What we do in the shadows: Cultivating faculty teaching and learning relationships in online tutorials

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Key contributions

- Higher education increasingly moves into online learning environments; the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this expansion. Virtual teaching teams are one way to meet the needs of large student numbers in online tutorials. However, this requires rapid development of teaching-team members and practices to work cohesively.
- This article reports on the strategies we developed to rapidly build a successful online virtual-team practice in the absence of prior team-building opportunities to cope with the sudden transition to online team-teaching. Using our personal reflections, we describe the insights we gained from each other and the new possibilities we created to work as a more bonded and effective team.
- We recommend using an Appreciative Inquiry framework to guide emotional and strategic discussions between educators to develop trust and safety. Bringing a caring heart and being open to seeing one's own hidden assumptions are important for guiding attitudes and actions in co-constructed teams. We list numerous strategies to assist other educators to develop their teams.

Abstract

Many academic faculties found themselves unexpectedly thrown into the online teaching context during the COVID-19 pandemic. In our context, online tutorial attendances ranged from 20 to 150 students per session, necessitating the creation of a virtual teaching team. This article offers a perspective on developing collaborative team-teaching from the lived experiences of three academics who suddenly found themselves team-teaching online. We reflected on our experiences of collaborative online teaching over the year and shared our stories with each other. Our analysis drew from elements of Appreciative Inquiry and collaborative autoethnography. Based on the five principles of Appreciative Inquiry, we constructed positive and supportive conceptions of our experiences and opened positive possibilities for course delivery and our ongoing relationships. Important outcomes from this study included the development of our online teaching skills and strategies necessary for effective collaboration in online team-teaching. Our findings will be of interest to educational staff transitioning to online team-teaching.

Introduction

Higher-education faculty face increasing demands resulting from a student body with diverse needs, academic diversification, pressure for pass rates, and online learning environments (Rolls & Northedge, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has added further tension by necessitating shifts to online tutorials and rapid transitions to fully online learning (Almost, 2020). This switch in the way tutorials are managed has created higher student-to-staff ratios, as online ‘rooms’ are free from the limitations of physical classrooms. Virtual teaching teams, described by Crawford and Jenkins (2017) as involving two or more people sharing responsibility for teaching some or all students assigned to a class, can address this situation. The use of virtual teams has rapidly escalated in recent decades in line with the growth of communication technology (Townsend et al., 1998; Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017), enabling geographically dispersed teams to collaborate in a way that limits face-to-face contact.

However, virtual teaching teams call attention to long-standing tensions between academic self-identity and the need to work in a more collaborative and relational manner. This is also true of team-teaching in face-to-face situations, which have the universal goal of creating a community that fosters constructive dialogue and forms part of the value of care for others in the context of reflective practice (Light & Cox, 2001). As online teaching continues to expand, it becomes especially important for

educators working with other professionals to understand how to address the challenges of functioning within a team in an online environment. Specifically, team-teaching in online environments requires purposeful practice, communication, and respectful negotiation. Intuitive habits, such as reading visual cues and body language, are not possible in such environments. To facilitate sessions fluidly and with effective collaboration, a process of clarification, open discussion, and continual reflective practice needs to be conducted – 'in the shadows' – outside of tutorials and away from student view.

Professional vulnerability

As teaching and learning have moved to blended and online contexts, more educators have made the adjustment to teaching online. Effective online teaching involves multiple skills including managing technology, course content, student communications and behaviours, time, and one's own feelings. This transition can open a sense of professional vulnerability when staff are unsure of their competency to teach online. Academic online experiences need to be examined and supported (Cutri & Mena, 2020; Regan et al., 2012). However, the transition to online learning was accelerated by an urgent and unexpected need during the COVID-19 pandemic (Almost, 2020). Morreale et al. (2021, p. 117) recognised 'the distinct difference between intentionally designed and structured online courses, typically referred to as "online pedagogy," as compared with "crisis pedagogy," the mandated remote learning transition recently witnessed'. In some cases, there may be professional-development programmes to assist with this transition, but many educators must figure things out as they go along.

The change to online teaching challenges educators to reconsider their relationships with students (Naylor & Nyanjom, 2020). Teachers are less able to use their personal authority to control classes online than in face-to-face teaching (Shaw & Northedge, 2018). In the case of team-teaching, an additional dimension of considering the relationship with other teachers is important. Team-teaching has received some positive and enthusiastic analysis, but it also comes with some associated challenges. Pedagogical and logistical differences among teachers may cause friction. It is important to find like-minded individuals with similar personalities, expertise, and pedagogical philosophies, as well as an ability to communicate with each other. An effective instructional connection and respect are vital to providing meaningful learning experiences (Crawford & Jenkins, 2017).

Rationale

Current circumstances demand that educators in higher education transition to online teaching, yet not much is known about the experiences, perceptions, and strategies needed to help develop new teaching styles (Regan et al., 2012). In a review of literature on teachers' readiness to work online, Cutri and Mena (2020) noted affective dimensions and disruption that can lead to a sense of professional vulnerability. Ultimately, the study found that many teachers do not feel prepared to teach online (Cutri & Mena, 2020). Furthermore, faculty experiences of online teaching need to be critically examined for issues of equity and power. This gap can be explored through reporting on the coalface experiences of online teaching teams as they manage the development of their teaching skills. This study contributes new knowledge by providing rich descriptions of personal experiences from which readers can draw when reflecting on their own online team-teaching experiences and evolving skills.

This article shares our perceptions and experiences of managing our teaching skills as we transitioned suddenly to an online team-teaching context. As a result of the Covid lockdown in the fourth week of the semester, classes were no longer held on campus. Additional family commitments for many students meant previous timetables were no longer manageable, so instead of having separate online classes, we offered tutorials in a question-and-answer format that students could choose to attend. Students could attend multiple sessions, and the platform allowed for a large number of students. The course had been redesigned at the beginning of 2020, which presented additional challenges. Fresh staff had joined and needed to familiarise themselves with the format of the course, as well as become acquainted with each other. Alongside this, there had not been enough time – only four weeks of semester – to establish solid relationships with students. In light of such circumstances, the course co-ordinator (GE) decided to run the online sessions with the full teaching team.

The unusual situation prompted greater reflection on practice – individually and as a team – whereby we began recording our experiences in journals. Through an analysis of our reflective impressions, we noted the development of positive collaborative teaching and learning relationships along with strategies for managing technology in the online space. Our research questions were:

1) What insights can be gained from inquiring into the experiences that led to building a successful online teaching team?

2) What strategies can be recommended to other educators to facilitate their team-building process in times of rapid transition?

Method

Participants

KH and GE (course coordinator) are senior lecturers coordinating a second-year undergraduate course on research methods. CC is a teaching assistant for this course. Before the pandemic of 2020, we had not worked together and were working in different areas of the university. However, we were all experienced teachers, each bringing our own unique skills to the task. When the lockdown occurred, we found ourselves challenged in ways we had not envisaged.

Relational ethics

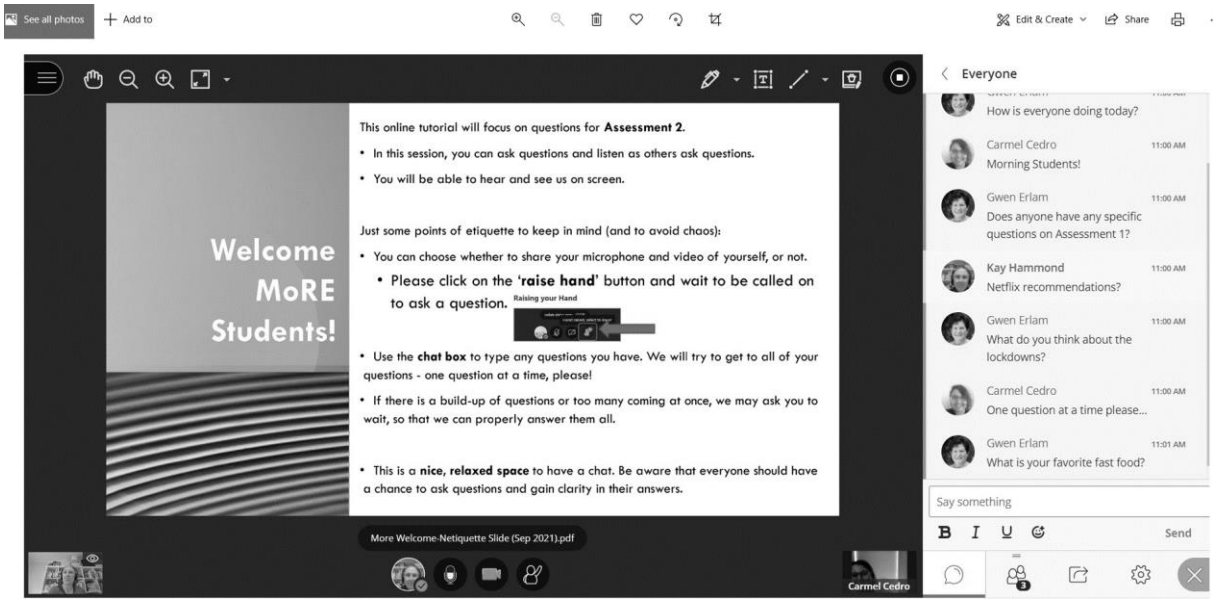
In collaborative autoethnography, researchers must identify the ethical situations arising in their research process and engage in ongoing ethical discussions, as formal ethical processes may not be sufficient (Lapadat, 2017). The writers are both the researchers and research participants, as they are the site of the research as the process evolves through interaction, reflection, and reconceptualisation (Wall, 2006; Sawyer & Norris, 2009). As we were all jointly researchers and participants, we negotiated our own process of relation ethics, rather than obtaining formal approval. We agreed on consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the project. We were especially mindful of the difference in academic rank between us in the course. We allowed several weeks to consider our willingness to participate, after which we were all still very keen. In this writeup, we have been careful not to give any details that would identify students. As we discussed our experiences, we constantly checked with each other that we were comfortable with the research process and final manuscript.

Context

Methods of Research and Enquiry is a 15-week course run each semester. Enrolment is usually around 600 students from a range of health-science disciplines. Assessment is based on two written assignments and four multiple-choice online tests. Tutorials are held in the week prior to the submission of each written assessment. These sessions are run as a question-and-answer tutorial to assist students with completing the written assessments. Prior to the lockdown, tutorials were the only face-to-face contact with students in classes of 40. Online tutorials numbers ranged from 20 to 150 students. Figure 1 shows the appearance of the online classroom using Blackboard Collaborate. The central screen showed the slides while the teachers had their

microphones and cameras on. Students chose to participate through the chat with their cameras and microphones off. A few students would use the hand-raise function and turn their microphones on to ask questions. We encouraged them to replace their blank avatars with a photo of themselves so we could get a sense of their presence. We did not use breakout rooms, as there would have been too many to monitor.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the online tutorial view



Before the pandemic, we had each been working with students in separate classrooms. We each took on our own 'perceived' responsibilities and worked independently. Once we transitioned online, we had to find new ways to connect with both students and each other to continue developing. We needed to learn to trust each other and rely on what each team member had to offer. A combination of two reflective frameworks assisted our enquiry.

Reflective framework – Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is a domain of positive psychology that calls for a serious study of the good life and, more precisely, human flourishing (Cooperrider et al., 2018). Appreciative Inquiry at its heart is about valuing and recognising the positive. It affirms past and present strengths, successes, and potentials (Townsin, 2021). Its methodology focuses on ways of researching, teaching, and doing business that are both profitable and successful (Godwin & Stavros, 2021). Some research has shown that positive emotions involving caring and synchrony – also called 'positivity

resonance' – are associated with mental health; that is, when people co-experience enjoyable states characterised by caring, they receive a strong boost in mental health and the development of personal and social resources. (Prinzing et al., 2020). However, Appreciative Inquiry has been criticised for its positive bias. Johnson (2013) acknowledged the paradox in working with positive emotion and yet seeing the value in examining what negative feelings contribute to positive growth. She offered a nuanced approach to Appreciative Inquiry in which the shadowed feelings are included rather than denied. Appreciative Inquiry encompasses exploring aspects of the self that one may not prefer to investigate, but that can result in improved self-knowledge (Onyett & Hill, 2012). Self-knowledge develops as people become aware of previously unconscious experiences, conflicts, emotions, dysfunctional thinking patterns, and behaviours that negatively influence performance (Kilburg, 2004). Therefore, becoming conscious of these aspects of the self can be uncomfortable at first, but can result in enhanced self-understanding.

We chose to engage with Appreciative Inquiry to build early trust, as we had differing backgrounds and had not worked together previously. Broadening our professional skill set to include virtual team-teaching offers exciting possibilities, but can also challenge unexamined assumptions, which can be emotionally demanding. Such unexamined assumptions could include expectations about online behaviour rules, roles in the tutorials (e.g., who leads), how the material would be covered, assuming we would only need to address the same question once, how disagreements would be handled in the moment, or how any disruptions would be dealt with. Therefore, in our initial engagement with this research and professional development, it was vital to build a relationship of trust and support between us. Only when trust had developed did we start to examine what had not worked so well, ultimately resulting in positive growth.

Reflective framework – Collaborative autoethnography

We also introduced an element of collaborative autoethnography, in which we compared our experiences and developed further insights from these comparisons. Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe collaborative autoethnography as using self-reflective narratives collaboratively, where two or more researchers engage in a dialogue on their personal experiences of a phenomenon. The individual self-reflective narratives are ultimately incorporated into a scripted collage of interconnected ideas, which expands the possibilities for new insights (Norris et al., 2012).

Data collection

In anticipation of starting this project we kept individual notes on our personal experiences in the first and second semester. Following this, we considered analytical frameworks suitable for examining our reflections. Once we considered the project useful and desirable, we checked that all of us were in agreement to participate. After establishing our relational ethics, we met to discuss our experiences together. We reviewed our personal experiences of team-teaching over the year and commented on which were significant in working with others online.

Based on the four-step reflective practice process described by Richards and Farrell (2005), we expanded our process to include elements of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) and collaborative autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Figure 2 shows the phases of our process of reflecting on the experience of teaching together online. Initially, as we were getting to know each other and build trust, we focused on the more positive events and reflections. As our relationship grew stronger and trust developed, we began to mention negative events and discuss our experiences in more depth, in a trusting space.

Data analysis

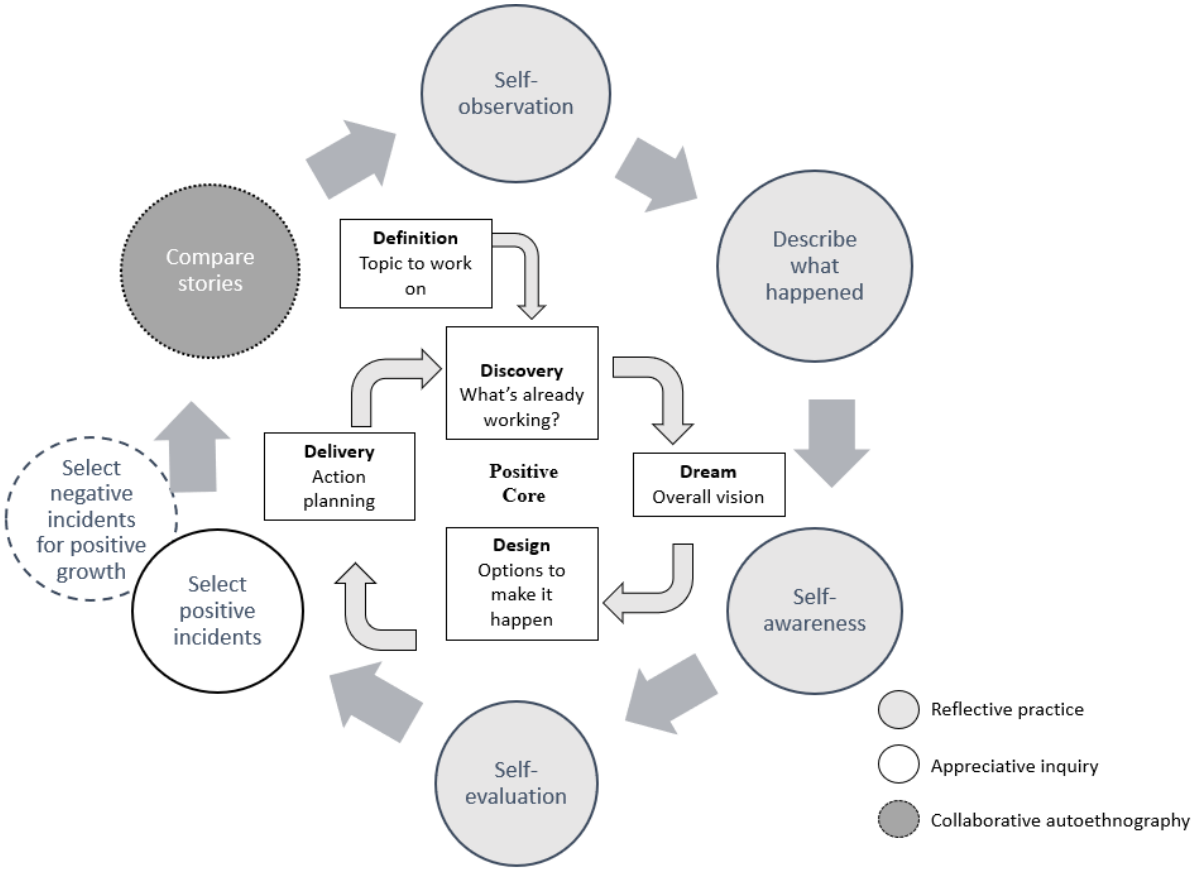
As research participants, we selected the reflections we wished to share and discussed them together. We read each other's accounts and discussed our findings. We decided which reflections best illustrated how our team developed, without needing to reach a consensus on their interpretation when referring to the same incident. Although our initial intention was just to focus on the positive experiences, by the time we came to the analysis phase, we felt safe enough to share some of the negative ones – to find the positive impacts.

Findings and discussion

Positive incidents

Some of our inquiries focused on positive occurrences that we recognised as contributing to what worked well. Here we present two incidents: one of sharing leadership and the other of debriefing after the tutorials. These incidents happened after several tutorial sessions and formed an impression that subsequently became critical to our practice. We present the analysis of our experiences using the Appreciative Inquiry stages of discovery, dream, design, and delivery.

Figure 2: Appreciative Inquiry process embedded within a reflective practice and collaborative autoethnographic cycle



'Do you wanna take that one?' – dynamic leadership

One of the commonplace events that emerged during our semester was a development from assigned leadership to fluid leadership. This became a commonplace event that emerged as we worked together. Usually, it would happen as a student asked a question about an aspect of the assignment for which we knew one or other of us was stronger in answering. The leader of the session would ask, 'Do you wanna take that one?' We noted that the 'leadership' seemed to flow organically this way until assigning a session leader became unnecessary.

> **KH** – Instead of one of us being 'the leader', we find that we are each stronger on certain aspects of the topic – I can explain coding practices and she shares details from her nursing background. The students get the combination of both our expertise. I also learn details from GE. Sharing also works when we feel

a little uncertain about an answer: we invite the other to take on the response. We can also do this if we are just feeling tired.

CC – I noticed some 'jitters' around adapting ourselves to the online space and to each other's style. I eventually found my role in the sessions and developed clearer strategies as to how to support the team. This pushed me to let go of needing to be in control, which was an unrealistic expectation in a multidimensional online space. Through leadership sharing, our sessions became supportive, collegial, and calm, which also became something the students commented on and appreciated.

GE – I found that being the course coordinator put extra pressure on me due to feeling I had to support the others in the delivery of the tutorials. However, I quickly found that I became exhausted responding to all 600 students. Instead of being the 'fount of all knowledge', I found my identity morphing into a long-distance runner who needed help to get 'over the line' with team support. I was becoming a more collaborative educator.

We **discovered** that one person does not have to carry the entire load. It was more sustainable to spread the work so that no one feels overburdened. We got to know more about our colleagues' strengths and interests relating to each assignment. The **dream** was that when we came to the tutorials, nobody would feel left to manage them alone. Furthermore, everyone could contribute and uphold their identity as an educator – ensuring that nobody felt redundant. This was incorporated into the **design** of the tutorials, allowing for a more fluid style of leadership that passed control between us according to our expertise and interests. Currently, we **deliver** tutorials by loosely assigning a leader to each tutorial. This aligns with the concept of collectivistic leadership described by Yammarino et al. (2012), in which multiple individuals can take on leadership roles over time.

The debrief

Teachers typically do not get to observe other teachers' classrooms, although peer observation may offer them the chance to receive feedback (Visone, 2016). In our case, we were unable to meet in person due to the lockdown, but because we had team-taught online together, we had an opportunity to give each other feedback. After each online tutorial, KH immediately sent a Zoom link to GE and CC to debrief about the session. We used the debriefs, which lasted approximately 15 minutes, to support

each other and check our reactions and thoughts about the tutorial we had just completed.

> **KH** – I like the post-tutorial debriefs. When I was in in-class tutorials, I could see by the students' expressions how it had gone. But after the online one, there was just this blank feeling that made me anxious to get other people's perceptions on it. I wanted to check that I was giving a quality session. Getting positive feedback from the others was so reassuring and being able to give positive feedback felt supportive of others. I think that's when I felt safety and trust building in our group.
>
> **GE** – It was kind of like a desperation move. I felt that we needed to do the debrief because we were so new at this and wanted to check [that] everyone was okay. For me, it was terrifying because I didn't know how to engage 150 students while restricting individual domination. I put pressure on myself – I should know how to do this. In my uncertainty, I feared the unknown. I felt like we were dumped in the deep end and left to do a job we were not prepared for. I felt vulnerable.
>
> **CC** – The debriefs felt vital to maintaining a supportive environment. Being able to check in with each other, even briefly, was good. Having space to clarify what had gone well or needed fixing reassured me and solidified the dynamics of our team. It was so encouraging to hear that we had similar perceptions.

We **discovered** quickly that the debriefs focused on what was working well, which allowed us to rapidly build a sense of support and safety through positive feedback. We **conceptualised** that debriefs could be a regular part of our teaching practice. Through debriefs we could get to know each other through sharing our perceptions of the tutorial. We **designed** our tutorial timetable to always include short debriefs. In **practice,** debriefs initially discussed what was working well in order to build our confidence and trust. As this trust developed, we included what did not work well. Our team debriefs offered feedback from peers who were both participants and observers. Thus, we are all intimately invested in the ongoing success and relationships of the teaching practice.

Negative incidents

Although we wanted to focus on the positive, sometimes negative incidents prompted us to reflect on our practice. In such cases, Appreciative Inquiry is still applicable, as we used our reflections to find positive aspects that could come out of these incidents, which became increasingly easier to discuss as trust developed between us. This enabled a more comprehensive approach beyond just the positive to include the more shadowed aspects of our work (Johnson, 2013). The following inquiry by KH and GE reflects this.

Where were you? Different arrival times online

We open the online tutorials 15 minutes before the official start so students and staff can settle into the online space. Before one of the sessions, when KH had been assigned the leadership role in the session, she came in about three minutes prior to the session start. GE had arrived online earlier at the opening time. We realised we had different expectations about the timing.

> **KH** – I felt confident of just 'hitting the ground running'. However, GE took over the leadership role in the tutorial and I felt surprised and marginalised. Once we talked about this event, I realised that my 'late' arrival had caused her to wonder if I was going to show up and whether she would have to run it herself. I realised I needed to be more considerate of how my timing into the room affected others.

> **GE** – I came onto the tutorial 15 minutes before the official start time to 'warm up' the students to the online space. Surprisingly, I found I was alone with the students, and they were just 'sitting there waiting for me to say something'. This caused me to feel anxious, so I started the informal chat section of the tutorial and began to engage the students (35-40 at this time). When KH arrived a few minutes before the tutorial was to 'officially begin', I had already established rapport with the students and felt it was awkward to 'stop' leading. The cognitive disequilibrium I experienced caused me to press forward and make the tutorial a safe space for the students. I knew that KH felt left out, but I did not know how to 'fix' it. In the end, we discussed this in our debrief and decided to make sure we came to the tutorial 15 minutes early and that we were both there to interact with the students during that 'warm-up time'.

This incident enabled us to **discover** divergent expectations we had made about timing. We both recognised a personal limitation that we overcame to create a more supportive space. We **aspired** to make these expectations explicit and to agree on a common protocol for arriving in the online tutorial. We **agreed** in future to both be present at the opening time of the tutorial so we could build the social environment together. We **allocated** the role of early greeting equally across the three of us to spread the responsibility more evenly. This helped us feel supported by our colleagues, reducing the stress of going into an unknown online space where we did not know how many students would be attending. We realised we both had aspects of behaviour and assumptions that had caused distress to the other. Facing one's own shadow side can be uncomfortable (Onyett & Hill, 2012). Through being open to these parts of ourselves, we were able to respectfully overcome differences and negotiate a new practice without feeling shame.

Managing a disruptive behaviour

One early session had a dominating student who repeatedly asked the same questions in the chat box and using his microphone to interrupt. The other students also noticed this. While we were trying to answer other students' questions, this student commented that their questions were being ignored. KH reassured the student calmly, both verbally and in a chat response, that this was not the case. The student left the session early, and another student asked if it was possible to ban students with such behaviour in future sessions, which KH addressed and explained that was not possible as the tutorial space was a place for everyone to feel welcome. The incident was discussed further in our debrief, and we each had a chance to express how we felt about it, how it had affected the session and other students, and the best ways of dealing with similar issues.

> **CC** – It made me feel anxious, particularly as it continued throughout most of the session. Reflecting on it together also created a sense of unease, as we were concerned that it had affected other students in the session and could happen again. I think without the smooth and efficient response of my team, my confidence would have been shaken going forward. This prompted reflection on my teacher identity in preparing for and dealing with classroom confrontation. As a result, I produced a 'netiquette' slide, which I introduced at future sessions by outlining the expectations of interaction in the online space. This became one of my roles in each online tutorial and I could play a more pronounced role and set a respectful tone.

> **GE** – I found this dominating student disruptive and yet did not know how to help other students find their voice. We found as a team that we had to take control and show some active leadership in this virtual space. I was delighted to find that KH had a strategy – set out the rules so everyone knows them at the beginning. This made me feel safe and supported.

As a result of this incident, we **discovered** that the disruption provoked anxiety in two of us. We had assumed that the ability to control in-class disruption would automatically transfer to the online environment. We **envisaged** being able to support each other equally. We **developed** our ability to manage online tutorial expectations by designing a netiquette slide and allocating the role of introducing it to CC. Now, when CC starts the tutorial formally with the **netiquette slide**, it sets the ambience and tone for staff and students. This process, once repeated, began to build our confidence in running tutorials in an orderly and safe manner that helped all students be heard. The appearance of disruptive behaviour creates a complex situation, as multiple goals need to be managed simultaneously to continue meeting the class's learning and relationship goals. There is little literature on how teachers actually respond to disruptive students (Chesebro & Lyon, 2020); thus, teachers may feel ill-equipped to handle these situations. Chesebro and Lyon noted that students perceived teachers who remained professional and calm in response to disruptions positively. We have begun to address disruptive behaviour using a netiquette slide but may need further discussion and mentoring on dealing with in-the-moment disruptions.

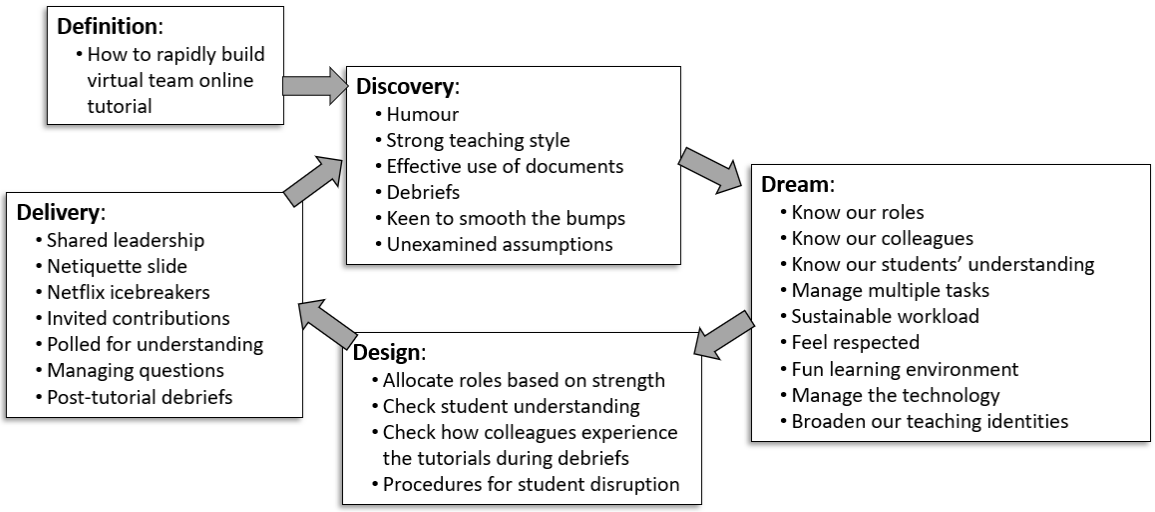
Impacts on teaching and learning relationships

Figure 3 summarises the findings from the analysis of our inquiries. The Appreciative Inquiry of our experiences in the online team-teaching helped us understand how we rapidly built a successful online virtual team practice in the absence of prior team-building opportunities.

We feel, as described by Prinzing et al. (2020), that our experience of caring and support of each other created a 'positivity resonance' and led to feelings of mental wellbeing. Similar to Crow and Smith (2005), we found that reflecting on shared co-teaching experiences helped develop trust and empathy and provide a sense of equal ownership and accountability. This is in line with other research that has shown that when interactions are frequent and supportive, trust develops, which enables people to share more deeply and critically (Holton, 2001). Harrison and Lee (2011) mentioned

the importance, but difficulty, of finding time to engage in reflective dialogue with others as part of professional development. We prioritised this reflective time in our debriefs.

Figure 3: Findings from our Appreciative Inquiry process



We found it rewarding to overcome the additional difficulties of the online environment presented by the lack of visual cues from others. Starting from the initial frustration of talking over each other at times and feeling disorganised, we developed skills in managing three components of online teaching: the main screen, the chat, and the documents that needed to be moved and highlighted. Our teamwork improved, and we became comfortable not controlling the tutorials as much we would as solo facilitators. Instead, we stepped back and allowed areas of confusion to arise as students asked questions. We then answered these together in a collaborative manner – often passing the 'baton' to each other when clarity was required. Clarity was often confirmed by requesting a chat-box response. In time, we knew each other and our skills so well that we automatically responded efficiently to student questions in the moment and could cover more of the material in the class period.

In addition to our reflections on our staff relationships, we also believe that student-teacher relationships were affected in several ways. The sessions always began with light-hearted ice breakers that included mood quizzes, Netflix binge-watch recommendations, cooking during lockdown, and preference for takeaway food. Many of the comments in the chat indicated that students were enjoying the light-hearted banter between the three teaching staff and the many students who joined in the 15

minutes before the official start of the tutorial. Students seemed to enjoy knowing all the members of the team instead of being 'assigned' to one tutorial leader. This created a more supportive and engaging learning environment for students. This also meant there was no need for students to jump from one tutorial leader to another in search of a favourite. Students often commented at the end of the tutorial how much fun it had been and complemented us as a team.

We also noticed that there was scope for those who just wanted to listen as 'lurkers', watching the actively engaged students. In this sense it felt like a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in which some students were more centrally active with their questions, while others participated through peripheral presence in the session. At the end of the tutorials, GE would often ask all the lurkers to type in the chat whether they had found the session useful. There was always a stream of positive responses to this prompt from students whose names had not come up in the chat during the session.

We believe the student learning experience also benefitted from our online team-teaching as we allowed students to attend multiple tutorials so they could clarify areas of confusion. In addition, staff members highlighting relevant parts of article in the moment of discussion enabled students to identify information related to the discussion and their assessment. Scheduling the tutorials the week before the assessment was due and having the content determined by the students' questions enabled abundant just-in-time learning. Consistent with previous research, this promoted better preparation for attendance, greater student engagement, and the ability to hone in on students' remaining misunderstandings (Wanner, 2015).

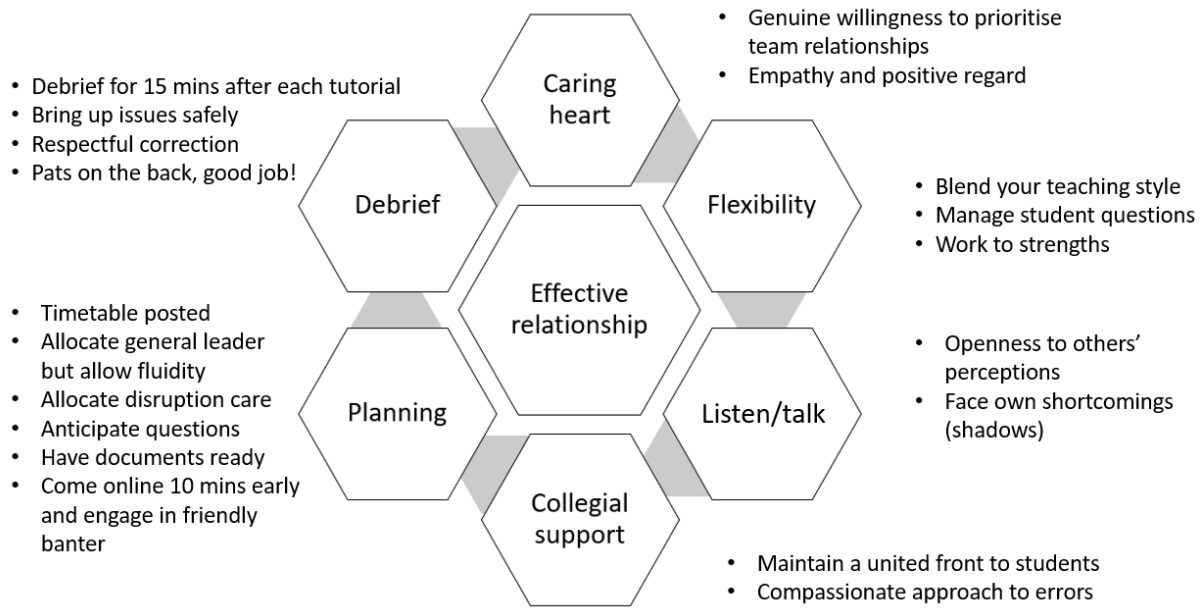
There was also the opportunity to ask the same question or hear other students ask them. This enabled students to hear the answers in several different ways that could deepen their understanding. We noticed that as the week progressed, students who had become more confident with their answers helped other students by putting answers up in the tutorial chat and later in the discussion board. This confidence is congruent with a systematic review of peer teaching literature finding students perceived greater self-confidence and sense of their own abilities when peer teaching (Rees et al., 2016).

Implications for practice: Strategies for building an online team

Figure 4 shows key recommendations from our insights into building a supportive online teaching team. These emerged from both the experiences reported here and

others that were not included. The insights contain a blend of practical and emotional considerations that emerged from the co-construction of our team practice. Co-creating a positive and ethical culture is important in times of change (Driskill et al., 2019). The positive mindset encouraged by the Appreciative Inquiry process permeated our interactions and strategies.

Figure 4: Strategies to build a supportive online teaching team



Our effective relationships incorporated several actions and attitudes. Having a caring heart was vital as we prioritised our relationships and the building of trust and safety. In doing this, we modelled respectful interaction to the students in the tutorials. This also included respectful correction in the event of making an error. This was vital to create a sense of safety and collegial support. At times, this meant confronting our own shadows and being open to seeing how others perceived us while negotiating new ways of being and practicing within the team. Doing this enabled us to affirm our current, emerging, and potential practices (Townsin, 2021). Academic online experiences need to be examined and supported (Cutri & Mena, 2020; Regan et al., 2012), and we achieved this in a just-in-time way through our debriefs.

Currently there is no set plan regarding the continuation of online tutorials once on-campus tutorials are possible again. We embraced the opportunity to develop the online format and reflect on what we consider to be the most effective options for the

future. This may include a blend of online and in-person tutorial opportunities. If we return to individual contexts, we will make note of the areas in which we could become stronger and help each other in this process. In-person team-teaching would be difficult in large classes due to the limitations imposed by the physical classroom size. There would not be enough lecture theatres to hold large, team-taught classes. Timetabling flexibility is also a complicating factor when the large classes consist of multiple disciplines. These are complicated matters included in ongoing discussions. At this point, based on individual reflections from our experiences, we each report how we see a potential future as the current semester draws to a close.

GE – Going forward, this experience has most definitely changed my practice. I have taught online before, but always with some face-to-face component. I have learned that engaging students online is not only possible, but that it can be done in a manner which is preferable to the clumsiness of driving to a location, finding a parking space, and teaching a class where few students show up. Modern digital platforms allow communication to be exciting, enticing, and even educational in a way that whiteboard and marker cannot approach. We need to not waste the pain of moving to a remote digital pivot in COVID. Use what we have learned to make it better for students in the future.

KH – I see great benefit in the flexibility of the team-taught online tutorial. When a good teaching team is formed, I believe it can represent a community where students can interact as they feel comfortable. However, I am also aware of students who value in-person contact for study. Therefore, I feel a blended offering to cover a wide range of learning and teaching formats and preferences should be explored to reach the increasing diversity of students and teachers in their circumstances.

CC – This course has unique challenges that favour a team approach. It has equipped me with greater flexibility in the delivery and design of specific activities for the online platform that have proven useful for students' understanding. Moreover, it has led to an environment that is supportive, welcoming, and conducive to learning, as well as able to provide students with confidence to continue their own knowledge process. I feel the benefits of a team-teaching approach in this course demonstrate that broader integration

into teaching practice enables a space for richer learning and teaching, which would not be completely possible, or as successful, with only one teacher.

Limitations

We recognise that this study focuses on a specific context with three female staff members. Other academics may experience other personal, social, or institutional factors contributing to the development of their virtual teams. Thus, the process and strategies recommended here would need to be adapted to local contexts. We also recognise that strength-based working is a positive way to teach; however, it can lead to outsourcing of weaker skills to others. For example, one member may deal with all student questions about referencing. This can hinder individual development and reduce team flexibility in times of staff-member change or illness. Teams may need to consider including a mentoring role to upskill and increase confidence in areas individuals may initially prefer to leave to others. A final limitation of this study is that it covers a year of working together. We envisage the process to continue beyond this as we develop our skills in additional areas such as dealing with disruptive behaviour.

Conclusion

As higher-education faculties move to online learning environments and working in virtual teams, the ability to develop professional teaching skills in collaborative contexts is important. When rapidly building a virtual team, individuals need to engage in positive reflective practice in collaboration with others. This involves unpacking one's assumptions about classroom teaching practice while responding to different social and technological environments. The insights we gained from our process in the shadows resulted in developments in a supportive team culture. We encourage educators to reflect on their potential for cultivating trusting online teaching and learning relationships. Furthermore, we recommend the use of Appreciative Inquiry, beginning with positive focus and moving to exploring more-negative experiences if trust builds sufficiently to enable this.

Disclosure statement

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