

## Educators' experiences of pivoting online: unearthing key learnings and insights for engaging students online

A. Brown, J. Lawrence, S. Foote, J. Cohen, P. Redmond, C. Stone, M. Kimber & R. Henderson

To cite this article: A. Brown, J. Lawrence, S. Foote, J. Cohen, P. Redmond, C. Stone, M. Kimber & R. Henderson (2023) Educators' experiences of pivoting online: unearthing key learnings and insights for engaging students online, Higher Education Research & Development, 42:7, 1593-1607, DOI: [10.1080/07294360.2022.2157798](https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2022.2157798)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2022.2157798>



Published online: 20 Jan 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 376



View related articles [↗](#)







View Crossmark data [↗](#)

RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Educators' experiences of pivoting online: unearthing key learnings and insights for engaging students online

A. Brown <sup>a</sup>, J. Lawrence<sup>a</sup>, S. Foote<sup>b</sup>, J. Cohen<sup>c</sup>, P. Redmond <sup>a</sup>, C. Stone <sup>d</sup>,  
M. Kimber<sup>a</sup> and R. Henderson <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Faculty of Business, Education, Law and Arts, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia; <sup>b</sup>John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, Brevard, USA; <sup>c</sup>Educational Services, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia; <sup>d</sup>School of Humanities & Social Science, The University of Newcastle, Australia

### ABSTRACT

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that online teaching in higher education became the default. Educators were, and often now continue to be, required to pivot to online teaching, necessitating them to adapt their teaching delivery, effectively engage students online, and apply existing skills to new and unfamiliar pedagogical contexts. This paper presents a small international case study, investigating the experiences of a diverse group of educators who wanted to learn about engaging students because their higher education institutions were pivoting to online teaching. Following the educators' involvement in professional learning about a particular online engagement framework, the educators used their learning in their planning and online teaching. Data extracted from a deductive coding exercise augmented by qualitative data gleaned from semi-structured interviews was used to explore how the educators enhanced the engagement strategies they implemented in their courses. The findings indicate the types of learning processes used by the educators and how they applied their learning to online teaching. The deductive analysis suggests that the strategies the participants revealed worked well in their online practice correspond with the strategies delineated in the framework.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 March 2022




Accepted 25 November 2022

### KEYWORDS

Online engagement; higher education; student engagement; COVID-19

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many higher education institutions, educators, and students, to pivot rapidly to online teaching and learning. Over a relatively short period, higher education needed to adapt hurriedly and apply existing competencies to new and unfamiliar situations (Green et al., 2020; Moore, 2020). In some cases, this exposed a lack of adequate prior training about online teaching/learning for students and educators (Byrne et al., 2021; Oyedotun, 2020). Although some expected the move to be a straightforward process of transferring written material and face-to-face lectures

**CONTACT** A Brown  Alice.Brown@usq.edu.au; R. Henderson  robyn.henderson@usq.edu.au  Faculty of Business, Education, Law and Arts, University of Southern Queensland, Springfield, Queensland, Australia

to the online space (Cohen, 2021), the shift was often more complex and challenging than anticipated, especially when considering student engagement (Bozkurt, 2022).

During the on-campus-to-online shift, a group of experienced online educators investigated the experiences of a diverse group of educators from across the world. The literature had suggested that an important key to successful online teaching was finding ways to engage students online, as engagement was increasingly recognised as an influential element in the student experience, student retention and students' learning outcomes (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

This paper describes a project that connected educators from higher education institutions internationally. Two members of the project team had been involved in producing an online engagement framework (Redmond et al., 2018), following an extensive analytical review of student engagement literature. The framework also conceptualised practical examples of how different types of engagement could be employed in teaching. This theory-practice aspect provided a starting point for the current project, which aimed to explore how the higher education teachers employed the framework to enhance their students' engagement.

This paper begins by reviewing the context for pivoting to online teaching and the support provided for online engagement during the crisis. It then describes the methodology of the project, including the conceptual framework of the research, and the role played in the project by a specific tool, i.e., the Framework for Online Engagement (Redmond et al., 2018). The paper then reports on the deductive analysis conducted and how the analysis augmented the critical insights gained from the educators' perspectives. The paper concludes with some tentative thoughts about the potential for such a framework to assist educators to enhance student engagement in their online teaching practice.

## Literature review

COVID-19 forced most higher education institutions to shift rapidly from on-campus or blended learning to online. Regardless of experience and expertise with online teaching, academic staff had to organise and teach classes remotely. Although many educators demonstrated remarkable determination and resilience in adjusting their classroom pedagogy and practice to the online environment (Bozkurt, 2022; Green et al., 2020), others simply applied previously used teaching practices (Olsen et al., 2020). Indeed, Bartolic et al.'s (2022) research highlighted the widespread practice of posting videos, weblinks and lecture slides without consideration of delivery mode.

Similarly, the Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2020) reported that higher education providers adapted to the pandemic by using the learning management systems already in place, and that frequently Zoom (or equivalent) software was used to simulate face-to-face delivery of lectures and conduct tutorials and discussion sessions. It also noted that 'the limited range of ... electronic tools' was 'somewhat surprising', given the large investments in developing learning management systems in recent years (p. 8).

In addition, the effectiveness of the shift to online delivery is debatable (Cohen, 2021). In Bartolic et al.'s (2022) research, a majority of academic staff regarded the online transition as handled well, but they were 'somewhat divided' on quality, with 56% reporting a lower quality learning experience. Other research, however, has discussed how many

students and staff, while generally happy with online options, have missed the socialisation opportunities and corridor conversations of on-campus study (Karalis & Raikou, 2020; Takayama, 2020).

Several studies noted that online teaching does not always have the necessary professional development emphasis for educators in higher education (Kilgour et al., 2019; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2021). Byrne et al. (2021) highlighted a lack of formal training for educators in higher education, especially those ‘new’ to teaching, while Redmond et al. (2018) noted a lack of clarity regarding ‘what counts as online engagement’ (p. 195), which impacts on student learning. Similarly, Rapanta et al. (2020) indicated that novice online educators lack the pedagogical content knowledge (PCK, from Shuman’s 1987 model) needed for teaching online. Despite increasing emphasis on the online educational environment, it seems that the pandemic highlighted the need for professional learning to be prioritised, to build ‘a culture of learning about online teaching practices’ (Byrne et al., 2021, p. 197).

In addition, there has also been concern around pedagogy in relation to the move to online teaching. Cohen (2021), for example, argued that online teaching has to be ‘more than an afterthought or an awkward reproduction of the face-to-face experience’ (p. 17). In particular, he took issue with the use of lectures, preferring ‘a more inclusive or “aligned pedagogy”’ (p. 15). Similarly, Shearer et al. (2020) asserted the need for thinking differently about pedagogy, as a way of moving ‘beyond the replication of the face-to-face experience’ (p. 36).

Researchers have called for addressing issues of ‘inequality and inaccessibility, inadequacies, poor communication quality, technical difficulties, the need for technology literacy’ (Bozkurt, 2022, p. 2; Bozkurt & Sharma, 2021). Mehta and Aguilera (2020), for example, advocated for a ‘more humanising,’ critically framed pedagogical approach (p. 109), based on the Freirean tradition, to work towards more socially just and equitable learning opportunities. Grafton-Clarke et al. (2022) examined clinical teaching using live streaming, arguing that the technology enabled ‘equitable access to high-quality teaching’ (p. 1) during an authentic patient-doctor consultation. It seems, then, that the available technology can address some of the perceived issues, but educators need to be skilled and aware of what might be done. Overall, what seems to have been left wanting in the rush to online teaching are critical pedagogical analysis and genuine emphasis on pedagogical support strategies. We emphasise that we recognise the urgency that was associated with the emergency move to online teaching, but there is still a need for ‘approaches adopted in haste ... to be revisited’ (Cohen, 2021, p. 15).

## Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this paper is the Kalantzis and Cope (2005) learning by design framework. Although not specifically a framework for online teaching, it is useful because it conceptualises pedagogy and learning as involving four ‘ways of knowing’ (p. 72):

- experiencing (drawing on prior knowledge, being immersed in new learning);
- conceptualising (learning new ideas by defining, using theory, building abstract knowledge, generalising);

- analysing (understanding functional elements, being able to critique);
- applying (being able to take new knowledge and apply it to typical as well as new situations) (p. 74).

In considering both pedagogy and learning, the framework draws together the processes involved in both teaching and learning. This is an important characteristic of the current study because the educators are both teachers and learners.

The framework also considers two conditions for learning: belonging and transformation. This emphasises the importance of building on learners' prior knowledge and experiences, thus constructing a sense of belonging. Learning is described as moving into 'new and unfamiliar terrains' (p. 51), thus highlighting that teaching should tap into students' lifeworlds (belonging) while enabling learning (transformation) (p. 51). These processes and conditions for learning are evident in literature relating to the shift to online. Stone (2017), for example, pointed out that a strong teacher-presence providing a sense of belonging helps students feel connected and more likely to persist with study (p. 8). Similarly, Vlachopoulos and Makri (2021) discussed the importance of enabling students to connect 'curriculum, knowledge and skills ... with the real world' (p. 50).

The use of the Kalantzis and Cope (2005) framework ensured a focus on learning: the educators' learning and how they tried to engage their students in learning. A premise of the study was that learning is more likely when students are engaged, thus providing the link between our discussion of learning here and the use of an engagement framework (Redmond et al., 2018). Although *engagement* has been difficult to define, we understand it as students' commitment to and active involvement in learning (Macquarie University Learning and Teaching Centre, 2009) and incorporating social, cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and collaborative elements (Redmond et al., 2018).

## Context

This project was based on awareness of the significant challenges of the rapid pivot to online learning. As the literature review has indicated, the urgency and haste of this move meant that many educators could not access immediate or appropriate professional learning, and, in turn, this allowed only limited pedagogical consideration of how the move to online might work best. The research thus tapped into the views of educators in higher education who felt they were ill-prepared for the pivot to online teaching.

As was indicated in the introduction, two members of the research team had been involved in the theorisation, development (Redmond et al., 2018) and implementation (Redmond et al., 2021; Tualalelei et al., 2021) of an online student engagement framework, which could be used as a reflection and planning tool for teaching and learning. They conducted three webinars for an international audience, presenting the framework as an auditing/planning tool for thinking about the enhancement of student engagement in online teaching. This provided the stimulus for the study.

The decision to use the framework was a pragmatic one, and it meant there was an opportunity to operationalise it with a group of international educators. Table 1 shows the framework's engagement elements and corresponding indicators.

**Table 1.** Redmond et al.'s (2018) Elements and Illustrative Indicators for Online Engagement.

Elements	Illustrative Indicators
Social	Building community Creating a sense of belonging Developing relationships Establishing trust
Cognitive	Thinking critically Activating metacognition Integrating ideas Justifying decisions Developing deep discipline understandings Distributing expertise
Behavioural	Developing academic skills Identifying opportunities and challenges Developing multidisciplinary skills Developing agency Upholding online learning norms Supporting and encouraging peers
Collaborative	Learning with peers Relating to faculty members Connecting to institutional opportunities Developing professional networks
Emotional	Managing expectations Articulating assumptions Recognising motivations Committing to learning

## Method

The project was constructed as a case study, exploring the how and why of contemporary events in real-life contexts (Yin, 2009), namely the use of the Redmond et al. (2018) framework by a group of educators pivoting to online teaching. The project had two layers: the educators' learning, and how they applied the framework's elements/practices to their learning and teaching. The methodology involved four phases: (1) recruitment; (2) orientation/learning and application; (3) data collection; and (4) analysis. These phases were enacted after ethics approval (H20REA130).

Ten participants were recruited, through the webinars about the Redmond et al. (2018) framework and through information sent to professional networks and social media. The participants were in five locations (England, Scotland, Wales, Nigeria, and South Africa) with varied experiences in online teaching: five novices, two with a little experience, and three working in learning design and supporting academic staff. Apart from the varied geographical locations, the group was diverse: from different disciplines and institutions and teaching different courses at different levels. However, they all had a desire to know more about online teaching.

During the orientation/application phase, participants learnt about the Redmond et al. (2018) framework through a range of mechanisms: webinars, readings, discussions with members of the research team. They engaged in reflection and evaluation of their own practices, making notes about the framework's efficacy and practices as they developed and refined their online course/s during July to September 2020. Data collection at this stage relied on research team notes and artefacts (e.g., PowerPoint slides, teaching notes).

Data collection for the overall project involved semi-structured interviews (Barbour & Schostak, 2005). Each interview took approximately 45 minutes, with questions exploring participants' experiences as online educators, their use of the framework and its perceived utility in planning for learning, building confidence and competence in online pedagogy, and supporting student engagement. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis began with a priori coding of the transcripts using Redmond et al.'s (2018) online engagement framework (see Table 1). This was followed by a filtering process that determined categories as well as conceptual elements based on the conceptual framework (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005). The next step was a final examination of the transcripts to identify any patterns or outliers beyond the a priori code. Two members of the research team completed the coding to enhance consistency.

## Findings and discussion

### *The educators' learning*

The orientation phase involved the participants in learning about the Redmond et al. (2018) framework. In terms of the conceptual framework (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005), the participants' learning involved conceptualising (input from webinars, readings, annotated PowerPoint slides), experiencing (learning by doing: using the online engagement framework in their planning), analysing (self-reflections, critique of the framework), and applying (using the framework in their planning/teaching). In other words, the participants' learning covered the full range of learning processes described by Kalantzis and Cope (2005).

This learning occurred in contexts characterised by enforced change and, in some cases, anxiety. As one of the participants noted, the framework was helpful because it gave 'something really concrete that they can do in their practice'. In particular, 'some of these things don't need our explicit attention' in face-to-face situations, but the structure is useful when moving to online teaching. Similarly, another participant said: 'I love a bit of a framework. I love a bit of order.'

In fact, all participants discussed the utility of the Redmond et al. (2018) framework which, for some, served as a structure in the absence of institutional guidance and training. Specifically, the framework assisted planning and facilitated learning, applying, evaluating, and reflecting on online student engagement. For many participants, the framework provided 'a structured way to reflect on what we're doing' and 'a useful tool to do self-assessment, self-analysis, identify a few things to look at to try a bit more'. In relation to learning, this suggested that the initial input from the research team fostered further opportunities for the participants to learn, via experiencing, analysing, and applying their learning to their own practices (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005).

The participants' learning, however, also involved a second layer: considerations of their students' learning. In talking about their students, the participants focused on their observations of how students engaged with course materials and activities, how they responded to particular aspects of course design, and comments from the students. This is evident in the following sections.



### *Focusing on student engagement*

At the outset, we realised that the research group was diverse and was operating in a wide range of contexts. Despite the diversity, the analysis of their interview transcripts revealed consistency in several of the codes and engagement examples. The initial coding identified the participants' references to the indicators of Redmond et al.'s (2018) framework. [Table 2](#) displays the frequency for each of the online engagement elements and related indicators. We have restricted discussion to those with frequencies of eight or more.

What is perhaps surprising is that none of the indicators for cognitive engagement (Redmond et al., 2018) scored highly. This was possibly explained by one participant's perception that 'the main focus of teaching' is typically 'the cognitive side', in that the participant's faculty prior to COVID-19 addressed 'the social, emotional side' through on-campus social events. The framework brought those elements into course design considerations.

Another participant highlighted that collecting evidence about 'cognitive engagement is more tricky because you don't see what's happening inside their minds'. In comparison, 'behavioural change is easy to identify ... you can observe your students'. This participant also argued that the framework's inclusion of social and emotional engagement gave educators 'permission, as it were' to incorporate them into their teaching: 'You were right to feel this way and you're right to act on it; it does help students'.

According to one participant, another challenge was separating the elements of engagement, because they seemed inter-related: 'They're developing the cognitive engagement through collaboration and the social engagement might contribute to the emotional engagement ... You're not just addressing one dimension or one element of the framework'. Another participant agreed: 'They do overlap'.

**Table 2.** Frequencies of the Redmond et al. (2018) Online Engagement Indicators.

Elements	Indicators	Frequencies
Social engagement	Building community	15
	Creating a sense of belonging	12
	Developing relationships	8
	Establishing trust	9
Cognitive engagement	Thinking critically	3
	Activating metacognition	6
	Integrating ideas	0
	Justifying decisions	3
	Developing deep discipline understandings	3
	Distributing expertise	5
Behavioural engagement	Developing academic skills	8
	Identifying opportunities and challenges	0
	Developing multidisciplinary skills	0
	Developing agency	5
	Upholding online learning norms	15
Collaborative engagement	Supporting and encouraging peers	1
	Learning with peers	12
	Relating to faculty members	1
	Connecting to institutional opportunities	0
Emotional engagement	Developing professional networks	3
	Managing expectations	15
	Articulating assumptions	2
	Recognising motivation	2
	Committing to learning	6



Another participant was adamant that ‘we don’t really cognitively engage our learners. We talk at them’. As a result, the emergency move to online was a positive, because it ‘shone a light on how poor the infrastructure around remote distance learning education was’. This reflection on practice, particularly in relation to ‘how little maybe we did around the social and the emotional stuff,’ highlighted possible actions for facilitating student engagement.

### ***Social engagement: building community and creating a sense of belonging***

While participants took varied approaches, all discussed the importance of establishing an environment of trust. For example, one participant explained that small class size meant that breakout rooms could not be employed in synchronous class meetings in Zoom. To provide students with space to talk openly during class, the participant had ‘no qualms about turning my camera off and leaving for 10 minutes and telling them that I’m leaving’. The participant further explained that the students ‘know that I’m not just there and spying on them’, and that ‘I’m going to leave so can you monitor and see what’s going on and note down where people are struggling. When I come back, you can tell me where we need to do more work and in what areas’.

Indeed, building or maintaining relationships was made more difficult because technology was generally the only form of communication. However, the educators used a range of strategies to enhance relationships, such as breakout rooms, where students were more likely to keep their cameras on. Building community was evident in the transcripts. One participant described intentionally and frequently mixing students and allowing additional time in their small groups and pairs to establish rapport. Students were also invited to continue conversations using WhatsApp or WeChat messaging systems. As one participant explained: ‘They’ve often come to me ... saying over the weekend somebody asked about this and we’re all struggling with this’. Another participant used WhatsApp to connect students, build community in the virtual classroom, and convey course content to students in remote areas where Internet access was limited. In one location, email on smartphones also helped students access information. For some institutions with high numbers of students who did not have English as their first language, social media assisted with communication.

To build a sense of belonging, other participants instigated strategies to build rapport and model behaviours for engaging. For example, one participant used class forums, particularly at the beginning of the semester, to recognise and amplify student contributions while modelling how students might make connections to readings and resources: ‘This is your answer, and this is good for these reasons, but have a look at this and see how you could make it more in-depth’.

In the examples described by participants, they used strategies that fitted Kalantzis et al.’s (2005) learning process of conceptualising with students: directly teaching and modelling skills and behaviours, to build belonging, trust, and rapport, and to develop relationships (Redmond et al., 2018). Ultimately, these actions were designed to help students engage in learning.

### ***Behavioural engagement: upholding online learning norms***

The approaches used by participants to engage and communicate with students also contributed to upholding online learning norms. The prevalence of this indicator was not unexpected, as most courses taught by the participants shifted to online. The enrolled students had not necessarily sought out online study, so the emergency transition necessitated communication about foundational aspects of online learning, presence, and engagement.

The participants used different strategies, from reminding students at the beginning of synchronous class sessions about the course's purpose to having planned reminders and prompting students to meet assessment deadlines. One participant made sure that students were provided with 'a model ... so that they're able to use that to then shape their own behaviour'. This seemed to work: 'I have noticed that their contributions have been really good and solid ... since I've provided this model'.

One participant described 'student syndrome', the tendency to complete work just before a deadline, such as last-minute cramming. The challenge had become significantly more prevalent in the online environment, as students no longer had opportunities to interact informally with the educator around upcoming assignments and due dates. Another participant had similar concerns, because with 'quite a few of them ... it's taken a lot of prompting to get them to try ... doing things'. This participant spent time emailing students, saying 'the formal deadline is January but this is based on stuff I taught you in October, so you should aim to complete it at the end of October'. These actions seemed necessary because the move to online had removed interactions in 'the lecture room' which often led to discussions about 'I've done this, have you done that?' The participants' discussions seemed to reflect You's (2016) highlighting of poor student self-efficacy in the online space.

One participant talked about developing multiple checkpoints for assessment, to bring a 'kind of gamification approach' to the course to incentivise students to complete tasks promptly, including formative assessment. For example, a quiz worth 2% of course marks replaced some of the feedback loops that were easily activated in face-to-face situations. As the participant explained: 'It also means that I can let them do it multiple times if they want to, because each time they do it they'll get a different question'.

Participants discussed the need for managing expectations regarding behaviours related to engagement. One explained how students were helped to understand the expectations for engagement in online synchronous lectures, in comparison to what they might have been accustomed to in traditional face-to-face classrooms. While the result sometimes involved students interrupting the educator, it was apparent that reinforcing the expectations and guidelines improved engagement as the semester progressed, because the students 'loosened up.' In contrast, another participant quipped that occasionally students were a bit too relaxed and required some instruction on 'appropriate dress or lack of it' and online behaviour, particularly while on camera.

Many participants expected students to appear on camera during synchronous class meetings. They reflected on the challenges associated with this. For example, one participant explained that, despite efforts to build community in a first-year course, it was difficult

to get students to turn on cameras and microphones during class: ‘They’ve not met each other, whereas my second and third years [who had previously studied on campus], they’re interacting. They know each other’s voices. They’re familiar with each other. They’ve already got that element of friendship ... whereas our new students don’t’.

The educators’ moves to incorporate behavioural engagement involved direct teaching and modelling of appropriate behaviours (conceptualising), creating experiencing (doing) activities, and building a sense of belonging.

### *Collaborative engagement: learning with peers*

Many of the practice examples discussed by the participants emphasised collaborative engagement (Redmond et al., 2018) aimed at fostering learning with peers. While their teaching spanned different disciplines and levels, they all included some synchronous activities incorporating ‘a lot of peer learning’. For example, one participant described creating a shared document for engaging students in personal reflection, then encouraging the students ‘to respond to each other’s ideas and build out each other’s ideas’.

Another participant shared an approach to conveying course content in the new, online study environment:

Our focus was not on limiting the content; it was about providing the content through facilitated group discussions because the alternative is that if you limit content, you have the potential then to limit the outcomes associated with the learning.

In other words, this participant used collaborative engagement and opportunities to learn with peers to cover more content than might have been possible in face-to-face situations. Thus, collaborative learning unfolded organically, contributing to the students’ cognitive development.

Another participant described intentionally designing a course using a ‘flipped approach’. Specifically, the students were provided content before the synchronous course meetings, which ‘gave me the space to be able to create more collaborative tasks’. The participant ‘was able to foster that collaborative element when they’re all at the same time online and nurture that collaboration by taking away time where previously ... I would have been potentially lecturing at them’. The participant asked students to read a section and reconstruct the text collaboratively in a breakout room. Another approach involved assigning students to breakout groups and asking them to find and evaluate three sources on a particular topic.

In addition to encouraging students to learn from and with peers, one participant described the engagement observed when tutors were present in their online course, saying it was ‘much more lively than the lectures’. In these interactions, students maximised their time online, going beyond reviewing information and ideas that had been covered in the class, which ‘wasn’t just about the discussion; it was about the peer-to-peer learning aspects’.

In their discussions of collaborative engagement, it was evident that the educators were able to move away from conceptualising activities and include activities that incorporated experiencing and analysing (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005). The participants’ descriptions suggested that hands-on learning with peers was helpful.

### ***Emotional engagement: managing expectations***

For emotional engagement (Redmond et al., 2018), one participant highlighted the importance of developing a ‘warmer environment’ and ‘bringing the familiar’ into learning. This seemed to reflect the Kalantzis and Cope (2005) notion of belonging, especially in relation to the study environment described by the participant: ‘Students are coming to the online space against a background, against a world behind them which is in chaos, and they want something much more warm’. Students had told the participant that ‘we walk into an online space and it’s exactly the same as everybody else’s and it’s cold’. This offered a rationale for building emotional engagement and ‘trying to get that level of connection’. One participant explained that, in a sense, students were in ‘stages of grief for the experience that they have lost’.

The participants provided examples of how they communicated and managed expectations of their students and themselves. For example, one participant used the first 10 minutes of online tutorials to simply ask students ‘where are you at?’ By giving purpose and value to emotional and personal connections, the participant helped to build emotional engagement. One participant emphasised the ‘personalised part of their [students’] journey’ as an important aspect of emotional engagement.

Another explained that an expectation-setting exercise reinforced the utility of the information and ideas in the curricula. In this case, students reflected on what they studied and learned during a given week and made connections to their personal learning goals. As one participant explained: ‘I go back to their individual reasons, and I relate it to the national [educational agenda]’. Another participant’s strategy involved a weekly news bulletin, with weekly reminders that connected students to expectations for engagement and progress in their study.

Another participant created a module map that appeared ‘on their home screen when they open up that module’ and allowed students to track their progress. Its consistent design reinforced expectations. This participant also asked students periodically how the course could be more responsive to their individual expectations. Indeed, frequent check-ins with students was a strategy used by several participants to manage expectations. However, one participant felt guilty about having not checked up with the students to find out how they were, because they were suddenly being asked to go back to their home country.

The participants’ use of emotional engagement was generally focused on the environment, personalising study for students, and helping students manage expectations. In terms of learning, this involved consideration of the students’ emotional states and feelings of belonging to their study (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005).

### ***Additional themes associated with pivoting online***

In the final step of data analysis, additional themes were identified in the participants’ talk about their experiences of using the Redmond et al. (2018) framework for online engagement. The data revealed the intentional ways participants approached course design, often to humanise the online learning environment while providing opportunities for collaborative learning and engagement. For example, one participant shared:

It wasn't just about students listening to the recording and then going back and doing their learning by themselves ... I suppose we do encourage independent learning, but part of the student experience also has that engagement which is something I was scared that students were not going to have, especially since they were not going to be on campus.

In this case, 'engagement' was referring to educator support to 'have a discussion with students', in order to reflect on what they were learning.

To ensure continued student engagement, many of the participants revised aspects of course design and delivery during the duration of their courses. They also used technological tools (e.g., Mentimeter) to gather student feedback for continuous course improvement. Additionally, reflections from students and instructors also provided valuable insights. For example, one participant noted: 'I think good practice is about reflecting, responding, adapting and it just served as a reminder, this isn't about cognitive engagement. It's not just about one thing. It's also about the opportunity to engage people in different ways'.

In addition to the general utility of the framework, the participants' narratives consistently reinforced four significant challenges confronting educators as they moved to online teaching. First, COVID-19 lockdowns meant an enormous and rapid shift, sometimes with limited time, training and resourcing. Second, the educators were working in isolation from home, sometimes under increased stress and duress from families in lockdown. Third, there were issues with connectivity and technological competence, and fourth, the educators experienced a steep learning curve relating to online teaching and its associated pedagogical differences from face-to-face teaching. Many participants reported that educators retreated to didactic and transactional teaching approaches that were not well suited to the facilitation of online engagement. Indeed, other research (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Schleicher, 2020) has shown that even experienced online educators were challenged by logistics, access to digital devices, software licences, Internet bandwidth, intrusion of family or pets, diversity of participants' attention, and increased workloads.

### Implications, limitations, strengths, and future research

This study, which explored educators' rapid transition to online teaching during COVID-19 lockdowns, suggests that the types of activities being used by educators were consistent with key elements of the Online Engagement Framework, to which they had been introduced to prior to the data collection via interviews. While it is not possible from this research to determine the extent to which their online teaching practices had been directly influenced by their exposure to the framework, nevertheless it is possible to make some tentative assumptions about the use of such frameworks as training tools. We therefore suggest that:

- educators moving to online education for the first time may benefit from access to a framework that can help to guide their reflection and considerations of planning and teaching.
- directors or leaders of teaching and learning centres could benefit from providing academic staff with access to such frameworks to support the transition from working face-to-face to either blended or fully online teaching learning environments.

- educators may benefit from discussing the elements of online engagement as part of their professional learning and continuous improvement.

We have been deliberately tentative with these suggestions, as the study had limitations. One limitation was the small number of participants and the non-generalisable nature of the findings which represented participants' perceptions. The second was that the impact of the pandemic on educational institutions, many with limited pedagogical support for staff, may have biased the responses of the participants. As well, while the deductive coding in [Table 2](#) supported the educators' descriptions of their learning activities and aligned with many of the elements of the Redmond et al. (2018) framework, it remains inconclusive whether and to what extent the framework itself may have influenced educators' practice. This suggests that the model contains categories that may be helpful to people when learning to teach/shift online. Yet while this may reflect the need for the structure and practical advice that a framework can offer at such a time of change and uncertainty, to be more conclusive, this aspect would need to be explored more comprehensively in future research.

To offset its limitations the study had several strengths. Strengths included the international cohort of participants across multiple disciplines, their detailed insights into their lived experiences, and the practical nature of the project. At a time when all universities were struggling with the technical and pedagogical implications of moving traditional teaching to online, this study provides useful insights into the research participants' practices when pivoting to online design.

## Conclusion

This project resulted from the rapid, global shift to online teaching that accompanied national shutdowns caused by COVID-19. Online offerings continue in many universities as they try to rationalise their delivery systems, and online education requires a solid evidence base to support its viability and deal with the challenges experienced by educators. The findings of this study have added to the growing body of literature on emergency remote teaching. These findings provide insight into the lived experiences of ten educators as they dealt with the enforced move to online teaching.





The project introduced the participating educators to Redmond et al.'s (2018) online engagement framework and highlighted the various strategies these educators were using to encourage online student engagement and student learning. While this research was not designed to establish a causal link between the introduction of the framework and educator strategies, the deductive coding (see [Table 2](#)) indicated that learning about the framework may have influenced practice to some extent, thus illustrating some alignment with elements of the Redmond et al. (2018) framework. However, it remains inconclusive whether and to what extent the framework itself may have influenced educators' practice. The overall effectiveness of the framework and its capacity to positively influence online learning and engagement strategies amongst educators into the future thus needs to be the focus of future research. Such research could investigate a larger pool of participants and how discipline differences impact on the pivot to online teaching. We also recognise that there needs to be a specific evaluation of the Redmond et al.

(2018) framework's usefulness and efficacy and its performance in relation to other frameworks that are on offer.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

A. Brown  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0306-729X>  
P. Redmond  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9674-1206>  
C. Stone  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6367-8810>  
R. Henderson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7906-766X>

## References

- Adedoyin, O. B., & Soykan, E. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic and online learning: The challenges and opportunities. *Interactive Learning Environments*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2020.1813180>
- Barbour, R. S., & Schostak, J. (2005). Interviewing and focus groups. In B. Somekh, & C. Lewin (Eds.), *Research methods in the social sciences* (pp. 41–48). Sage.
- Bartolic, S. K., Boud, D., Agapito, J., Verpoorten, D., Williams, S., Lutze-Mann, L., & Matzat, U. (2022). A multi-institutional assessment of changes in higher education teaching and learning in the face of COVID-19. *Educational Review*, 74(3), 517–533. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1955830>
- Bozkurt, A. (2022). Resilience, adaptability, and sustainability of higher education: A systematic mapping study on the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the transition to the new normal. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 9(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.56059/jl4d.v9i1.590>
- Bozkurt, A., & Sharma, R. C. (2021). On the verge of a new renaissance: Care and empathy oriented, human-centred pandemic pedagogy. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 16(1), i–vii. <http://www.asianjde.com/ojs/index.php/AsianJDE/article/view/576>.
- Byrne, V. L., Hogan, E., Dhingra, N., Anthony, M., & Gannon, C. (2021). An exploratory study of how novice instructors pivot to online assessments strategies. *Distance Education*, 42(2), 184–199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2021.1911624>
- Cohen, J. A. (2021). A fit for purpose pedagogy: Online learning designing and teaching. *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal*, 35(4), 15–17. <https://doi.org/10.1108/DLO-08-2020-0174>
- Grafton-Clarke, C., Uraiby, H., Abraham, S., Kirtley, J., Xu, G., & McCarthy, M. (2022). Live streaming to sustain clinical learning. *The Clinical Teacher*, e13488. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tct.13488>
- Green, W., Anderson, V., Tait, K., & Tran, L. T. (2020). Precarity, fear and hope: Reflecting and imagining in higher education during a global pandemic. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(7), 1309–1312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1826029>
- Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 58–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197>
- Kalantzis, M., Cope, B., & the Learning by Design Project Group. (2005). *Learning by design*. Common Ground.
- Karalis, T., & Raikou, N. (2020). Teaching at the times of COVID-19: Inferences and implications for higher education pedagogy. *International Journal of Academic Research in*



- Business and Social Sciences*, 10(5), 479nn–493. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v10-i5/7219>
- Kilgour, P., Reynaud, D., Northcote, M., McLoughlin, C., & Gosselin, K. P. (2019). Threshold concepts about online pedagogy for novice online teachers in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(7), 1417–1431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1450360>
- Macquarie University Learning and Teaching Centre. (2009). *Student engagement principles*. [https://www.mq.edu.au/lih/pdfs/Engagement\\_Principles.pdf](https://www.mq.edu.au/lih/pdfs/Engagement_Principles.pdf).
- Martin, F., & Bolliger, D. U. (2018). Engagement matters: Student perceptions on the importance of engagement strategies in the online learning environment. *Online Learning*, 22(1), 205–222. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i1.1092>
- Mehta, R., & Aguilera, E. (2020). A critical approach to humanizing pedagogies in online teaching and learning. *The International Journal of Information and Learning Technology*, 37(3), 109–120. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJILT-10-2019-0099>
- Moore, R. L. (2020). Developing lifelong learning with heutagogy: Contexts, critiques, and challenges. *Distance Education*, 41(3), 381–401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2020.1766949>
- Olsen, J. K., Faucon, L., & Dillenbourg, P. (2020). Transferring interactive activities in large lectures from face-to-face to online settings. *Information and Learning Sciences*, 121(7/8), 559–567. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ILS-04-2020-0109>
- Oyedotun, T. D. (2020). Sudden change of pedagogy in education driven by COVID-19: Perspectives and evaluation from a developing country. *Research in Globalization*, 2, 100029. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resglo.2020.100029>
- Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P., Guàrdia, L., & Koole, M. (2020). Online university teaching during and after the COVID-19 crisis: Refocusing teacher presence and learning activity. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2(3), 923–945. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00155-y>
- Redmond, P., Foote, S., Brown, A., Mixson-Brookshire, D., Abawi, L.-A., & Henderson, R. (2021). Adopting a framework to support the process of critical reflection and understanding of online engagement. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, Advanced online publication. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s12528-021-09281-3.pdf>.
- Redmond, P., Heffernan, A., Abawi, L., Brown, A., & Henderson, R. (2018). An online engagement framework for higher education. *Online Learning*, 22(1), 183–204. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i1.1175>
- Schleicher, A. (2020). *The impact of COVID-19 on education*. OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/education/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-insights-education-at-a-glance-2020.pdf>.
- Shearer, R. L., Aldemir, T., Hitchcock, J., Resig, J., Driver, J., & Kohler, M. (2020). What students want: A vision of a future online learning experience grounded in distance education theory. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 34(1), 36–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2019.1706019>
- Stone, C. (2017). *Opportunities through online learning: Improving student access, participation and success in higher education [Equity Fellowship Final Report]*. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, & The University of Newcastle. [https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CathyStone\\_EQUIITY-FELLOWSHIP-FINAL-REPORT-1.pdf](https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CathyStone_EQUIITY-FELLOWSHIP-FINAL-REPORT-1.pdf).
- Takayama, K. (2020). Japanese nightingales (uguisu) and the ‘margins’ of learning: Rethinking the futurity of university education in the post-pandemic epoch. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(7), 1342–1345. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1824208>
- Tualalelei, E., Burke, K., Fanshawe, M., & Cameron, C. (2021). Mapping pedagogical touch-points: Exploring online student engagement and course design. *Active Learning in Higher Education*. Advanced Online Publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787421990847>
- Vlachopoulos, D., & Makri, A. (2021). Quality teaching in online higher education: The perspectives of 250 online tutors on technology and pedagogy. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (iJET)*, 16(6), 40–55. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v16i06.20173>
- Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.)
- You, J. W. (2016). Identifying significant indicators using LMS data to predict course achievement in online learning. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 29, 23–30. doi:10.1016/j.iheduc.2015.11.003