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THE COVID CRISIS – 'ACADEMIC FIREFIGHTING'

Teaching exchange programmes involving United Kingdom Higher Education delivered in the People's Republic of China were directly impacted by Covid-19, requiring the immediate adoption of alternative plans of delivery for both teaching and assessment. In examining the impact, this reflective analysis suggests a global crisis the educational world becomes a smaller more unified place of collective cross border experience.

*" **I** n Chinese, the word for disaster also means opportunity"*
Petty, 2009

Facing the crisis – Immediate adaption required

This article seeks to document the reflective practice of two experienced Chartered Surveyor practitioner/educators lecturing on built environment modules within a Higher Education teaching exchange. The built environment degree courses of Anglia Ruskin University, a United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education provider, are delivered under an exchange programme with East China Jiaotong University, located in Nanchang in the People's Republic of China. In the pre Covid-19 world these modules were delivered in both the UK and China through face-to-face teaching. Teaching in China involved an intense block learning approach over a two-week period, whereas the modules were taught in the UK through weekly lectures spread across a 12-week trimester. The intensity of the block teaching in China was such that course design and delivery required a high level of preparation and a consideration of the needs of students and practitioners in order to maintain enthusiasm (Thompson, 2013). This is rapid 'standards-driven' delivery model was planned for maximum short-term educational impact with little space left to nurture the longer life skills of 'Slow Education' (van der Sluis, 2020). As an external 'flown in' educator you sought to plant a seed during the intense block teaching and hoped that others in the local institution would help nurture,
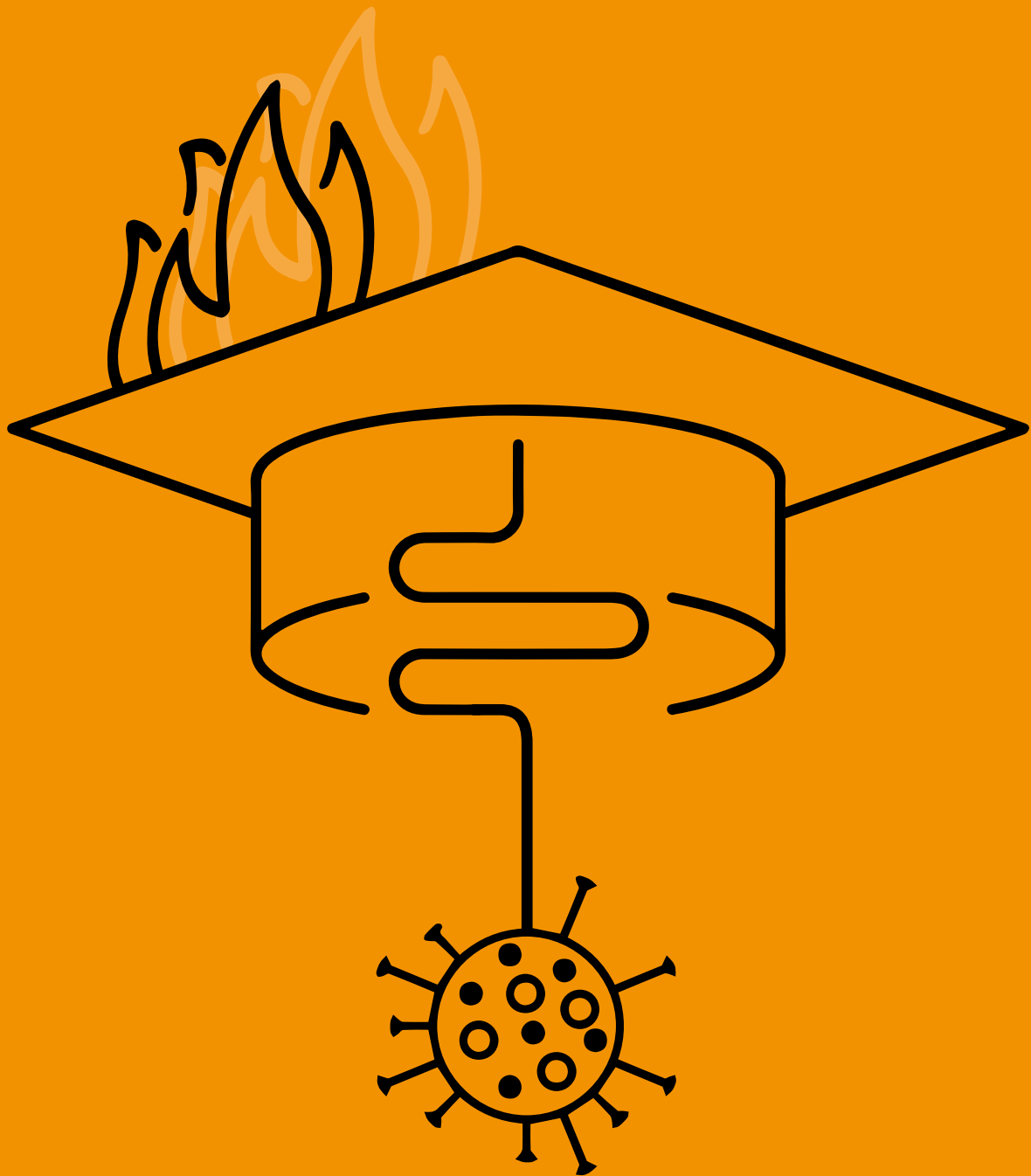
feed, and support it to flourish. Having established multiple deliveries of the module with successful assessment outcomes through the face-to-face block teaching, the Covid-19 crisis caused a change of approach.

The events of the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to global lockdown, impacted both the UK delivery model and the international travel associated with the China exchange such that the established delivery plan would not be possible. This required a fundamental reassessment of the delivery plan and an examination of whether an already intense face-to-face delivery model could be successfully redesigned for online teaching. Online immediate adaption thinking was therefore necessary. A flexible, pragmatic approach was required to encourage the students, nurture a positive learning environment, and seek to provide reassurance that, in crisis, education can continue.

Research aims and objectives

Our aim here is to reflect on the lived experience of teaching during a period of global crisis with the objective of:

- Reviewing the theory that had underpinned the decision making of our practice which had shaped the adjustments from a face-to-face model to the emergency online structure.
- Using the toolkit of critical reflection, undertake a structured review of our practice and the emergency delivery plan.
- Provide the foundations for the next phase of teaching to both our UK and Chinese students.
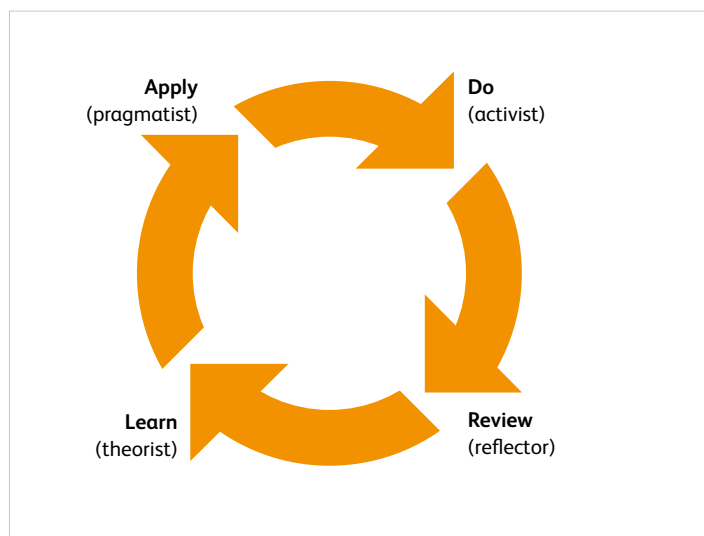
FIGURE 1 Kolb's Cycle (Petty, 2009)

The theoretical framework

The basis of this reflective assessment uses a combination of tools drawn from soft system methodology (SSM) (Checkland, 1981) in conjunction with group collective memory. This was combined with Bolton and Delderfield's (2015) methodology of '*writing as reflection*' following the **EDAR** model of **E**xperience → **D**escribe → **A**nalyse → **R**evise (Gravells, 2012). This combined approach provided a flexible means to create the holistic recollection of experience. The positioning of the researcher as an insider within the system under assessment is acceptable in this type of educational research as:

The idea of the insider-researcher reflecting upon their own practice and that of others, formulating research questions and testing everyday assumptions is the core of the reflective practitioner tradition and can provide work-based researchers with a useful theoretical lens through which research observation and analysis can be viewed… (Costley, Elliott & Gibbs, 2013)

The classic four stages of the SSM learning cycle approach are also aligned to the sequencing of the educational design process when compared to the stages of the Kolb Cycle (see figure 1).

The challenges and pressures of Covid-19 hitting the Higher Education sector created a unique set of circumstances such that recording the strategies and reflections of practitioners seeking to deal with this crisis is felt a worthy endeavour. Being worthy however still comes with complexity when dealing with a retrospective event. Our original approach, when engaged in the firefight of the crisis, was never planned as a research project, the luxury and formality of research stages such as literature reviews, pilot studies and design testing did not factor in the purest context. This type of 'after the fact' research is an approach that is open to potential disadvantages due to the lack of a predesigned methodology. However, in the context of the lived experience the pressure and magnitude of global events were such that the normality of planning a research project within such a crisis would have been impractical. This is therefore the reflections of educational firefighters who have faced the heat of the crisis.

Immediate adjustments during the teaching

We developed a plan for delivery and were ready to teach; however, mindful of the military wisdom that *"No plan survives contact with the enemy"* (Barnett,1963), it would be folly to suggest our concept of a strategy did not need immediate and flexible adjustment. Essentially, harnessing technology was the key issue, in order to achieve the desired outcomes. The events required good preparation and the ability to remain patient, pragmatic and flexible to needs of the students.

Whilst we had organised our materials in advance and ensured that there was a Module Study Guide with clear assessments and marking schemes, further explanation and briefing were required, and the anonymous wisdom of '*tell the audience what you're going to say, say it; then tell them what you've said*' became a vital teaching strategy. Our teaching communication was easily achieved via an app called 'WeChat'. As teachers we were able to communicate with the organisers (Chinese academic colleagues, and the real stars of this story) and our Student Monitors. Student Monitors in Chinese education help teachers organise the materials and communicate with the group. By using WeChat they made our Orwellian '*Big Brother*' '*Face on a Screen*' become human. Our Student Monitors were in the class doing all the 'leg work' and were given deserved respect. The Student Monitors were an essential 'lynchpin' communicating to the group in Chinese and liaising English instructions from the lecturers.

It should be noted that the programme is delivered in China in the English language.
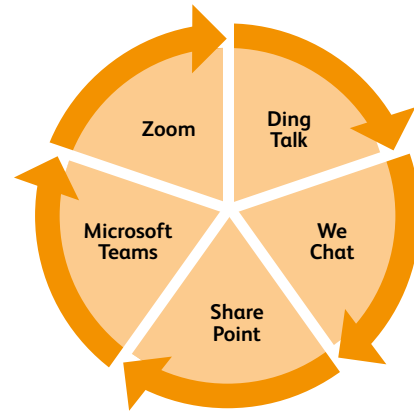
FIGURE 2 Technologies used

As a technical course it was anticipated that minor communication language barriers might arise in the terminology of expressions used in professional/ business technical communication. We facilitated and resolved this with the help of the Student Monitors who were comfortable using technology such as app-based translation tools and were able to look up advanced terminology using a reference text. Our use of 'SharePoint' enabled the students to access the materials and upload their presentations with relative simplicity. The online platforms made the geographical difference an irrelevance in the UK to China comparison.

Both the UK and China courses had an assessment based on a group presentation of a technical problem task. This software was Microsoft PowerPoint with the quality and delivery being identical between UK and China groups. Interestingly, the Chinese students appeared to enjoy the chance to practise speaking in technical English which cannot always be stated in equal terms for our UK students who appeared to focus on the negative challenge of public speaking rather than the opportunity to practice. Lectures were delivered using Zoom.

Feedback from the Chinese students helped develop better technical solutions to facilitate the viewing of the presentations, such as viewing the faces of those who were presenting. This feedback was obtained through 360° class discussion and encouragement of a quality control feedback approach. This empowered the ownership of the whole experience to be a collective journey of 'we' – working together and seeking to obtain the best educational solution. The students suggested using an app called 'Ding Talk'. This app enabled students to work remotely on their group presentation. Our need to be culturally mature – with trust in the professionalism and work ethic of our students was rewarded. This is an example of the Chinese students taking ownership and responsibility for the quality and professionalism of the delivery and the

presentation. When a similar approach was suggested to UK students using non-university software for course work the cultural shift was drastic. UK students immediately voiced that this was a 'university' problem and that acknowledgement of less than perfect delivery was grounds for seeking an extension or appeal.

The Chinese students were able to deliver the group presentation virtually, with identical technical professional quality as that of the students. The combination of WeChat, SharePoint, Zoom and Ding Talk creating an online learning experience that enabled students to achieve equitable results in both the UK and Chinese group presentations. This online teaching immediate adaption also led to practitioners developing new training skills as they moved from a face-to-face delivery to an online environment. See Figure 2 for a summary of the technologies used.

Conclusions and recommendations

Online teaching is our new normal and the distinction between 'traditional' and 'online' educators has now been removed. In the 'new normal' every educator needs to be equipped and skilled in both face-to-face and online practices and should be able to switch between the two forms with little warning. However, such practices should be examined against the higher academic goal of planting the seeds for critical reflection, and approaches such as 'slow education' (van der Sluis, 2020) must remain a core part of our educational thinking. It is suspected that, in the very near future, the distinction between the two will disappear as student will demand the best of all experiences. For this, new entrants into Higher Education teaching will need to be confident in a variety of both face-to-face and online approaches. Luckily, as a new generation of students convert to educators they will emerge with the requisite skills, having been taught during a period of crisis.

In the depth of Covid-19 crisis, the requirement to adopt an online teaching immediate adaption approach was a challenge. Using a combination of technological tools, significant results were achieved. Students were able to adapt easily, with a can-do team approach producing significant team results. Fear, uncertainty, and the complexity of the challenge created by Covid-19 existed for both UK and Chinese student groupings. When faced with equal challenge the positive professional response of the East China Jiaotong University students, in particular, was a credit to them and their university. Further work may be required to examine the cultural significance of the two student groups and how they approached the various challenges encountered.

As practitioner/academics this reflective exercise has been an attempt to establish the basis for more specialised educational researchers to challenge, evolve and take forward the observations this paper has attempted to document. This is a practitioner experience record, as such we accept all the errors, weaknesses and pitfalls of our actions in a time of global crisis. It is however our belief that micro gains will build the collective move forward so as a community we need to record the living record of these global events as they were experienced. This needs a forgiving stance accepting of the research methodology weaknesses that a planned more considered exercise could have observed. It is now for future educationalists to assess the merits of our crisis delivery, but they are reminded of the words of Samuel Becket (1983): *"Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better."*

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Fear, uncertainty, and the complexity of the challenge created by Covid-19 existed for both UK and Chinese student groupings. When faced with equal challenge the positive professional response of the East China Jiaotong University students, in particular, was a credit to them and their university