvious and culturally marked, such as precarious employment, others are emergent, compressed and/or temporary, described as 'sea change' or 'darkening atmosphere'.

However, while times of crisis are often framed as fraught and challenging, impacting on professional identity and feelings of precarity via fear, anxiety, and doubt (Winkler 2018), previous studies on extreme work situations (e.g. Bozkurt 2015) also highlight positive outcomes from overcoming difficulties, e.g. self-determination and a growth mindset (Dweck 2017). Whilst teaching would not generally be considered an extreme occupation, long hours, confusion, and isolation generated similar emotional responses to those noted by Granter, McCann, and Boyle (2015) in studying armed forces and emergency-service workers. Surviving, then thriving in extreme work scenarios could then be seen to generate self-worth and accrue professional dignity (Bolton and Boyd 2003).

Early studies of lockdown teaching tended to consider practicalities of online-teaching pivots (Williamson, Eynon, and Potter 2020), including fluctuation impacts from changing lockdown regulations. Reitan, Waage, and Habib (2022) characterised HE responses as comprising three stages: emergency online-only pivot during lockdown, hybrid approaches reducing face-to-face numbers during social distancing, and mixed offerings due to campus quarantine rules. They acknowledge the sheer complexity, flexibility, and creativity required to develop and teach quality online offerings, concluding that these should be supported by management, and given sufficient time and budget going forward. The pandemic evidenced many cases where academics struggled with pedagogical practices for pivoting online (Rapanta et al. 2020) contributing to feelings of insecurity.

Gigliotti (2021) highlights additional tensions for academics working as managers and leaders of administration and faculty at this time. Unlike senior management who can distance themselves from operational decision-making they must 'walk the talk'. Managing a pandemic added further complexity with requirements for systemic understanding of organisational impacts, well-rehearsed principles for crisis management, and a clear view of how institutional values should shape choices and actions.

Three years on, we are now in reflective phasing of post-pandemic HE scholarship; emerging work includes topics such as digital repurposing (Gallagher, Nicol, and Breines 2023), tensions in 'space' and 'place' in moving to homeworking (Littlejohn 2023) and artefacts of pandemic teaching and learning (Reitan, Waage, and Habib 2022) that shed light on possible future directions for the sector.

Approach

Our research aims to understand the lived experience of distance HE teachers during the pandemic through axes of time, communication, and perceptions of precarity. This paper

is structured as follows. Our literature starts by discussing liminality as a concept, applying it to the lockdown state. Second, we extend liminality further into the extreme work paradigm (Cai et al. 2021). Our primary dataset focused on experienced part-time, HE teachers on fixed-term contracts, who responded to a call for paid research participants. Lockdown conditions provided opportunities to consider theoretical and methodological applications of liminality. Given our time-bound context of early pandemic weeks, we focused on short-term impacts, which enabled the exploration of lockdown teaching precarities and securities. This paper concludes with post-pandemic ambiguities and implications for HE teaching and management.

Liminality

Human experiences of the pandemic could be likened to a liminal rite of passage as identified by Turner (1982, 17). It was individually defined through many differing experiences and identified as an objective condition where it had its own events, rites, and responses (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003, 273). Powley's (2009, 1310) crisis management framing considers social processes in such emergency events, noting 'altered social structure' from 'liminal suspension'. He argues that whilst crises are often visible and abrupt, they also create new connections and resilience, although liminal suspension may be subtle and require reflection.

Although liminality is a productive term for exploring ambiguities and tensions in and around organisational life, Söderlund and Borg (2018) state the importance of separating collective-level processes (such as change management) from individual transition (such as identity work). This section will therefore first consider organisational approaches before funnelling into individual experiences from later research.

Organisational studies have recontextualised liminality from its anthropological roots to generate ideas on transitional time and space inhabited by organisational actors as part of changing routines and rituals of the workplace. Drawing from the Latin limen (for 'threshold'), van Gennep (1960) developed a three-stage ritual process of separation, transition (liminality), and incorporation. This was extended by Turner to denote a separation in time and space from previous social environments. Here persons in a liminal state are both liberated from expected obligations but also constrained by this special social status. Turner (1982, 24) refers to this as sacred space, an 'area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo … ' which might impact individuals' subsequent incorporated social experiences. Jamjoom (2022) considered a nuanced interpretation of van Gennep, noting that rites of passage are culturally dependent, and how transitions can be experienced differently by different societies, cultures, or people. This could then imply that during the pandemic our varied experiences made liminality 'both social and personal' (Thomassen 2014; Jamjoom 2022, 4).

Applications for liminality as a key concept for organisational studies are summarised by Czarniawska and Mazza (2003, 273), who, in their study of management consultancy as liminal space, note both its bindings and its opportunities, 'the exits are open and so, peculiarly for our time and place, also the entrances' (Czarniawska and Mazza 2003, 273). These ideas are enhanced by Sturdy, Schwarz, and Spicer (2006, 930) who considered potential productivities from suspending workplace routines. Here authors note important distinctions between who might and might not be invited to enter liminal spaces,

alongside conditions for negotiation and boundary setting. Whilst the liminal state might be judged painful, or positive, it is necessarily of limited duration for the affected group (Rottenburg 2000) and their interaction with wider society.

At the individual level, a subsequent flowering of liminality as conceptual approach to professional identity work from social constructivist perspectives comes via Beech (2011), who expands on discussion from Ybema et al. (2009) on the dialectic between individuals and the social structures they inhabit in their daily lives. Here Beech focuses on identity reconstructions, particularly the 'in between' state of partial change, teasing out two main strands; that of a temporary transition for reconstructing identity, and a more longitudinal experience of social ambiguities 'within a changeful context' (288). This idea of 'changeful context' is productive, with Küpers (2011, 45) linking rapid change events in organisations as 'triggers' for many forms of transition, noting how these thresholds give 'space for reflective suspension, moments when action is temporality held in abeyance' (46). In this way, the 'changeful context' also permits a more nuanced understanding of personal journeying, where liminality can be an individually-dependent, heterogenous experience (see Simpson et al. 2023). Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014, 68) also explicitly link concepts around liminal phasing for workplace identities, where 'individuals create identity narratives that must be socially tested and validated'. For example, in situations where changes lead to work-related identity loss, Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014, 68) evaluate how employees undertake sensemaking, regulating emotion to determine who they were and who they will be. They define the liminal period as self-constructed time with a sense of 'who I was' moving to 'who I am becoming'.

Returning to the critical streaming of approaches to liminality as advocated by Söderlund and Borg (2018), we adopt their call for more empirical investigations into the liminal experience itself, particularly temporal perspectives. Of their three themes for organisational and individual change-work (process, position, and place), we centre this paper on liminality as process. Specifically, how individuals experienced the liminal phase of teaching during the abrupt and extreme work conditions of the pandemic; how they developed new identities and behavioural responses to face these working conditions and what specific precarities, tensions and insecurities appeared.

Extreme work

Much debate in and around extreme work focuses on two major themes of intensities and boundaries, both of which are highly relevant to precarities experienced during the pandemic. A practical example of these conditions is summarised by Bayne and Gallagher (2021, 609) who described initial lockdown impacts, with staff having to 'radically reshape their teaching methods, shifting these online in a matter of days …'

Regarding work intensity, whilst research on those with all-consuming careers of 70-h weeks and high risk/reward were set out as initial conditions for extremity by Hewlett and Luce (2006), wider applications for when jobs might be considered 'extreme' rapidly emerged. Some of these discussions focus on the nature of work done in extreme settings, such as the armed or emergency services, where rapid judgements in life-or-death situations coexist with periods of mundanity, bringing different demands and intensities for workers (McCann et al. 2013). In terms of boundaries, difficulties

in determining what might be considered 'normal' and what might be deemed 'extreme' are problematised by Granter, McCann, and Boyle (2015, 446) who note that 'what counts … is context-specific and socially contested'. This is important, as ambiguities around socially acceptable boundaries of work bring extremity towards other fields of organisational research. These include macro conditions of the labour philosophies of neoliberalism that promote precarity and gig work, and to micro-level identity work undertaken by casualised workers (e.g. Cant 2020).

Hewlett and Luce (2006) also included details of workers' personal life, social life and culture. This points to extreme work encompassing employment, personal and social conditions. This tallies with Godber and Atkins (2021) who call for a more holistic approach to managing academics within pandemic situations with the inclusion of lifestyles, livelihood and experience.

Bozkurt (2015, 476) helpfully identified two distinct strands for extremity: extreme jobs, and extreme work, with one condition of the latter being *temporary* intensification. An example of this is retail staff when Christmas trading represented a temporary, and expected transformation to an extreme setting, where despite 'extraordinary demands' (484) regular workers were given 'enhanced discretion' as supervision fragmented (484). The study notes that many jobs 'are defined by punctuations of their normalised pace and routine intensity by sudden or predictable periods of extremisation' (478). Examples offered include the accounting year end, or exam periods for teachers and lecturers.

However, in the case of the pandemic, the word 'predictable' is no longer appropriate, whilst 'sudden' is imbued with new difficulties of individually and collectively sustained challenges in keeping organisations and wider society afloat. This is the basis of evidence put forward by Cai et al. (2021, 387) who return to the retail sector to note contrasts for key workers during the pandemic and the liminal nature of deconstructions and reconstructions of roles and responsibilities at this time. Describing the supermarket as 'like a war zone' (386), the authors highlight 'how government guidance, workplace practices, and the behaviours of customers, colleagues and management bring abrupt changes' (388), 'absence of leadership' (389) and the collapse of expected workplace routines. Here, the autobiographical account (389–91) of the liminal phase highlights a multitude of emotional responses including *anger, worry, shock* (at customer behaviour), *disappointment,* and *boredom.*

Conflicting and heightened emotions during early pandemic conditions are also emerging in research from other sectors. Unsurprisingly, analysis on social media postings by health workers during the pandemic by Ford et al. (2022) report extreme workload as the most prevalent topic. Authors highlight 'expressions of alienation and anger' (640) alongside personal risk and concern for patients, but also responses of hope and love. Similarly, desire for visible leadership to alleviate anxieties for care professionals emerges strongly from Shanafelt, Ripp, and Trockel (2020) alongside Willis et al. (2021) who note excessive hours, unpredictability, expanded duties and risk as contributing stressors. Considered in this way, the boundaries of extreme work could include workers' personal and social background, making it possible for individuals to have differing work experiences. Hence multiplying personal and social factors might threaten an individual academic in working in a sustainable manner (Godber and Atkins 2021).

Research design

Responses to liminal pandemic working conditions gave an interesting environment to study perceptions of precarity and (un)certainty in HE teaching, given the abrupt disruption to normal frames for working and learning heightening ambiguities and emotions. Interruption produced an intense, and bounded, period of experiences lasting from the initial lockdown order given on 16 March 2020 to the first phase of reopening schools on 1 June 2020 (Institute for Government 2022), broadly fitting a 'critical period' of a time of crisis (Stein 2004).

Our research design took micro-interaction insights from 12 Business and Law tutors who produced reflective narratives with accompanying photographs portraying their working lockdown. We wanted participants to capture everyday encounters that had value to them (Kelly 2020). Adopted pandemic practices, and accompanying emotions, intensifications and challenges related to their academic work serve as testimonies of lockdown teaching. As described by Frank (1995, 139), such testimonies present 'as some fragment of a larger whole', in this case, the lockdown experience, that an individual 'witness' cannot grasp 'in its entirety'.

We report on emotional responses to work, and activities that facilitate work, rather than the totalising effects of the whole lockdown experience. For example, comments around fitting childcare around meetings were included, but our findings section excludes narrative paragraphs related solely to family well-being.

In terms of the photographs, we used the flexible approach of respondent-generated visual data as a means of supporting the narratives which we contextualised in relation to the text. Phenomenologically, photography is a visual system of representation, illustrating both what is physically depicted and also offering multi-layered meanings. Photographs are polysemic, with participants seeing and understanding and perceiving them in different ways. The aim was for the participant to explore the significance or meaning of the photographs and 'elicit a story' (van den Scott 2018, 722) which anchored the narrative.

Photographs can offer three levels of image analysis (Collins, Glover, and Myers 2022). Rose (2016, 6) defined this as 'scopic regime' because it refers to what is seen and also how it is culturally constructed. We analysed the composition of photographs, their content and design within the context of pandemic work and life which produced them. We aimed to understand the communicative intentions and, ultimately, personal, organisational, and social meanings embedded in the images. Pink describes this as an 'anthropology of the relationship between the visual and other elements of culture, society, practice' (2006, 144). First, was the pre-iconographic description when all details of the image were systematically described. Second, the iconographic analysis, where the meaning of the image was established by using knowledge from beyond the image and framing together with the pandemic teaching narrative. Third, the iconological interpretation, the unintended meanings of the images we reconstructed by considering their historic, political, and social context.

In terms of the text, we reviewed the data to check the fit with the initial headings supplied to respondents. These had been derived from an internal operational teaching report from which the axis of precarity, communication and time emerged. These headings helped structure responses, however, participants were free to interpret meaning.

We used content analysis (Miles and Huberman 1984) to cluster our data and maintain congruence with our visual approach, in recognition that respondent narratives were historically and culturally situated. This perspective also allows the lockdown to be viewed as a social process with its own specific practices and social knowledge. As a team we then reviewed each theme to uncover the underlying insights and to establish what makes it meaningful to the research question, by presenting our findings though these three axes. In the next section we present the images taken by the participants and narrative text boxes to illustrate the three levels of photographic analysis. This accompanies our analysis of the photographic and textual data using verbatim quotes.

Discussion

Axis 1: precarity and security

This first axis saw respondents all experiencing forms of precarity and emotional vulnerabilities as they pivoted solely online, despite previous assimilation (Littlejohn 2023, 367) with digital teaching methods. Fear was invoked through unpredictability and 'socially constructed chaos' (Ettlinger 2007, 322) of the stay-at-home order and crisis footing. 'Early March was categorised by worry …. what alternatives and possibilities were being put in place', (R6) and quickly being 'at breaking point' (R10).

R4 communicated a feeling of stillness and abandonment in this liminal time, of a future 'limited to looking out of my little office window', commenting on 'no excuse to get out of the slippers' (Image 1).

Other emotional responses from respondents included anger at perceived abandonment by university leaders; 'chaotic … left waiting for central instruction' and 'no direct support from our managers' (R1), but also poorly-timed and confusingly written messages that undermined staff and created confusion. One emotionally charged example where work pushed extremes was assessment changes sent out at 5 pm on a Friday, 'who else was going to be there for the students … !' (R4). R2 highlighted the same disruption and collapse of routine, with herself as the recipient of 'angst, panic, frustration and consternation' from students as online forums 'buzzed' with questions in a way 'never' previously experienced.

Insecurities were fed by a 'sense of loss that traditional structure of the academic year has dissolved' and ambiguities around the 'myriad potential directions the future could go' (R9). This was exacerbated by macro conditions, with several respondents citing daily government briefings and loss of everyday social routines and tools (e.g. empty bus stop, R9) as having emotional impact, 'precariousness of work … media fuelled this fear' (R10). Vulnerability was not limited to university work precarities, e.g. 'finish off these modules, and that's it?' (R4). More existential responses to the liminal state were also invoked, 'this appalling feeling at the early days of lockdown as to whether you are marking your last [assignment] or the student might not be alive to read the feedback'(R1). Here we see respondents confronting stages of identity past, present, future and planned (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly 2014) (Image 2).

Yet we also noted Ettlinger's (2007, 327) paradox of security in the framings of respondents' discourses through attempts to bind this liminal period as special and/or different and in 'throwing' themselves into 'comforting' (R7) self-organised work routines as

Image 1. Bounded in slippers (R4). Image 1 was taken by the participant in their home at the beginning of the pandemic. The two slippers are sitting next to each other but with the toes pointed inwards. The image is presented and used to inform the researchers that the participant has been wearing her slippers at home during her working day. This is because her working life, since the pandemic started, has been constrained to using her computer in her home and she has been unable to meet any students face-to-face. The slippers are old and well-used and rather forlorn, denoting how often she has worn them and how isolated she has been from other people because she is unable to leave her home.

coping mechanisms. Tributes to 'comradeship of colleagues' (R1) in extremity and active attempts to be 'caring and collaborative' (R10) sat alongside a sense of being 'needed' through 'endless issues' (R4) by the institution. This also manifested in practical comments about confidence building, e.g. 'new skills' online (R11), and switching to developing new resources such as webinars (R8) and getting 'out there' in publishing (R8). Some also gained strength from previous identities, using them as coping mechanisms. One noted the period as a 'throwback to [a] former career in the emergency services which I easily slipped into' (R5).

Axis 2: time and perceptions of time

Analysis of images and narratives here showed time manifesting in unexpected and challenging ways, what Turner describes as a 'moment in and out of time' (1969, 360) as social expectations ceased. Like Reitan, Waage, and Habib (2022, 10) we noted recurring ambiguities for our respondents in and around how time was experienced, both generally, in relation to impact as days became (un)structured, and specifically in relation to management 'ownership' of academic staff time.

Image 2. The empty bus: fearing the familiar (R6). This image of a bus stop was taken by the participant showing a bus stop close to her home. The bus shelter is located in the countryside, and you can see the shadow of the trees from the other side of the road. The image is taken focussing on the bus shelter and the direction of travel. The shadows from the trees give a sinister feel to the image even though the sun is shining on the bus shelter. There is a contrast between the familiarity of the shelter in sunshine and the road, indicating travel which is in shade.

In relation to unstructured days, several respondents chose the structure of chronological order to their narratives, firstly reporting on time perceptions alongside the lockdown order and 'brief period of chaos, which was quite unpleasant' (R5). Here they discussed abrupt pivots to online meetings and teaching, alongside emptying diaries as they 'took on the persona' (R5) of homeworkers. These discussions were framed within their wider professional identities under extremity, e.g. 'my sleep … disturbed … lacking my usual confidence' (R10) and 'impact on current quality of my teaching'. (R7)

As lockdown became established, we noted a plasticity (Ybema 2010, 483) in perceptions of time, e.g. 'forgetful of time' (R12), from all our respondents. R2 commented how, alongside her little boy, she was asking 'every day what day it is', as expected adult, and professional conceptualisations of 'time had no meaning' (R2). Similarly, R3, noted an initial positivity, 'more time to get everything done' was giving way to 'time running

away from me' by May. R4 also lost track of expected time, reporting feeling 'completely drained' by 'endless days' in front of a computer, consciously seeking to counteract this fatigue by outdoor exercise, and immersion in nature (Image 3).

In the latter part of narratives, we noted respondents coping strategies through adopting a 'temporal template' of linear self-continuity, Ybema (2010, 483). Here, 'perceptions of control reappeared … .' (R5) as participants sought to 'construct a linear sense of self-continuity' during a 'precarious, ill-defined context' (Ybema 2010, 484). This was evidenced through active measures of 'trying to stick to work hours' (R6) and even deliberate scheduling in what would previously be considered extreme hours, 'established my … time from 3am to 9am … when no one else was up' (R10). Images here also asserted control, mitigating work stress in 'exchanging commuting hours' for 'little projects' of value (R5) (Image 4).

Image 3. The endless road – to where? (R4). This image was taken by the participant. It is an image of a countryside road junction. The road disappears into the distance as it dips down out of sight. The perspective of the image shows the contracting narrowing field of vision as the road appears narrower. There are roads off the junction, but we cannot see where they lead. The sky is grey and cloudy with only a glimpse of blue on the top left-hand side. The road is one the participant used to run along as part of her exercise regime, but now she is shielding. She wonders when she will be able to run along it again and where she can go. The clouds are descending and with it comes the gloom and uncertainty of what the day can bring.

Image 4. Time for a Japanese garden (R5). This image was taken by the participant. The participant is a keen gardener, and he has composed his image to detail his Japanese garden which he has painstakingly tended over the years. The focal point of the image is the table and chair rather than the foliage and planting. There are two posts denoting a pergola construction giving the sense of a cocooning safe place. The area is private and secluded. The image hints at the participant having time to now appreciate his gardening efforts in a calm and peaceful environment.

In relation to management ownership of 'intense' (R10) academic worktime, two distinct phases were seen. Initial top-down decisions to cancel exams and reduce assessment, 'created an avalanche of work' (R5) that impacted immediately on evenings and weekends for teaching staff. However, based on narratives, once the initial 'lack of direction' (R1) and 'chaos' (R1, R5, R11) subsided as that decision was implemented, managers did not then reassert control in any sustained way. Management veered between extremes from 'highly engaged to the non-existent' (R1), as module teams independently

adopted their own models and student workload patterns (R1). Respondents reported themselves 'thinking strategically' and planning time for 'personal and institutional growth' (R6).

Time was often seen as a contested resource, whether in short supply, 'exhausting … I was inefficient in the first few weeks of the pandemic' (R7) or an object for negotiating with management. Respondents reported being offered choices on extra work and new responsibilities, (R1, R4, R5) discussing time available to take it on. Some saw opportunity in new time available 'at the margins' (R8). Like Barley and Kunda (2004) and Söderlund and Borg (2018, 881), we see here evidence of participants developing new (temporary) identities to cope with the liminal phase, as skills and competencies developed to take advantage of a managerial vacuum and opportunity for self-direction.

Axis 3: communication

Pradies et al. (2021, 155) use a paradox lens to explore pandemic tensions; their discussion explores difficulties for leaders 'tasked to provide a clear vision … while themselves immersed in fog'. This was borne out in our respondents' comments around communication, with the image below evocative of the confused and noisy communications characterising early lockdown life and work (Image 5).

We heard considerable dissonance from all respondents on this topic, through an initial extreme phase of 'frustrations' (R5) and 'worries' (R11) of 'waiting for some kind of direction' (R1), followed by 'watching management struggle' with 'silo thinking', 'lack of agility' and communication 'obsessions' with closing down campus operations rather than 'reaching out' to lecturers (R1). Management from faculties was considered 'invisible or at least inconsistent' (R1). Decisions on cancelling classes, exams and meetings and associated communications were 'not-thought-through' (R5) and often contradictory, whilst student support lines 'cannot cope' (R11). This produced 'waves of panic' (R11) and 'distress' (R4) from students, contributing to lecturers' own insecurities and building on already demanding workloads, 'it didn't and shouldn't have occurred to the students that I had worries … (R4).

These endless new challenges and tasks academics were required to keep up with ran alongside sudden structural suspensions as academic leaders struggled with the demands of leadership when 'the future changes day by day' (Gigliotti 2021, 436). Peculiarities of managing at a distance and leaders own responses to extreme workload meant that this lynchpin role for information flows from above and feedback on how students and tutors responded became temporarily separated (Beech 2011, 287).

However, most respondents then began fresh paragraphs prefaced with 'a couple of weeks later … ' or 'shortly' or 'soon', which identified a second phase of communication outputs and new sureties as new routines established. Some were from management, as work was re-distributed, as 'new postgrad modules commenced' (R5), new online formats created (R12) and 'ceaseless marking' (R1, R2, R10) got underway. Students too were reaching out 'to talk to someone different' with 'great attendance' (R2) recorded at online tutorials, and 'endless … emails, calls, texts' (R4) keeping everyone busy but productive. Reporting activity engendered positive responses from several people as they settled to a 'new normal' (R10), 'calm, happy and able to cope' (R3), 'making you in control of a situation that robs you of control' (R6).

Image 5. A world 'off-kilter' (R4). This image was taken by the participant while on a previous vacation. It is taken on a sunny bright day and denoted metal sculptures placed along a pedestrian walkway within a public park. The image shows the perspective of the sculptures as they grow smaller to the eye when viewed from the walkway. They illustrated a world which is not static and is changing but not in a logical ordered way. The shapes and view are hard to communicate to others and this was how she perceived communications during her working day. The sculptures are unsettling, and the participant believed that this represented her world during the pandemic.

This phase was characterised by 'nice noises' despite 'muddled thinking' (R1) from leaders, as lecturers adopted a 'just do it' (R12) approach to combat uncertainties. Line managers adopted 'regular and understanding' (R6) communications without previous metrics. 'No-one seemed to raise … issues, and it was a plus to get one or two appreciative comments' (R1). Lecturers were making their decisions on extensions for assessments (R1, R2, R12) and relaxing academic frameworks to support students; 'I must confess I was probably generous in marking' (R1) (Image 6).

Reflection on the findings

Axes chosen helped explore intensifications in work activities, both in increased precarities and newfound assertions of autonomy and certainty with outcomes demonstrating a rapid repointing of academic selves. These were engineered through micro-interactions of teaching and learning during liminal lockdown conditions which saw self-empowerment burgeoning during the reduced managerialist phase.

Image 6. Communicating design. This image was taken of the participant showing her working on a drawing tablet illustrating one of the platforms she had used in the past to communicate designs for her PhD. The image shows her drawing on the tablet and there is an architectural design featured on the pad. The participant is in control of her work communicating the designs. She contrasts this with the chaos of communication from the university at the beginning of the pandemic. At this point, she was not in control of her work or how she could communicate but rather bombarded from both directions with queries from students and conflicting instructions from the university. Questions went unanswered because she thought faculty management did not have any answers.

A nuanced picture of multi-dimensional responses emerged. Whilst some of our participants found lockdown challenging or damaging, some also welcomed the becoming of alternative selves through new independence, responsibility and release from tired teaching routines. In these cases, positive identity framings emerged, encouraging the development of future resilience. They generated insights into tensions between physical and digital 'embodiment', surety of frontline teaching roles and fears that professional life may never be the same again. We found that different workplace selves became a possibility with the rapid move to a digital, immaterial place, therefore creating a sense of liminality. We also noted the mitigation of psychological impact by keeping busy during the extreme lockdown period noted by Cai et al. (2021, 389) and the absence of leadership norms. Whilst the full consequences from potential changes to physical and social selves for professionals will play out, the narratives produced at that lockdown moment are important for understanding uncertainties in the sector.

Conclusion and further research

Using frames of liminality and extreme work, we were able to reflect on emotions and behaviours of HE teaching staff at a time when antecedent frameworks and expectations were temporarily suspended, enabling alternative forms of student support. Whilst at the time multiple and conflicting communications from the university contributed to instability and increased feelings of precarity, opportunities were generated for individual academics taking student learning into their hands. Goffman's (1956, 166) 'moments of great crisis' were applicable here; usual 'sharp lines' of demarcation were blunted, and the 'momentary crumble' of expectation when general 'working consensus' and 'public keeping of place' were suspended.

We are now in a post-pandemic phase of 'incorporation' (Turner 1982), as temporary intensifications of extremity are no longer in play. Management, at least on the surface, seems to recognise the value of frontline distance-learning teaching staff and professional autonomies. This temporary receding of controls seemed to refresh legitimacies of the lecturer as knowledgeable and expert. Whilst full assessment structures have returned, the semblance of mutual respect and more consultative decision-making reported by 'residual appreciation and understanding' (R1) tentatively remain. Longer-term outcomes of changed routines, new independence and resulting autonomy show few signs of institutionalisation. Early conclusions point to intense and emotive phases of work producing both positive and negative impacts.

Empirical findings indicate this liminal time of crisis contributed to changing conditions for precarities and securities in teaching. For example, new fluidities in time for students and tutors alike offered opportunities for refreshed academic independence away from pre-pandemic managerialism and controls. Communication 'fog' (Pradies et al. 2021, 155) and resultant autonomy appeared to reassert teachers' sense of their value to both students and their institutions. This helped propel more collegiate approaches including current hybrid work solutions which fits better with current social expectations and improves work–life balance (ONS 2022).

Resistance and negotiatory movement on issues such as precarious contracts and work conditions for HE staff may become emboldened by professional validations made during the crisis. In some senses, academic identities have been refreshed; the pandemic has contributed to levelling HE provisions with the post-covid blended hybrid model neither 'utopian nor dystopian' (Clegg 2011, 179); although still malleable. This study concurs with Parpala and Niinistö-Sivuranta (2022) who call for improvements in HE communication and collaboration during a crisis or pandemic. Our findings support Godber and Atkins (2021) who asked for a more holistic approach to understanding individuals' circumstances by including lifestyle, experience, and employment.

We noted, like Czarniawska and Mazza (2003, 272) before us, there was 'a sense of freedom', a 'possibility of creation' and shared sense of community with fellow travellers during this liminal phase. Whilst Gabriel (2020, 328) notes pandemic silences 'deprived us of our usual defences in noisy social interactions', he also outlines the value of the crisis in offering a range of possible futures. These include both fear of populist demagoguery, but also a potential to 'sweep away' (p. 329) existing neoliberal doctrines and ways of working for a brighter future.

Ethics statement

Disclosure statement

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