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Blended and (not so) splendid teaching and learning: Higher education insights from university teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT
This paper provides deep insights and reflections by a group of teachers on the redesign of three postgraduate university courses in tourism management to a blended format during the Covid-19 pandemic. Like many others, we faced the common struggle of ‘what’ and ‘how’ to blend in uncommon circumstances whilst staying committed to maintaining excellent teaching and own wellbeing. To account for crucial nuances that normally are discarded in debates on higher education teaching and learning, our paper incorporates the author-teachers’ emic, insider perspectives on extant realities. Through snippets of our shared, reflective logbook, we reveal the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions of teachers’ experiences, while our findings point to the collaborative opportunities that come with managerial challenges during a transition to blended teaching. Based on our findings, we argue that collaborative redesign with, not for others, is of paramount importance when transitioning higher education to blended and splendid teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

Online and blended teaching and learning in higher education have been discussed extensively in research since the 1990s, when universities began adopting the Internet to deliver courses (Liburd, 2015; Liburd & Christensen, 2013; Liburd et al., 2011; Marasi et al., 2020). Following Boelens et al. (2017), Bruggeman et al. (2021), Hrastinski (2019) and Maggio et al. (2018), we define blended learning as the deliberate combination of online and classroom-based activities designed to activate and support learning, wherein we distinguish between synchronous (those with real-time participation of all participants) and asynchronous (those taking place in different time and space for each participant) online learning activities.

In the past three decades, much attention has been drawn to how online and blended formats can benefit institutions, teachers and students, how online and blended teaching should be done and what are the main catalysts and barriers for introducing such formats (Boelens et al., 2017 Bokolo et al., 2020; Liburd & Hjalager, 2010; Smith & Hill, 2019; Wiske et al., 2001). Despite the strong enthusiasm about online education, the improvements of technology, increasing number of online courses and even fully online degree programmes, face-to-face, non-digital teaching has remained the dominant format of course delivery in higher education. The dramatic changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic pushed universities around the world to switch to online teaching but without the strategic, sequential, multi-stakeholder transition that has been performed voluntarily by select universities in the past (Lorenza & Carter, 2021 Taylor & Newton, 2013). Considerations of why, if, when and how (much) to engage in online teaching were non-existent following 2020 national lockdowns, as decisions whether to engage in online teaching became a question of how to do it now.

The lack of institutional support, the lack of faculty time or other barriers to online transition identified in the literature (Bruggeman et al., 2021 Marasi et al., 2020; Taylor & Newton, 2013;) were of little relevance as online teaching became the only available format by which the work of educators and functioning of universities could be upheld. While the long-term effects and consequences of this disruption in higher education are yet to be seen, some are already obvious. The extraordinary situation forced virtually all institutions and faculty to adopt new teaching and learning formats, which possibly revealed more associated affordances and limitations. It also provided different perspectives on the teaching, learning, and the very being of the university, thus uncovering existing weaknesses and identifying new opportunities for the 21st century (Liburd, 2013 Watermeyer et al., 2020). Specifically for research on blended and online teaching the situation opens avenues for exploring how effective and better teaching can be done in online or blended formats, rather than how new formats can improve traditional, face-to-face teaching. Critical voices (e.g. Feenberg, 2017) argue that blended and online education pose a further iteration of neoliberal reform, and the Covid-19
pandemic inadvertently expanded – even if temporarily – the scale of this transformation. Virtually all faculty, regardless of their qualifications had to engage in the use of technology for remote teaching. Watermeyer et al. (2020, p. 9) report that as university management views students as consumers of higher education, many educators felt that the 'pedagogical praxis had been reduced to the fulfilment of rudimentary technical functions, functions moreover that might easily be automated'. Add to this enrolment of ambitious, demanding students, the often perfectionist nature of academics – intensified by the lack of separating work from personal lives and the timelessness of (not) being online, – and one easily arrives at the imperfect blend (Trudel et al., 2021).

The objective of this article is to enquire deep into teachers’ perspectives on the blended (and not so) splendid teaching and learning based on the redesign of postgraduate tourism courses during the Covid-19 pandemic. To do so, we consider the emic perspectives on the transition process to bring forth individual experiences and understand how teachers approached, coped, and felt during the redesign and a turbulent semester. Allowing for multiple co-existing, even conflicting understandings of how people perceive the world around them, emic perspectives offer important insights in the ‘unknown unknowns’ (Hansen & Heu, 2020), including the nuances easily discarded as unprofessional, such as insecurities, doubt, frustrations, joy, relief, pride, and excitement embodied teachers. Our qualitative and interpretive exploration of a transition to blended learning thus complements existing research (Bokolo et al., 2020 Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2018; Castro, 2019), which predominantly applies management-centric perspectives and accounts for how students react to blended learning activities.

2. An emic perspective on teaching

An emic perspective is grounded in a phenomenological worldview and represents the insider’s view of reality in any given community (Pettermann, 2009). Its standpoint is different from that of an etic perspective, which looks at behaviours and phenomena from the outside, as ‘an essential initial approach to an alien system’ (Pike, 1967, p. 37). The two terms – etic and emic – were introduced by linguist Kenneth Pike, who through analogy with linguistics suggested that different elements and aspects of a behavioural system can be identified by taking different perspectives (Harris, 1976). This epistemological approach has been embraced by cultural anthropologists and psychologists, for whom an emic perspective permitted identifying the holistic, emergent constructions of cultures (Berry, 1999).

Much of research on teaching and education has been performed from an etic, ‘outside-in’ perspective, with a separation of the researchers and the researched phenomena. Practicing teachers have been commonly seen as recipients of externally produced knowledge to be adopted into the teaching practice (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992). Already more than 30 years ago, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) enumerated the advantages of ‘inside-out’ research performed by teachers on their own teaching; besides having a transformative effect on the teachers themselves, such inquiry could produce powerful and relatable cases and rich, intricate data on the teaching and learning process, thus helping theorization. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) describe such ‘teacher research’ as systematic (well dokumented and structured) and intentional (planned rather than spontaneous) inquiry that generates new questions and makes sense of the teachers’ experiences (p. 3).

Research on teaching from an emic perspective brings together subjectivity, context and practice; the teacher-researchers are both the subjects experiencing the forces shaping their choices and decisions and the authors who can capture the phenomenon’s situatuedness, which is otherwise lost through generalizations (Rowsef et al., 2012). The small details are of major importance when discussing transitions, such as the digital transformation. Past research has demonstrated how experiential elements could be both constraints and facilitators of digital transformation in various fields, but these were often overlooked in ‘traditional’ research (Burton-Jones et al., 2020 Drechsler et al., 2020; Izzo et al., 2021). Attempts to incorporate teacher’s voices into discussions on online teaching have also showed the importance of the typically discarded personal and situational details (Maggio et al., 2018 Sword, 2012).

The holistic nature of an emic perspective affords addressing the three aspects of mental activity – cognitive (think), affective (feel), and conative (act). The three are intertwined, but ‘when we apply one of these three adjectives to any phase of mental processes, we mean merely that the aspect named is the most prominent of the three at that moment’ (McDougall, 1923, p. 266, as cited in Hilgard, 1980). Addressing each separately is beneficial, as it helps avoid the tendency in higher education research to emphasize cognitive aspects whilst silencing the conative and affective dimensions (Hilgard, 1980). We address the three aspects of mental activity in our own attempt of adopting emic perspectives in exploring the transition to blended teaching. The procedure of our inquiry as well as its educational context are discussed next.

3. Contextualisation and the inquiry

The principal aim for the two post-graduate degrees, the Master of Arts in International Tourism and Leisure Management (MA in Tourism) and the joint European Master in Tourism Management (EMTM) at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU) is to educate today’s students to become proficient practitioners of tomorrow. Therefore, it is important to create learning environments that take the challenges of unknown futures into account (Heape & Liburd, 2018). The two student cohorts average 26 nationalities with different educational backgrounds. Three core courses are offered during the first semester: Sustainable tourism development, Strategic communication and Tourism innovation. In all three courses, the students engage in projects that address open-ended and ‘wicked’ problems to which no one resolution apply. This is markedly different from resting on predefined learning outcomes, where students simply acquire knowledge about a given topic. The students are encouraged to acknowledge multiple perspectives, variations of interpretation, and alternate ontological and epistemological stances. Normally, students from the two post-graduate programmes have joint classes where they do projects together.

In April 2020, as Covid-19 had effectively halted international travel, the consortium of universities running the EMTM programme, produced a contingency plan envisioning online teaching from the end of August until mid-October 2020 by when students would arrive and assume physical classes for the latter half of their semester in Denmark. At the same time, per SDU management decision, the MA in Tourism would be offered on campus, as usual, with an option to provide ‘digital attendance’ to some students. To meet SDU management’s, the EMTM consortium’s and our own expectations, we asked the SDU E-Learning Unit to assist us in a redesign of the courses. Unanimously, we regarded the transformation of courses to an online format as a major challenge, particularly as our teaching and learning rely on collaboration and social construction of meanings and understandings amongst all participants. The SDU E-Learning Unit prepared a series of all-day workshops tailored to address our role as the teacher in students’ online learning and to introduce us to a range of asynchronous and synchronous learning spaces, tools, and platforms, electronic activities (e-tivities), ways of providing feedback and feedforward, as well as digital exams.

Clarity about e-tivities, roles and responsibilities based on ‘wicked’ problems, collaborative efforts and project-based tasks proved challenging. We wanted to ensure the scaffolding of individual and collective learning without disempowering the students by telling them what to do, as that would endanger the stated aim of both programmes – becoming a philosophical tourism practitioner. For example, central to the sustainable tourism development course is the introduction of collaborative design (co-design). Co-design is a social practice where participants relate to the dynamic and iterative nature of the task at hand where outcomes emerge from the social interactions of those involved in an overall sustainable tourism development process (Heape & Liburd, 2018). Firstly, this deliberately challenges the notion that learning and sustain-
able development processes can be planned and micro-managed towards pre-determined outcomes. Secondly, it gives way for creative conceptualizations of higher education as a space for transformation of the self; a space for receiving and contributing to critical knowledge about the past and present; and a space to engage in future world-making (Libur, 2013, Liburd et al., 2020). Reverting to more traditional teaching formats by means of slide presentations and lecturing in a ‘plugged-in classroom’ we did not see as an option.

Familiarizing ourselves with and subsequently selecting online tools, producing videos, getting ready for a fully online semester start with EMTM across 12 time zones, as well as getting ready for physical classes with the MA in Tourism students, we found ourselves moving from experiment to experiment to create new teaching and learning environments. To document our experiences of preparing, delivering, adjusting, and assessing the three blended, post-graduate courses, the four author-teachers maintained a shared logbook, select segments of which are presented in the form of four vignettes.

Vignettes are short impressionistic texts within text that ‘bring life to research and bring research to life’ (Ellis, 1997, p. 4). We present our ‘data’ (or experiences) as vignettes because we find that ‘personal, autobiographical modes of writing are vital for knowledge production’ (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 411). This is particularly relevant when aiming to give voice to emic perspectives on affective and conative dimensions of blended teaching and learning. Subsequently, we step back from the insider’s perspectives when discussing the vignettes through combining the four teachers’ logbook entries and producing multidimensional perspectives, maintaining the uniqueness of each journey.

4. Accounts of new teaching and learning realities

In the four vignettes comprising this section we present our first order interpretations of moving from experiment to experiment with blended learning. The first vignette is an entry by the teacher of tourism innovation on the preparations for blended teaching and learning. It is followed by a vignette by the teacher of the strategic communication course, captured immediately after her first online teaching session with the 2020 cohorts of students. The third vignette is an entry by the two teachers in sustainable tourism development course. In the last vignette, we introduce a teaching assistant robot.

4.1. Vignette I: Anne-Mette’s experiences

‘The e-learning unit is a wonderful bunch of people, and they came in heavy demand. They supplied the unprepared colleagues and me with lengthy training sessions. Online of course. Additionally, I had special sessions alone with Pete from the E-learning unit which felt like being back in the primary school with the ladders. Only back then I was not one of the ladders. It hurt, separate training for me, upsetting my self-confidence! In spite of Pete’s well-intended assurance my resistance came to the surface. Not an obstruction, not at all, I wanted to learn and work to progress through experiments. My irritation was the tiny aspects of the technology, easy to blame as it felt like we paved whilst driving, and there was no-one else to blame, except myself. A concern was to ensure equally engaging teaching for both those students at a distance and those in the classroom. It is supposed to be one and the same class, despite truly blended in several dimensions. Pete never quite understood my concern about the situation with the asynchronous format for those present and those students located around the world in 12 different time zones. He constantly referred to synchronous teaching, obviously the mind-locking backbone of on-line teaching.’

This vignette shows how course preparations shifted significantly with the demand for blended and asynchronous formats. Moreover, Anne-Mette felt that her professionalism as a senior academic, and even her sense of self, were challenged during the intense process of preparing for blended teaching and learning. She blames herself, feels irritated and it even hurt needing additional training and support.

4.2. Vignette II: Bodil’s experiences

‘It’s late in the evening, Thursday, 17.09.20. Today, I taught my first lesson online on strategic communication and oh, I’m bad at it. Don’t know whether I dare to write this … … … But here I go: Online teaching is so boring! I have extreme difficulties activating the students. Some students seem active – but they can’t have their cameras turned on, some are thrown off the system due to bad connections, some have extremely bad sound when they turn on the microphones, their writing in the chat is even slower. All this means that I end up talking to a black screen (and try to multisit; putting people back into breakout rooms, dealing with echo, trying to make sense (and communicate strategically) while monitoring a seemingly endless stream of chat messages from people, who can’t hear, can’t see, can’t upload/share. So far, my impression is that online teaching is lonely. What also worries me is that students are so eager to have classes recorded. I don’t understand why they are so preoccupied with this issue: They wouldn’t learn anything watching a recording of what goes on in “my” lectures, simply because it is those who participate actively that learn something. The students are co-producers of the show and co-creators of knowledge. My course is not a Netflix series and the students aren’t consumers, who can learn whilst sitting on the couch with a box of popcorn watching recorded lessons; they are people with whom I arrive on the academic set; set the philosophical stage, turn the lights on wicked problems, engage with props in the form of our discipline’s theories and methods, and immerse ourselves, not in method acting, but in learning.’

The second vignette shows how online teaching was fundamentally different from what Bodil had imagined and hoped for while spending the summer preparing for it. The vignette points to a teacher who is overwhelmed by technical issues. Furthermore, Bodil labels herself as ‘bad at’ online teaching and hereby voices concern about (in)competencies as a facilitator of learning. Most importantly, the vignette demonstrates how online teaching makes this teacher ‘worry’ and ponder about how learning can happen without active synchronous engagement whilst the unidirectional speaking to a black screen makes her feel ‘lonely’.

4.3. Vignette III: Janne and Kristof’s experiences

In the post-graduate course on Sustainable Tourism Development, we are two teachers – Janne, a senior professor, and Kristof, a junior assistant professor. In the logbook, Janne described the semester start as ‘nervous’, ‘unlike the usual buzz of meeting the students for the first time, and so on.’ Janne felt particularly ‘out of [her] comfort zone’ in managing the technical aspects of online teaching, while Kristof was mostly concerned about the administrative uncertainties arising from students’ online participation.

At the same time, Janne was ‘very pleased by having Kristof’s support and apparent confidence,’ which he himself expressed as ‘a certain type of excitement’ from the possibility of proving himself in online teaching that he himself experienced as high school and university student. Similarly, Kristof felt ‘more relaxed’ due to Janne’s extensive experience as educator and programme administrator. As the online course delivery unfolded, we continued relying on each other. In one of his logbook entries, Kristof expressed: ‘I feel sorry for Bodil and Anne-Mette’s experiences of teaching their courses alone, because the first thing that I do after an online session is go to Janne’s office to discuss the session. Only after reading Bodil’s previous [logbook] entry, I realized how actually important it is for me! Today it will be different – Janne is on campus and I am staying at home. We might have a call after the class:’

The third vignette captures the insecurities felt, regardless of the years of teaching experience, and how being able to share these concerns with a colleague as they arose was of mutually unserving comfort. They empathised with the struggles and loneliness of their colleagues as they too were insecure and nervous. Yet being two teachers who relied on each other enabled the sharing of experiences and sentiments throughout the semester.
4.4. Vignette IV: Wally the robot (narrated by Anne-Mette)

‘Did you meet Wally? He made us laugh. Wally is a robot that records and transmits the teaching synchronously. Wally was an in-house construction by the IT-Services, and they made an effort to make him look like a human being – a bit fat at the bottom with large trunks, and only one eye – but nonetheless Wally turned out to be difficult to communicate with, in that respect like a human being, and we started to address him as a human: “Sweet Wally, you make me weep when I connect all the electric devices and enslave you”. And “poor Wally, you should stay attentive, do not fall asleep and disconnect”. I wish we had more funny robots, excuses to laugh and talk with students in less formal ways and helping to make the conversation more dynamic. I dismissed Wally because of his lack of genuine loyalty to me. In the future I’ll crave my personal robot.’

This last vignette is about the distress related to the reception of innovative assisting technologies, meant to make life easier for the teachers. To provide teachers with an assistant in-class robot was undoubtedly a well-intended, smart idea. However, the technical solution to ease recording and transmission largely failed. Instead, it created a serendipitous space for the teacher and students to laugh and share informal exchanges otherwise hindered by the distance of the screen.

5. Discussion of the emic perspectives

The four vignettes serve as verbal articulation of emic perspectives and as means of analysis by intentionally focusing on the micro-details of self and interaction between those involved in blended teaching and learning. We are thus able to tap into and better understand the individual and collective affective and conative dimensions at stake. These higher order findings arose following multiple, iterative rounds of analysing the vignettes and logbook entries. This stimulated identification of three empirically grounded, thematic openings – (a) embracing the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions, (b) embracing uncertainties together, and (c) managerial challenges and collaborative opportunities addressed below.

5.1. Embracing the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions

We need to be cautious not to emphasize cognitive (think) aspects whilst silencing the conative (feel) and affective (act) dimensions in higher education. Vignettes I and II showed how blended teaching evoked strong reactions in terms of conative and affective dimensions. For the conative dimensions, engaging with technology and dealing with technical issues interfered with the teachers’ deeply habitualized ways of ‘making’ and ‘doing’ teaching in higher education. In accordance with Watermeyer et al. (2020), the teachers felt that the fulfilment of technical functions took prominence over pedagogical praxis. Importantly, both vignettes point to experienced teachers fundamentally questioning their identities as competent and capable educators and to the transition to online teaching and learning triggering strong, negative emotions such as self-doubt, solitude and loneliness. Vignettes I, II and III expose unexpected, strong emotional reactions regardless of seniority. It made teachers fundamentally question their identities as teachers, abilities to facilitate learning, and even the very essence of ‘the higher’ in higher education.

Questioning the taken-for-granted, including the self, and discovering new ways of knowing and being are vested on ontological aspects and an emancipatory conception of higher education. The formative process of higher education aims both at ‘meaningful freedom’ and ‘transformation of the whole man’ (Jaspers, 1965, pp. 64–65). This does not imply that students and teachers are equal but that both contribute to holistic and potentially transformative learning processes (Liburd, 2013), especially in blended formats where active participation and responsibility for not only one’s own learning but learning with others is paramount. Our experience is that a subjugation of the teacher’s authentic self is in need of critical attention. Walsh and Kahn (2010) argued that subjugation of the authentic self can be avoided if the shared goals and contributions necessary to achieve a fully collaborative process are explicitly recognized and acknowledged by those involved, which is further addressed below.

5.2. Embracing uncertainties together

We are cognizant that most of our students come from business-oriented bachelor programmes and bring an understanding of development – sustainable, personal, or educational – as rational, linear, pre-determined and sequential. Still, we challenge the students to work with a high degree of risk, in as much as they are working in a learning environment that is new and engaging in tasks that are open ended or ‘wicked’ and have no single identifiable or correct outcome. We also encourage the students to accept not knowing where their group-based projects will take them. Moreover, in sustainable tourism development they initially struggle with co-design and sustainable development presented as a process rather than a goal to be reached (Heape & Liburd, 2018). Vignette III revealed how, through the exchange of thoughts and impressions immediately after each class, and during the week when preparing for the next session, Janne and Kristof found a way to deal with the unforeseen blend of online and face-to-face teaching. By doing so, it felt like they were ‘taking their own medicine’ by accepting frustrations, risks, and uncertainties as we readily ask of the students.

Barnett (2012, p. 76) described this in different terms when he pointed to learning not only knowledge and skills but for becoming an ‘authentic being’. Attention to the self entails critically seeing into oneself in ontological and epistemological terms, thus cultivating deeper self-awareness in order to open for the possibility of seeing beyond the self. This is not to be mistaken for a self-indulgent process (Liburd, 2013). Rather, we contend, it alludes to an emancipatory conception of higher education rooted in critical examination of what is being taught, learned and achieved (Barnett, 1990), to which we add ‘with others’ (Heape & Liburd, 2018, p. 234). Vignette III demonstrates that our collaboration and experimentation with the blended formats and sharing our joy with the students – whilst certainly not our insecurities and constant adjustments to not appear unprofessional – showed the students that there is no such thing as failures. There are only experiments from which one learns with others. They allow for new experiments that will inevitably pose new research questions which in our case engages both teachers and students in a blended and perhaps more splendid co-generative and co-learning endeavour.

5.3. Managerial challenges and collaborative opportunities

A recurring theme in our findings has been the adaptive management of learning in the multi-level administrative reality of the university. Apart from taking the decision of transitioning to online or blended teaching as a result of the pandemic, university administrators at various levels and institutional policies have had a profound effect on the emergency transition, and the experiences of the teachers. One of the ways of providing support to teachers was the mobilization of the university’s E-learning unit. As illustrated in Vignette I, the unit’s standard toolbox and initial focus on synchronous activities on the one side and the teachers’ need for ensuring asynchronous teaching on the other side have revealed a mismatch between perspectives of the two parties and uncovered the potential isolation of E-learning units from active teaching practices. The Covid-19 pandemic pushed E-learning units to the forefront of developing new teaching and learning competencies and operational methods that were previously not envisaged by university administration. The robot Wally from Vignette IV also symbolized the university management’s attempt to support blended and hybrid teaching practices. Akin the E-learning unit, Wally did not fit the needs of the
teacher, but rather represented the ideas of the university administrators and the IT department about what the needs of the teachers could be. Both examples illustrate the existence of different perspectives on the same issue and solutions developed for, not with teachers, which may lead to less splendid teaching and learning, if not outright conflict (Sellani & Harrington, 2002).

Without activating links between the various elements of the university system, it is not possible to implement ‘adaptive surprise management’ (Pekkola et al., 2021). Instead, existing policies and decision-making protocols result in quick-fix solutions, each with its own load of unforeseen consequences, as the not so splendid experiences of 2020 have showed. Addressing future crises will only be successful through collaborative efforts enabling structures and policies that make the system work for and with its participants. Crucially, this calls for structures that recognize the amount of work around online and blended teaching without placing all teaching forms in the same category (Roby et al., 2013). Our experiences show that collaboration amongst educators, between educators and students, and between educators and administrators can feasibly be incentivized – rather than the current status quo focusing on individual performances (Walsch & Kahn, 2010), and provide flexibility to co-evolve with the wider environment. Without such transformation, misalignments and general dissatisfaction can undermine the joint nature of splendid teaching and learning, thus silencing of the conative and affective dimensions (Hilgard, 1980) which may lead to disintegration of the university system (Vican et al., 2020).

6. Conclusions

Without fully envisaging the implications, the four academies behind this contribution used the Covid-19 crisis to rethink our understanding of blended and splendid learning, and how it is embedded in the university where we work. We used the Covid-19 pandemic for experimentation in higher education and did not shy away from sharing and deeply reflecting upon the affective and conative aspects of our experiences to provide an emic perspective on a matter that has already received consideration from etic, cognitive and rationalist standpoints. We argue that such approach particularly appropriate when considering learning as collaboratively engendered, developed and disseminated through embodied and interpersonal exchanges rather than stemming from academic knowledge transfer and individual reflection (Heape & Liburd, 2018).

Our paper also provides a corrective against the tendency to (over)emphasize cognitive aspects in higher education (Hilgard, 1980). It illustrates how addressing embodied, conative and affective dimensions in blended teaching and learning uncovers crucial nuances that constitute the splendid in higher education. We thus propose that cognitive (think), affective (feel) and conative (act) dimensions of teaching should all be subjected to further consideration in the field of online and blended teaching and learning.

Reflecting upon our experiences helped us realize that the Covid-19 pandemic brought to the fore many existing but smouldering issues in the transition to online and blended teaching and learning from the perspective of the teachers. We demonstrated how such transitions, if done haphazardly, can undermine the confidence of the educators, limit their academic freedom, and uncover misalignment between the various managerial layers of the university. We have found that existing university structures and policies may not be prepared for adaptive crisis situations.

To leverage the benefits of blended learning and to avoid the not so splendid experiences, collaborative redesign with, not for others, becomes of paramount importance. This requires recognizing the affective aspects of the experiences of all those involved and making space for active experimentation. The shock caused by the Covid-19 pandemic suspended parts of the prevalent university management structure. It provided an opportunity to rethink the very aims of the university and to re-design teaching and learning by enabling a range of ‘blends’.

Whilst framed in a context of tourism higher education at a Danish university, we are confident that these deep insights on blended teaching and learning experiences will be beneficial to a wider audience of educators. We encourage others to keep on adjusting and experimenting with collaborative forms of higher education to make teaching and learning not only blended but splendid, and to engage students in addressing complex societal challenges, such as sustainable development.

Declarations of Competing Interest

None.

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