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**Transformative Learning in Times of Global Crisis:
Reflections on Collaborative Working Practices**

Many are familiar with the mantra “failing to plan is planning to fail,” and for educators, planning is an essential function of the job. Yet, nothing had prepared the world—or higher education institutions—for the level of planning required to address the impact of COVID-19, which continues to test the solidity of contingency plans and the solidarity of societies. Over a billion learners have been affected since the start of the pandemic (UNESCO), while the long-term impact remains unknown. Globally, steps taken to deal with the crisis at all levels vary significantly. Using transformative learning (TL) as a framework, here, we present the approach taken at the individual level by five faculty members teaching English for academic purposes (EAP) courses at Duke Kunshan University (DKU), a Sino-U.S. joint-venture university based in China. By exploring how we united as a team to overcome the uncertainties presented by the pandemic, we offer recommendations for faculty members beyond contexts of crisis.

At DKU, we deliver EAP writing courses as part of the first-year undergraduate curriculum. Spring Semester is divided into two seven-week course blocks (Spring Sessions 1 and 2, hereafter SS1 and SS2), and the EAP courses use the theme of intercultural communication, following a content-based instruction (CBI) approach. CBI is, according to Roy Lyster, “where subject matter is used at least some of the time as a means for providing second language learners with enriched opportunities for processing and negotiating the target language through content” (1). While all EAP writing sections share common goals and objectives, faculty members have autonomy to design and deliver their sections. Finally, it is noteworthy that SS1 was delivered in person for the first three weeks and then, due to COVID-19, was taught online via asynchronous instruction for the latter four weeks. Whereas SS2, with students distributed into different sections from SS1, was delivered entirely online using both synchronous and asynchronous approaches.

Confronted by an immediate transition to online teaching, many educators across the world found themselves facing multiple stressors and negative affective factors that could not be dealt with by a blanket approach, despite the institutional support available. During a crisis, internal factors such as anxiety, self-esteem, motivation, and attitudes

are impacted significantly, which may negatively influence teaching. To address this situation, Madiha Shah proposes that talking, sharing, and collaborating at a micro-level (among peers and within course groups) as well as a macro-level (institution- or sector-wide) can help reduce affective factors that may have a negative impact on faculty well-being (1243). Reflecting on COVID-19-induced experiences to aid understanding and growth, we interpret our experience through a TL framework because it provides a unified learning process for adult practitioners, and is widely applicable and transferable.

Rooted in adult education, TL is usually taken to mean deliberate interventions by educators in the curriculum in order to effect deep change in students. Jack Mezirow, who coined the term, defines it as “the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (Transformative Dimensions 167). In other words, TL conceives that a learner goes through phases, from disorientation to reflecting on one’s assumptions, planning a course of action, acquiring knowledge and skills based on this plan, and reintegrating the newly learned information into one’s life (Kroth and Cranton). TL takes place when a person goes through an experience or encounters a perspective that contradicts or does not fit into their values and beliefs.

According to Mezirow (Transformative Learning 19), transformative learning involves ten phases

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. Critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition of one’s discontent and the process of transformation
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan
8. Provisional trial of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective

The learner can choose to either ignore this new perspective or reflect on this new perspective and their own values and beliefs and act upon them, leading to full TL.

For many, COVID-19 acted as a disorienting dilemma, making us question what we normally take for granted. Although particularly affected

by this crisis of public health and public cohesion, expectations on faculty and the scope of faculty responsibilities did not change to account for the worldwide crisis—if anything, they increased. Many faculty have experienced tensions among the new teaching context that engendered new and, in many cases, additional responsibilities; varying, difficult, and uncertain individual circumstances; and deeply felt professional obligations to continue providing high quality learning experiences and pastoral care for their students. Many of us had to question and reevaluate how we teach while grappling with how to balance the need to model professionalism with the need to recognize—and display our own—humanity, in a very highly emotionally charged environment.

Spring Semester Session 1 Transformative Learning Experience

When COVID-19 emerged in China as a national threat in January 2020, over 300 tertiary-level institutions took decisive action to protect their students and employees by transitioning to online teaching (Lau et al.). As the DKU academic calendar predominantly follows the U.S. system, our Spring Semester began in early January, with the Lunar New Year break occurring at the end of our third week of classes, thus placing DKU at the forefront of the global transition to online teaching and learning. What is more, the Lunar New Year is a time when many people in China travel abroad, resulting in the global dispersion of our university community. Having gone on vacation and research trips, many faculty, staff, and students were ill-prepared to work from home with the majority of physical teaching and learning materials remaining inaccessible in offices and dormitories due to sudden restrictions on local and international travel.

At the beginning of SS1, several of the authors held weekly in-person meetings with the aim of sharing teaching ideas, in-class experiences, and resources. After the Lunar New Year, these meetings continued online via Zoom, with all five authors, and frequently lasted over the scheduled hour. Having specific aims but no fixed agenda, these meetings transformed into a space where we could be vulnerable and share our experiences with not only online teaching but also situational and personal struggles. As SS1 progressed online, we found that collaborating with, and feeling connected to, our peers around the world provided an avenue for both reflecting on our teaching, our profession, and the chaos in our lives, as well as for changing in depth how we approached our teaching.

As instructors' teaching environments are parallel to students' learning environments, teacher well-being is crucial to effective learning. We encountered burnout and negative emotions, which can have substantial implications for faculty motivation as well as on teaching and learning, and meeting weekly helped us share and alleviate pressures associated with such negativities. Using the TL framework (outlined above), we make

sense of our experience as being triggered by a unique set of disorienting dilemmas induced by COVID-19. We responded by self-examination individually and in a group and sought to explore options for action by openly and objectively analyzing our experiences and expectations for the rest of the semester. With only one weekend between the completion of SS1 and the beginning of SS2, which was to be delivered through a mix of synchronous and asynchronous online sessions, action was required in order to make significant steps to reduce negative affect and enhance working efficiency and personal well-being.

Spring Semester Session 2 Transformative Learning Experience

Factoring in the positive impact that team meetings were having on well-being, we continued to hold weekly scheduled meetings to provide stability, give everyone the opportunity to discuss teaching-related ideas, and share their experiences. These meetings helped fill the gap in professional support that physical distancing created and provided a safe space for critical reflections on our individual and group teaching. Sharing and discussing our discontent with specific situations (see figure 1) allowed us to share our transformative processes with each other. These sharing sessions paved the way for new relationships beyond collegial spirit, forging friendships and emotional ties. As a result, these new relationships enabled us to gain and sustain a degree of work-life balance, strengthening confidence and self-efficacy. Based on our new perspective of collaborative practice uncovered by TL, we advocate continually adopting this approach going forward.

More specifically, after reflecting on SS1, we developed a specific course of action to reduce existing pressures. DKU allowed flexibility with course level objectives based on the circumstances, so we elected to unify our course syllabus, teaching, and assignment materials, and to use platforms such as Google Drive to enable ease of material sharing and real time collaborative development. This created efficiency across time zones, enabling colleagues to effectively use and share existing and new materials. We broke down the course syllabus into weekly requirements, and we each volunteered to either provide (from our archives) or design materials, activities, and assessments for one or more weeks. Voluntary choice enabled us to focus on our interests and utilize readily available resources. This proved incredibly time saving, further reducing anxiety and improving individual well-being. However, existing materials at times required adaptation for online instruction and asynchronous use. We therefore acquired new knowledge and skills to make this change effective. For example, faculty attended internal and external seminars and sought one-on-one support from DKU's Center for Teaching and Learning and Duke's Keep Teaching website to develop competence and confidence

Time-bound uncertainty

With no indication of how long COVID-19 would remain a global pandemic, or of the duration of regional lockdowns and global travel restrictions, short-term concerns grew into long-term anxiety. In some cases, families remain separated due to these restrictions, and pets remain beholding to kind neighbors and friends.

Limited resources and access issues

Teaching and learning resources, for many, remain in inaccessible offices. Both faculty and students may encounter difficulties accessing much needed online resources as some may be restricted when off campus due to national regulations. Additionally, displaced faculty and students may experience additional access issues depending on their location.

Minimal preparation time: Institution level

Faculty and departments often design courses in advance, taking into consideration environmental factors, learning space, and resources available. In a crisis, institutions have minimal time to prepare and need to take decisive action, placing increasing pressure on stakeholders.

Minimal preparation time: Faculty and course level

Although courses may already be planned, an initial shift to online asynchronous teaching and later to a mix of synchronous and asynchronous required most faculty to adjust their pedagogy at incredibly short notice. As a result, uncertainties and inconsistencies may arise for faculty and students and must be met with flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity.

Varied experience with online instruction

Many educators had to enhance their skills sets and (re)discover tools and technologies at short notice. Navigating new technology, adjusting pedagogy, redeveloping lesson plans, and developing synchronous and asynchronous classes to support learner needs and meet existing objectives in a short time frame can be challenging and stress-inducing.

Additional pastoral requirements

Compassion for individual circumstances, stressors, and needs is paramount. It can be emotionally draining for educators to support students without feeling like they themselves are supported.

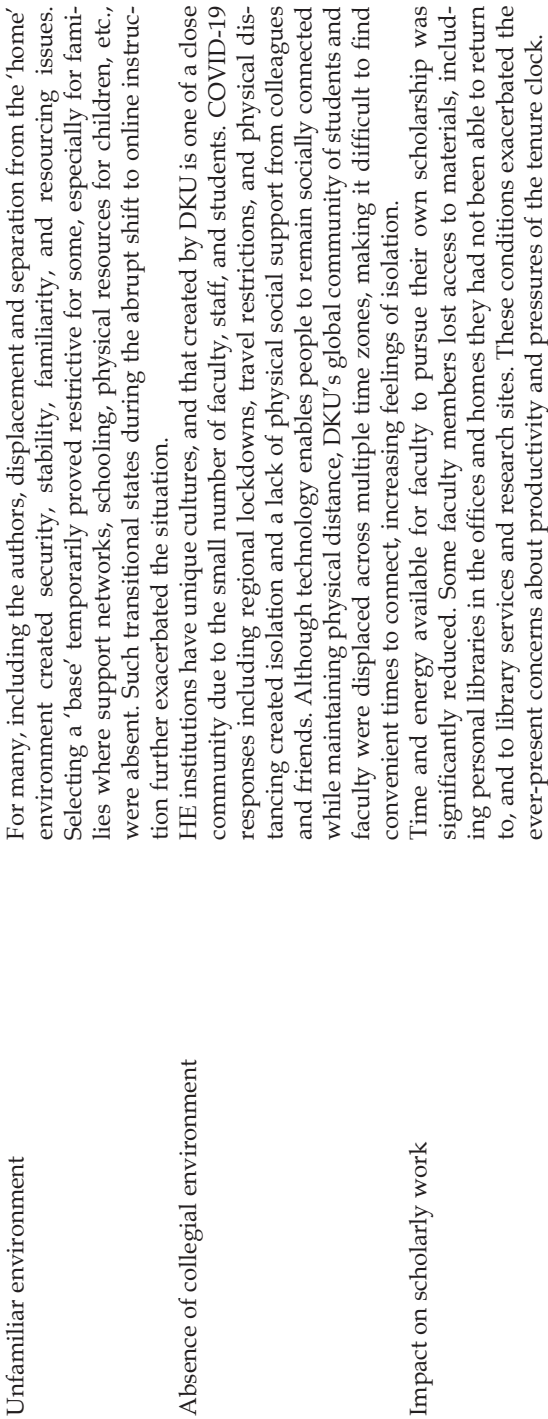


Figure 1. Negative Affective Factors Experienced by Faculty During the Initial COVID-19 Outbreak

with online instruction and design. Furthermore, as a team, we developed our own “self-help” support videos—for example, how to embed external tools such as Padlet into our Learning Management System, and shared formulas for standard and repetitive communication with students that could be personalized and adapted. This collaboration, because it results from a social structure, allowed us to learn like what Etienne Wenger calls a “community of practice”, increased our confidence and self-efficacy, and enabled us to experiment with technologies and new pedagogical practices beyond our initial intention.

As the TL process demonstrates, we experienced multiple individual affective factors which influenced our teaching and learning. Figure 1 outlines these affective factors and our reflections on each. Through this process we have been able to uncover uncertainty, geographical displacement, inappropriate teaching strategies, anxiety, and fatigue as a series of incremental disorienting events leading to a critical assessment of our assumptions and exploration of options for action. Furthermore, through collaborative discussion and constant individual and group reflections, we were able to acquire knowledge and skills and experiment throughout SS2, with the aim of building further self-confidence and competence with online teaching. This series of phases led us all to reevaluate our teaching philosophies and to consider collaboration as an essential part of our practice for the future, be it online or face-to-face. The chart above (fig.1) identifies and describes the negative affective factors experienced by faculty during the initial COVID-19 outbreak.

Lessons From the Transformative Learning Process

The semantic distinction between physical and social distancing has been widely discussed recently. Because social isolation can lead to psychological harm, adhering to physical distancing, whilst maintaining a social presence by way of maintaining regular social interactions with colleagues, should be promoted. We hoped that by sharing our transformative learning experiences, the benefits of maintaining such social interaction during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 global pandemic might be demonstrated. The lessons we learned are applicable in multiple contexts and differing learning environments (whether in-person, online, synchronous, or asynchronous). TL teaches us that there is no “one size fits all” approach to crisis management and transition. Yet, through TL, we were able to bring together our experiences to reduce negative affect, minimize anxiety, and alleviate some of the pressure. Ultimately, this past semester allowed us to grow in confidence with online instruction and to be better prepared for the next phase of hybrid instruction, thus transforming our teaching practice for the academic year ahead and associated uncertainties as COVID-19 continues to cause disruption. Crucially, we have learnt that not collaborating is no longer an option regardless of our mode of instruction! At the

same time, individually, we have undergone complete belief transformations: of what we ought to do, what we can do, and how we can achieve more with the combined resources available to us.

As a result of our experience, we have drafted the following advice for faculty dealing with any kind of crisis:

1. **Be kind.** While kindness will not resolve the public health issue, being kind to yourself, your colleagues, leaders, and students can help ease negative affect. Appreciate that the situation is affecting everyone in some way, so it is important to maintain a human connection.
2. **Communicate.** Maintaining frequent communication with peers is paramount during isolation. Reach out and ask for help when you need it. Similarly, build trust with colleagues and develop honest, open relationships, both with respect to emotional support (e.g., knowing that we can share our feelings, and validating others' feelings), and professional collaboration (knowing that our colleagues are smart, capable professionals and we can trust their contributions). In our experience, this practice can better facilitate team collaboration and alleviate emotional pressure, thereby improving personal well-being.
3. **Share and divide tasks.** Consider your individual strengths, experiences, and existing resources. Know your limits and do not over commit. A session (or semester) is a marathon, not a sprint, and may be an emotional rollercoaster. Therefore, commit to what you can, when you can, and allow others to support you when needed to alleviate the burden, reduce negative affect, and increase well-being.
4. **Remain flexible.** Be open to new ideas, teaching approaches, and tools—especially to those presented by colleagues. Use the situation as an opportunity to learn and develop. Be honest with students and colleagues about experimentation, and try to have fun with new tools.
5. **Reevaluate priorities.** Examine teaching, scholarship, and personal goals in light of the changed circumstances. Focus on key priorities: are your students learning / improving the targeted skills? Are you staying mentally and physically healthy? Do you need to work on that project now, or can it wait until you have the time and energy to focus on it? The answer is very often that it can wait (but if you are a tenure-track faculty member, you may need to talk to your mentor about pausing your tenure clock).

We hope that our shared TL experience and subsequent outcomes will serve as useful recommendations to help faculty members deal with crises and the wider context of change. And, if indeed 'failing to plan is planning to fail', faculty can be better prepared to face unexpected challenges through heeding these five recommendations.

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