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SYDNEY

The University of Sydney Accounting Foundation

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Executive Summary

**Perspectives from
Business School
educators and students
on building and living
in the remote online
Business Education
environment**



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We recognise and pay respect to the Elders and communities – past, present, and emerging – of the lands that the University of Sydney's campuses stand on. For thousands of years they have shared and exchanged knowledges across innumerable generations for the benefit of all.

Perspectives from Business School educators and students on building and living in the remote online Business Education environment

Key conclusions

This study shows that while classrooms demonstrated some capacity to self organise during the shift to emergency remote teaching, institutional constraints and limited pedagogical adaptation restricted meaningful transformation. Social connection was recognised as critical but was often superficial, shaped by differing understandings of engagement and connection. As a result, remote classrooms largely replicated traditional models, with only modest structural and pedagogical changes. The findings highlight the need for a reimagined pedagogy, improved educator training, and further research into how hybrid learning environments continue to evolve.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced universities worldwide into emergency remote teaching and learning. This study examines teaching practices at a globally ranked Australian university aimed at fostering student connection in the absence of face-to-face learning. Using complex adaptive systems theory and mixed methods, we analyse how the remote classroom evolved through processes of self organisation. We find that social connection was the central mechanism shaping classroom adaptation, though educators largely attempted to replicate face to face practices online, resulting in surrogate forms of connectedness. These findings extend pandemic related higher education research and underscore the critical role of pedagogy and social connection in driving meaningful change.



Introduction

Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced universities worldwide to rapidly transition to emergency remote online teaching and learning. While online education is not new, the speed and scale of this shift fundamentally altered how educators and students engaged with one another. We use the term emergency remote teaching and learning to describe this context, distinguishing it from purposefully designed online education. As higher education moves beyond this emergency phase, it is important to reflect on what was learned from both educator and student perspectives, particularly the critical role that connection plays in effective teaching and learning.

Objectives

The objective of this study is to examine how educators and students adapted to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL). Using a complex adaptive systems lens, the study conceptualises the remote classroom as a complex social system and investigates how teaching and learning practices evolved during the transition to ERTL. In doing so, it identifies social connection as the underlying mechanism shaping pedagogical adaptation and sustaining engagement in the remote environment. Guided by this perspective, the study addresses the following research questions:

How did educators and students respond and engage in the ERTL context?

How did social connection occur in the ERTL context?

Research method

For this study, we collected data throughout 2020 via 7 focus groups with a total of 25 students, and in-depth interviews with 23 educators, 11 from the Accounting discipline and 12 from the Business Information Systems (BIS) discipline.

Main findings and implications for practice

This study shows that while classrooms can self-organise in response to disruption, institutional constraints limited meaningful adaptation during emergency remote teaching. Educators largely replicated existing practices and relied on surrogate social connection, constraining learning effectiveness. Although social connection was seen as essential, it was often narrowly conceptualised, with engagement viewed as behaviour rather than cognition. Overall, the remote classroom changed little, aside from stronger educator support networks and early experimentation with engagement focused practices.





Conclusions

The findings highlight the need for a reimagined pedagogy in higher education that deliberately integrates engagement and social connection into teaching and learning, particularly within evolving delivery contexts. As hybrid models combining online and face to face teaching become the norm, educators face the challenge of sustaining the complex social processes that underpin effective learning communities. Addressing this challenge requires targeted professional development and a shift in mindset, moving beyond change fatigue to view ongoing transformation as an opportunity. By rethinking teaching practices beyond the traditional classroom while recognising the fundamental human need for social connection, higher education can better support meaningful learning in future educational environments.

References and further reading

Publication as a result of the research project:

[https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/
10.1080/07294360.2023.2203471](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07294360.2023.2203471)

Raduescu, C., Hecimovic, A., Coupe, J. (2023). Using social connection to drive engagement in emergency remote teaching and learning. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 42(8), 2015-2029.



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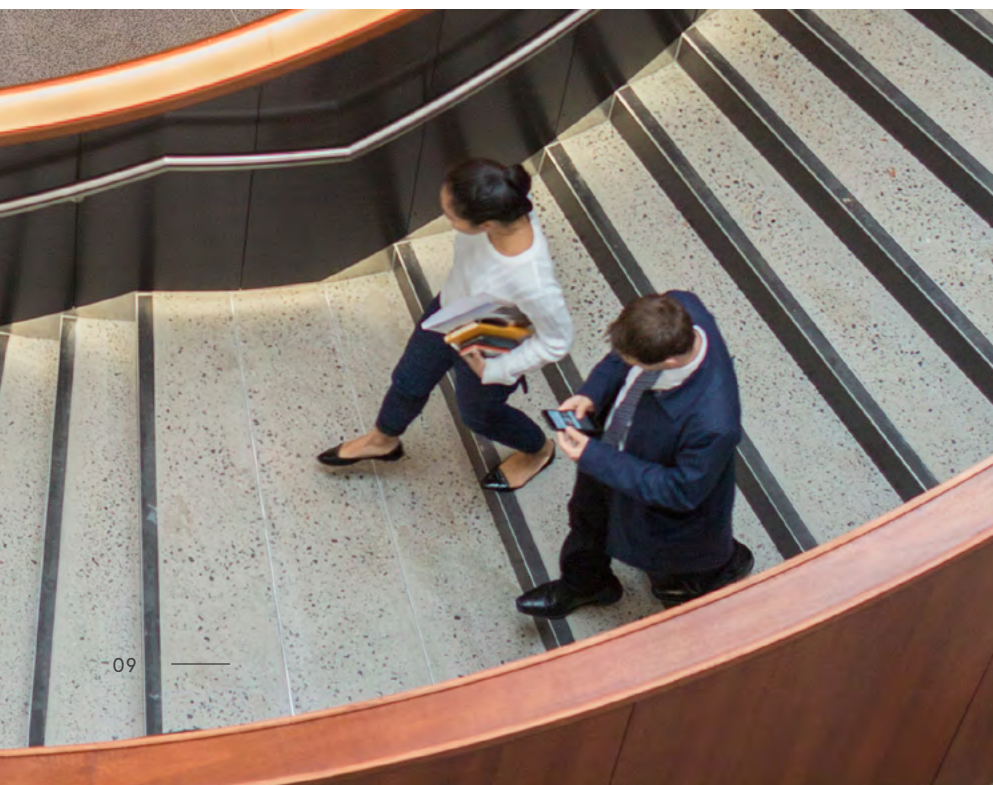
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