Posthuman Pedagogy and DASS

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Background Information

This project assesses to what extent, and how, blended online pedagogy affects students' learning experiences. With the move to online learning, it could be argued that there was a lack of time given to properly prepare for teaching remotely when the pandemic initially started. In fact, both local news articles and recent reports published within the University of Manchester highlight the difficulties that staff and students are now facing when accessing and engaging with online classes and material. This may be particularly true for students with disabilities, who are having to adjust their support plans with the University to accommodate the changes between on-campus learning and studying at home. As researchers, we became interested in investigating groups of DASS staff and students due to our individual experiences with disability or experiences with previous research that examined similar topics: and wanted to engage with the current discourse surrounding accessibility and online learning.

Research Questions, Site and Participants

Our objective was to investigate the following areas of research; what effect does online learning have on communication, accessibility and the general health and wellbeing of staff and students who either work within DASS or identify with having a disability that affects their experience at university (e.g. requiring additional support with classes or exams). However, over the course of our research we broadened these questions to include the Student Support Service staff from SALC and what their experiences were with delivering support during this period of online learning instead of only looking into the experiences of DASS staff and students. Furthermore, we also aimed to compare our findings to the experiences outlined within the Accessibility Report 2020-21 from the Disabled Students' Society (DSS) and Campaign to investigate any similarities or differences in the reported experiences of both students and staff within the University of Manchester.

All research was conducted via online correspondence with participants who were members of the Student Support Services with connections to DASS, as well as lecturers and student representatives who had experience with disability either personally or through the experience of providing access to classroom materials and lectures to students with disabilities. Examples of the questions we used are as follows:

Lecturer Questions:

- What has been your personal experience with online teaching and working from home (both negative and positive)? Have you noticed any particular issues with this approach to learning? Have you found any benefit to remote teaching?

- How has working from home affected the delivery of course content? Have you found any issues with making the classes and materials available to students?

- Have you needed to make any changes to course content to adapt it to online learning? How have you found this transition to online learning compared to in-person learning?

Student Questions: How often do you...? (Never, rarely, sometimes, often, always)

- Reach out for support from university staff and professors?
- Access peer support? (e.g. study groups, societies, etc.)
- Experience difficulty with deadlines and coursework?
- Feel engaged during live seminars or practicals?

University of Manchester Accessibility Report 2020-2021

- Are you aware of the recent Accessibility Report published by the Disabled Students' Society? (If so, do you feel that the issues raised by the students were taken seriously and subsequently implemented? Has there been a change in the quality of support provided following this, internal or external?)

- The Accessibility Report highlighted a reduced amount of financial aid being offered to students: has there been a noticeable impact on the issues students are facing and seeking support for from DASS in relation to this?

As per the current COVID regulations and guidelines, online communication was preferred as it allowed us to safely collect data from multiple people without the risk of meeting to conduct this research in-person. The student representatives who participated in this research were also involved, in some part, with publishing the Accessibility Report, and as such were able to give invaluable insight into how the report was received by the University and whether there had been any subsequent follow-up and communication to address the issues that were highlighted. In total, our research included 4 participants.

Methods of Data Collection

We initially conducted a brief literature review to gain an understanding of the subject and of research that had been recently produced within the University and the surrounding area that was relevant to the groups we aimed to investigate. This involved searching for academic papers about online learning and the experiences of students with disabilities that were either published recently, or were local to the University of Manchester. We found and examined the Accessibility Report from the DSS and the qualitative data from their research into student experiences with disability and online learning. From this, we found prevalent themes such as a lack of communication, accessibility issues and a reported lack of organization of support services and online lecture recordings and materials. To be able to compare our findings to this piece of research, we shaped our questions around these themes and chose to use a mixture of qualitative questions for our interviews and some quantitative questions for our questionnaires. We then established a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and consent forms as a research group which were sent out to participants alongside either the interview or questionnaire details.
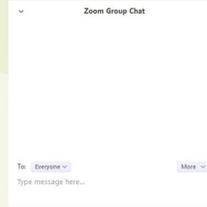
We conducted 30-minute online semi-structured interviews with university staff over Zoom which were locally recorded and then later transcribed by the researchers. These consisted of open-ended questions as we aimed to build off of any responses and subject areas that came up in conversation which might provide further qualitative data, given that the subject of our research was a complex topic. These were later transcribed and the data was condensed into key points, allowing us to quickly make connections across our data sets based on the subject area or the nature of these responses. To measure student experiences and collect responses from student representatives, we created online questionnaires using Google Forms. These were semi-structured and used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative questions to allow us to collect data in the form of charts and also to obtain more detailed, extended responses. These questionnaires took around 15-minutes to complete and the data was condensed into key points.

Results

Communication

- Student representatives reported having poor experiences when communicating with staff and support services. They highlighted a low level of responsiveness to student needs as being a factor in their experiences with communication. Similarly, they reported feelings of invalidation and hostility at times when seeking adjustments or trying to communicate with staff. However, when issues did arise, they felt comfortable approaching DASS for support and also reported reaching out for academic and pastoral support. Although, there were reported difficulties in implementing support or receiving amendments to Disability Students' Allowances that had been established in previous years, due to the extra time or meetings this required.
- Student Services and DASS co-ordinating staff reported an increase in receiving communication from students, especially surrounding mitigating circumstances. They reported that whereas they would receive 2000 applications a year under normal circumstances, they are now receiving over double the amount with the move to online learning environments and the ongoing pandemic. Similarly, it was indicated that some DASS staff may have felt overwhelmed at times due to the challenge of changing the types of support they can provide remotely, and adapting to a higher number of student requests and requirements for specialised equipment or support. They suggested that due to the restrictions on in-person appointments, a lot of communication with students has taken place over email, phone calls and Zoom meetings and have prioritised trying to deliver a quick response to student concerns; in some instances, student might be more comfortable with communicating over email and may be more responsive due to the variety in ways they can have contact with Student Support Services.
- The participating lecturer reported that there was a very small time-frame between the University closing at the start of the pandemic, and being able to figure out how to communicate and deliver content online at short notice. They suggested that there were difficulties with internal communication within the University and conflicting advice and guidance for teachers and what the best tools were to use when engaging with students. Part of this difficulty was also due to the lack of interpersonal interaction from online seminars and lectures, resulting in questions of how to maintain an authentic seminar experience while making sure that students felt comfortable enough to communicate and contribute in a different environment. They stress that in response to this, staff have tried to contact students and offer additional office hours or one-to-one sessions to accommodate those who may be struggling academically or facing communication issues. They stress that having compassion for students' personal situations and evaluating how online learning may be positive or detrimental to student experience has been important in establishing an equal environment for everyone. However, they report that ways in which the University communicates with students may be less effective; for example, long detailed emails may be overwhelming for students.

Accessibility Report

- Student representatives reported that no immediate changes have been witnessed as of yet, but meetings and correspondence is ongoing with a newly implemented Task and Finish group to negotiate adjustments for students. They report having a mixed experience, however they suggest that some staff within the University have been incredibly responsive.

Closed Captioning
Blackboard

- Student representatives reported that despite popular assumptions that online learning would enable better accessibility, their experiences were negative. They reported that live lectures were not recorded properly and thus were not able to access them, and that adjustments such as subtitles took time to implement leading to a period where lectures and class materials were difficult to access for these students. However, they highlight that learning from home did result in less physical strain on their health conditions and that mobility needs were not an obstacle to online learning.
- Student Services and DASS co-ordinating staff reported that the move to online learning has exacerbated the pre-existing accessibility issues that students with disabilities faced, as well as creating new challenges in delivering support. In particular, DASS students at home may not have access to the specialist equipment provided by the University, and the extra support such as extra time in booking study rooms for revising or software for taking exams which would normally be accessed through the library is now having to be delivered to students at home. Similarly, DASS policies from previous years weren't able to plan for or adjust to the ongoing situation quickly due to the different types of support that students required, resulting in a need for responsive changes to be made to meet the growing number of students with accessibility issues. However, they suggested that distanced learning has also had a positive impact on certain types of accessibility issues such as attendance, with the move to online classrooms and the availability of pre-recorded lectures and online content
- The participating lecturer reported immediate issues with equality and inclusion when using Blackboard systems and similar platforms at the start of online learning. These issues included not having access to captioning software or the ability to have one-to-one interactions with students over Zoom during lectures and seminars. Reportedly, there were accessibility issues for staff members when using certain Blackboard features or Zoom for the first time. They suggested that certain accessibility functions, such as the Zoom chat feature, might be beneficial for students with certain comprehension or communication issues, while alienating students with dyslexia or dyspraxia and resulting in unequal levels of engagement and accessibility. In response to these problems, they report using a structure of teaching where live lectures are recorded and then uploaded alongside extensive lecture notes and annotated slides, which received a positive response from students. There are also reported mobility issues for students with wheelchairs when accessing SALC on campus through the Samuel Alexander building.

General health and wellbeing

- Student representatives reported that studying off of campus was less stressful because of the flexibility it offers with practical and mobility issues of getting around campus. However, they suggest that the mixed experiences that they have had with communication and accessibility has negatively impacted their health and has resulted in feelings of stress and a lack of support during times where adjustments had not yet been negotiated or implemented.
- Student Services and DASS co-ordinating staff reported They also suggested that due to the communication and accessibility issues, students may feel a lack of support from the University which may impact their physical and mental health, especially for students struggling with disabilities such as chronic health conditions. Furthermore, the uncertainty of exam conditions and grade boundaries may be creating a lot of anxiety for students and as such are applying for support from mitigating circumstances because of these difficulties they are experiencing.
- The participating lecturer reported that, at times, delivering online learning and support for students remotely can result in stress and anxieties for staff involved in pastoral or academic support. These worries for staff members included wanting to do as much as they can to support and assist students during the pandemic, while trying to negotiate how best to deliver accessible content in a confident and organised manner to reduce the uncertainty that students may be feeling at this time. Similarly, they also reported facing a challenge of providing course content and support that everyone will be able to enjoy or engage with, especially in regard to online exam formats.

- Student Services and DASS co-ordinating staff reported being notified by colleagues. They suggest using the ability to adjust support plans for students working from home and being able to provide / find more information on technical support that can be provided. Furthermore, they reported the process in which DASS has aimed to build more specialised knowledge to address these accessibility issues that are present in a home environment.

- The participating lecturer reported having no prior knowledge of the report but expressed a strong desire to get involved with the ongoing discussion surrounding the accessibility issues it highlighted and working directly with students affected by these issues to implement positive changes. They also reported that SALC has previously been involved in initiatives aiming to provide support for students with disabilities or additional requirements, however some of these ongoing projects have had to be placed on hold due to the pandemic and the shift to online learning.

Discussion

Result Summary:

Communication:

- Poor student experiences and increased applications for mitigating circumstances.
- Some DASS staff members felt overwhelmed by the challenge of adapting to remote learning support services with increased student requests, support and equipment needs.
- Internal communication errors within the University.
- Absence of interpersonal interactions in seminars and lectures online creating more issues with student experience: staff have tried to contribute with additional contact hours.
- Long University emails and communications may be less effective for students: evaluating how online learning is positive or detrimental to student experience is important in establishing an equal environment.

Accessibility:

- Student experiences were negative, with live lectures reported recorded improperly, accessibility issues and an initial lack of subtitled content, however learning from home resulted in less physical strain to health conditions and meant an increase in attendance.
- Some students may not have access to the specialist equipment, time in study rooms or software for exams at home that would usually be accessible.
- Initially there was a learning period in which certain Blackboard and Zoom functions were not being utilized. Zoom chat features may benefit students with certain comprehension/communication issues, but alienate other students.

General health and wellbeing

- Some representatives suggested studying off of campus was less stressful due to its flexibility, but there have been mixed experiences with communication and accessibility that has caused added stress or exasperate physical or mental health conditions.
- Additional stress is also placed on staff who must adapt their methodology to deliver effective online learning content, exams and support to their students.

Accessibility Report Comparison:

- Lack of subtitles and captioning being an accessibility issue on Blackboard.
- Inability to access online materials due to incompatibility with DASS adjustments (eg. online textbooks and screen readers)
- Reported issues in communication between DASS and lecturers, resulting in support plans taking time to implement, creating negative student experiences.

Overall, we found themes during our research that were consistent with those published within the DSS Accessibility Report; given that a large number of our participants were staff from the University of Manchester, this suggests that the accessibility, communication and general health and wellbeing issues that have resulted from the pandemic and the move to online learning are affecting all members of the University differently. Frequent overlaps between issues raised from different representatives and staff members have also occurred. We suggest that further research should be carried out in other educational institutions across the UK to be able to compare findings with different samples of students and lecturers. Our research has highlighted the array of positive and negative student and staff experiences in relation to disabilities and online learning: all of these have material dimensions and all extend beyond the computer suggesting that there is scope for thinking more about how posthuman approaches to teaching and learning have the potential to enhance education and accessibility.

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