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Lighting the fire: unleashing student agency in emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pedagogical shift

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Abstract

This paper explores the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on university pedagogy and the lessons that can be learned from students who experienced emergency remote teaching. Unlike many countries, Sweden did not impose a lockdown or curfew, allowing students to gather in small groups on university campuses while receiving online instruction. This unique hybrid situation enhances the relevance of our findings for the post-pandemic context. Employing a participatory research methodology, we collaborated with first-year university teacher education students to co-construct their experiences as new students during COVID-19. Our research aimed to understand how the students' socio-cultural context and their university experiences influenced their learning and what insights these experiences provide regarding students' agency for learning. Through collaborative discussions and thematic analysis, we identified that students formed close-knit study groups, developed a strong sense of agency, became self-directed learners, and offered each other mutual support. Our conclusions highlight the resilience of students, the value of informal and spontaneous collaborative learning groups, the high degree of agency among students, and the potential benefits of a pedagogy that is less controlling and scaffolded, allowing for spontaneous, creative, and inquiry-directed learning. Future research could investigate whether collaborative learning groups are more effective with reduced mandatory lecture and seminar loads.

Keywords: participatory research, teacher education students, emergency teaching, collaborative learning, self-directed learning

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to explore how one group of first year teacher education students created and maintained agency for learning during the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic, and investigate what these students gained by meeting and studying together on campus even though all their teaching and assessments were online. Moreover, most academic staff were working from home during the pandemic in line with the national Swedish guidelines that those who could work from home should do so (HSLF-FS 2021:2). Our (Niclas and Kirk) interest in exploring this group of students' experiences was sparked by our observation that this group of students arrived on campus before 9am and remained at least until 3pm most days. To assure the clarity of the narrative presented in this article, our exploration of the reality of these students' experiences and identification of contextual influences was undertaken as a participatory research project. Niclas and Kirk invited the first-year teacher education student members of one such small study group, Nils, Gustav, Lukas and Hannah, to participate in a conversation with us (Niclas and Kirk), and they accepted the invitation.

Considering these students' experiences in discussion with teacher educators has the potential of contributing to how universities teach and support students post-COVID. The questions that guided our discussion were:

1. How do Nils, Gustav, Lukas and Hannah's sociocultural situated realities/contexts and lived school and university experiences impact on/interact with their experiences of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What do their experiences suggest more generally about the role of agency and collaboration for learning in relation to the systematic structures and bureaucratic endeavours of the 21st century university?

Background

The challenge that faced universities and other educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic is pertinently captured by Naidu (2021) when he wrote:

> "Few developments in recent memory have rattled the zeitgeist of contemporary educational systems as has the COVID-19 pandemic. From early childhood education to postgraduate study, the resilience of education systems all over the world is being tested" (p.1).

For universities that prided themselves on the quality of their on campus teaching and student learning experiences, the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions resulted in what has been referred to in the literature as "emergency remote teaching" (Bozhurt and Sharam, 2020, p.i) and "emergency eLearning" (Murphy, 2020, p.492). The use of the word "emergency" highlights that lack of planning and strategy of the almost over-night, forced transition from face-to-face teaching to online and distance teaching for both students and lecturers whose courses were grounded in the on campus teaching and learning experience. In most universities some of the academic staff and students already had online education experience prior to the forced transitions. However, the speed of the switch to online teaching was so rapid that only minimal existing institutional knowledge in this area was possible to distribute to those academics and students with no such knowledge.

The impact of this rapid change in how university education is provided has been widely discussed in the distance education literature and the primary focus has been on the educational systems' resilience, and the improvement of our understanding of online education for future online and blended course design. This follows a long tradition of educational technology studies, for example Braten and Streomso (2006), Zhao, Sullivan and Mellenius (2013), Zhao and Sullivan (2017), and Zhou and Zhang (2008), that have focused on how distance education affects student learning and outcomes, and that have tended to focus less on the impact of distance education on student agency and engagement. Such a focus contrasts with the portrayal in the press of students as agentless during COVID-19 (e.g., Lee et al., 2021).

According to Lee et al. (2021) university students have been portrayed "powerless victims" (p.164) and "reckless troublemakers, throwing drinking parties, breaching physical distancing rules, and spreading the virus" (p.164). Their analysis of 190 University students' answers to a questionnaire resulted in the conclusion:

> "It is […] too simplistic to see students as powerlessly suffering from an educational distance, created by COVID-19. On the contrary, students actively reduced the distance and found their own ways of learning and being connected, creating meaningful learning experiences" (p.168).

Simultaneously they highlighted that the respondents had difficulty communicating with other students and making new friends, while the friendships they already had were "nurtured using communication tools and social media platforms" (p.167). Similar findings were made by Wong (2020) in their high-school based study reporting that online learning supported the development of learner autonomy, yet their desire to meet, connect and create with others was not met. Neither were these students' motivation and engagement needs for learning met by online teaching and learning. Wong considered this finding "alarming" (p.13).

Other challenges have been highlighted by research that have found that student cognitive, mental, and social health suffered during COVID-19 (e.g., Al-Tammeni et al., 2022; Shin and Hickey, 2020). Without denying students' negative experiences and mental health issues during COVID-19, one of the starting points for the case study we present in this paper aligns with Lee et al.'s (2021) observation that ways in which students have been coping suggest there are also "positive and optimistic" (p.165) narratives of learning. We (Niclas and Kirk) had not observed or experienced powerlessness among university students before the start of the participatory research project presented in this paper. Interestingly, this contrasts with research that examined agency and power among newly arrived post-16-year-old students (Bušić et al., 2020) that suggested powerless existence among these students.

This paper with its focus on new teacher education university students informs the conversation about the impact of emergency online teaching on social activities, agency and engagement with learning. It also extends the conversation through Sweden's particular approach to community responsibility that meant that it was possible to enter university buildings and study on-campus if and only if contemporary COVID-19 restrictions were followed.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we situate this article theoretically through consideration of research on agency and collaborative learning. We then introduce ourselves before describing our context, that is COVID-19 in Sweden and being new to the university, and the approach we took in writing this article. The central part of the paper presents the understandings we constructed from our multiple conversations around a questionnaire and focus group discussion as we collaboratively constructed the understandings presented in this article. We use the pronouns "we" and "our" to express themes and ideas that all six of us have discussed and agreed upon. However, we present quotes from the questionnaire and focus interview in the third person as they are integrated into the findings section. Finally, we discuss the pedagogical implications of the findings for higher and further education.

Theoretical background

Agency plays a central role in learning. Ahearn (2001) viewed agency as referring "to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (p.112). That is, learning involves a range of acts by the learner. Sociocultural theory views the agent, in our case the new university student, as a highly social being whose "individuality rests on, and is derived from, social relationships, culturally organized activities, and use of artefacts" (Lantolf, 2013, p.19). Exploring student agency through a sociocultural lens encourages us to view new university students as immersed in, and creating complex social structures that have the potential to afford and/or constrain possibilities for learning. These social structures agentic power was potentially delimited by the COVID-19 pandemic, which would reduce the agency experienced by students in relation to their learning. Consequently, our paper explores how the student group of new university students', Nils, Gustav, Lukas and Hannah, sociocultural contexts influenced their agency of learning during COVID-19.

Al Zidjaly (2009) views power as inseparable from agency. Hence, the notion of the powerless student during COVID-19 would suggest students had neither agency for learning, nor for the formation of social structures. Yet, it is possible that they are not powerless, and are able to be agentic and form social structures even when learning suddenly moved online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The variation in how agency is conceived is discussed in Ahearn (2010). In this paper we work primarily with Ahearn's (2001) definition, but borrow the ideas of engagement, intentionality, and motivation towards goals from the definition of Kockelman (2007). He wrote, "agency might initially be understood as the relative flexible wielding of means toward ends" (p.375). In this way learners can have agency in their engagement with their immediate learning, and motivation towards a longer-term educational goal in their studies, and these acts can be intentional.

Social cultural theory posits that learning flourishes in social contexts in which conversations between learners afford and support individual and group learning. Yet Wong (2020) found that student interest in meeting, connecting, and learning with others was not met by online learning. It is therefore pertinent to consider the group of Nils, Gustav, Lukas and Hannah as a potential example of collaborative learning as they made use of the opportunity of meeting physically on campus even under the COVID-19 restricted form.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) defined collaborative learning as a set of teaching and learning strategies that together encourage and support student collaboration in groups to facilitate effective the group member's individual learning. The benefits of collaborative learning are reported to be an increase in student engagement in their learning process, a development of social skills including academic and inter-personal communication skills, and a growth in the understanding of the value of diversity in a group as no individual has all the answers. These skills together further support and encourage creativity, thinking critically and develop problem solving abilities. Further, others, for example, Yasmin and Naseem (2019), highlight how collaborative learning can lead to learner autonomy as collaboration supports learner confidence, learner motivation, learner responsibility, and learner independence that are elements of socioculturally mediated acts. For these reasons, some lecturers set up collaborative learning groups for their students as elements of their teaching strategies as they have been shown to promote the above list of academic and social skills (e.g., Johnson et al. 2007).

However, other research has highlighted the challenges of effective collaborative learning. For example, student free-riding and unequal contribution to the group's learning process (e.g., Drommeyer, 2007; Janssen et al. 2007; Popov et al., 2012), and lack of communication and cooperation skills necessary to operate in a collaborative learning group (e.g., Li and Campbell, 2008).

Participatory research partners

Kirk

I have been professor of linguistics at Umeå Univeristy, Sweden since 2009. I moved to Sweden in 1994 from Aotearoa/New Zealand where I had been a post-doctoral fellow at the Te Whare Wānanga o Ōtākou/The University of Otago following my undergraduate and doctoral studies in the United Kingdom. My research lies at the nexus of cognition, language, and education. Over the past decade the learning of teacher education students has increasing become a key focus of my research.

Niclas

For a decade, I taught religious education and philosophy at the upper secondary level before deciding to pursue a PhD in ethics at Lund University. Since then, my focus has shifted to research, particularly on values and ethics in schools and teacher training. My goal is to bridge the gap between theory and practice, exploring ways to integrate ethical principles into education for both educators and students. Currently, I am an associate professor at Umeå University, and I am engaged in interdisciplinary projects in educational studies, where I explore innovative ways to integrate ethical principles into education.

Gustav

I started studying the subject teacher program with social studies as an introductory subject during Autumn Semester 2020. I come from Stockholm and finished my high school education in 2019. After high school and before starting my university studies, I worked both in the restaurant industry and as a substitute teacher at a primary school. During my time as a substitute teacher, I became convinced that the teaching profession was something for me. I started studying during the Covid-19 pandemic and

student social activities as well as the campus life were more or less non-existent. I therefore decided to commit to the small group of peers that studied on campus.

Hannah

I started the subject teacher program in the autumn of 2020, with social studies as my first subject. Ever since I was little I wanted to work as a teacher, I took every chance I got to work at a preschool or primary school from when I was 13-years old. I finished high school in 2017, after which I worked for a year in a supermarket in my hometown before I spent almost two years in the USA. In the USA, I worked as an au pair, which made me even more confident in my career choice as a teacher.

Lukas

Last year I started studying the teaching programme. I come from Växjö, where I finished high school in 2016. Until autumn 2020, I have worked as a chef in various restaurants around Europe. The pandemic had a major impact on the restaurant industry, where jobs went from an abundance to a shortage. I then chose to start studying instead. Student life was not what I had expected, and required flexibility and self-discipline.

Nils

I recently started studying to be a teacher with social studies as my entry subject. I come from Kalix and finished high school in 2019. After completing high school, I worked as a substitute at primary school which confirmed my intended career choice. I started my studies during the COVID-19 pandemic and student life was not what I imagined. This made me reflect on how I approached my studies.

Method

Following Botelho de Magalhães et al.'s (2019) study of the agency of two doctoral students, we apply a participatory research methodology in which two academics (the first two authors) collaborated with four first year university teacher education students (authors three–six) to co-construct through research together experiences of being a new student during COVID-19. This approach emphasizes direct engagement (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995) and allows a more authentic student voice as the analysis of the empirical data can be interpreted with insider knowledge and lived expertise (Jagosh et al., 2012). The data collection methods used were so-called conventional tools. Namely we used a questionnaire and a focus group discussion. As Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) pointed out these tools can be approached in a participatory way. Indeed, as they write: "The distinguishing feature of participatory research is stakeholder power in decision making and implementation; therefore, any research method or tool can be participatory if chosen and/or utilized collaboratively between academic and community partners" (p.7).

Setting

The participatory research partners grew organically. Kirk and Niclas continued to work in their offices throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and had begun an observational study of student activity in their university's innovative student study complex. During the initial period of these observations there were many small groups of students who were regularly studying together. However, once the regulations were tightened, many students stopped coming to campus. It was after this change that Kirk, and later

Niclas, began to stop and have conversations with Nils, Gustav, Lukas, and Hannah. These conversations developed to the point where the relationship allowed us to suggest and design a project together that combined Kirk's and Niclas's interests in what was happening on campus during COVID-19, and the conversations we had held about how the students viewed being on campus during their first year of study when the advice was to work and study from home when possible.

Data collection and analysis

As the summer break was rapidly approaching we decided we would collect initial thoughts via a questionnaire and that Kirk and Niclas would use these as the basis for topics for discussion during a focus group discussion at the beginning of Autumn Semester 2021. The focus group discussion was held in a quiet room at the university. To assure the atmosphere was one of partners, we met in the coffee area before going to the room for the discussion, and all took coffee/tea with them as well. The discussion was recorded, and lasted just over 48 minutes. The recording was immediately shared with all members of the partnership via Microsoft Teams we had set-up for the partnership. The transcription of the recording was similarly shared in our Teams site.

Based on the transcriptions, we created themes (Braun and Clarke, 2008; 2021), selected illustrative passages from the discussion and discussed how these linked with the lived study experiences during their first year of university study. These were iteratively adapted and developed until no one in the team suggested changes, and all were happy with the presentation of these in this paper.

Results

In the questionnaires and during the focus group interviews, the participants described their initial period as teacher education students as characterized by uncertainty as they attempted to orientate themselves in the university world. Lukas expresses initial doubts: "For me, there were a lot of questions at the beginning about whether I fitted into this university environment...do I belong in higher education?" The friendships made during the initial weeks of study proved to be central to the formation of study groups and sociocultural mutual support. This helped students such as Lukas to continue their studies. Lukas articulates this as follows: "It was great to become part of a group, to study together and to gain context. To feel that I belong here and that what I do is just as good as what others do".

In our joint analysis of the material, we interpreted the study group as an arena for collaborative learning, where the participants gradually developed the ability to trust each other, and to position and understand themselves in their role as university students. Progression takes place gradually through participation in the study group's activities, where an academic language and working method is acquired, which Gustav, Hannah, Lukas and Nils felt contributed positively to their academic results. Lukas pointed out "it's also much more fun to be able to share, when you read something new, and then be able to discuss it with others" and this we see as supporting learning, as supporting the gaining of the skills to meet academic demands, and as supporting changes in how the student participants changed their perceptions of themselves and study over the period of investigation. These positive impacts are visualised as a spiral by Nils, who then continues to emphasize how the practical aspects of the group contributed to this developmental spiral:

> Nils: a very, very positive spiral...it isn't heavy to go to the University...if you sit at home alone, it's easy to avoid studying and then it becomes a huge stress. With a routine, you go to study with the group, no matter how you feel, you're here and you study. And after the study day with the group, you can do whatever you want to do.

Our co-construction of this process and the collected data resulted in four themes: Acquiring academic language; Structuring material and organising study; Making demands on oneself and each other; and Learning together.

Acquiring academic language

An important aspect that several participants return to is the academic language that they initially express a need to decode to acquire content (Peelo and Luxon, 2007). Based their earlier school- and work-based experiences, they felt they have acquired language skills that enabled them to handle these familiar environments, but in the university setting, they felt they faced new language challenges that limited their ability to find the way in what was expected of them (Bruffee, 1999; Lindström and Sullivan, 2021). When starting as a new university student, the university can feel like a foreign country with its own language. This is a line with how Lukas felt when he expressed that "a lot [of university language] is like Greek" when you "arrive as a newcomer to the university". Acquiring academic language usually occurs through interaction with other students and teachers as a natural part of campus education, but during the pandemic, these possibilities were limited.

One participant, Hannah, recounts how, at the beginning of the autumn semester, she interacts with a student who already has experience of studying at university. This interaction helps her overcome some of the academic language barriers. These conversations focused on several questions that are central to finding one's way in the academy. Hannah phrased this as follows: "How should I write? How should I think? It was very nice to be able to talk to someone who had experience of university studies and who could show how it works". In this context, the acquisition of an academic language can be interpreted as a process that helps to develop the ability to organise their studies as independent actors and to navigate the university world (see Bruffee, 1999; Clegg, 2011).

Structuring material and organising study

Students with previous experience in university studies played a key role for learning in the study group. Experienced students contributed to the structuring and preparation of the material and helped Gustav, Hannah, Lukas and Nils organize their studies. Gustav was one of the study participants who particularly emphasized experienced students' ability to help create structure and establish routines: "Nina [a pseudonym] (an experienced student) could help us a lot with things we found difficult, such as writing and creating outlines. She is good at analysing and determining what we should do in assignments, and how we should structure them". Getting help in structuring the material and organizing the studies also represents a learning process in which new students are socialized into a student role at the university. This could be understood as a process of reculturation, where a new language helps them collectively develop their ways of organizing their studies (see Bruffee, 1999; Peelo and Luxon, 2007).

Both Nils and Lukas provide examples of how members of the study group systematically worked together to prepare for examinations:

> Nils: During periods when there is much to do, the week before the examination. What do we have to know? Which questions will be included in the exam? We then sit down and structure the day we dedicate time to each of the different tasks we have identified. When we read, we compare what we found in our reading, and then obtain a much greater depth in what we learn and that is important.

> Lukas: On the one hand, you compare how you understand a lecture, then you talk about the differences - what did I pick up and what did the other person pick up? What do my notes highlight, and what do the other person's notes highlight? Where do I start (my studies), and where does the other person start (their studies)? Then you get a much clearer picture - much clearer...a more holistic perspective on the tasks and studies themselves.

Several participants described how members of the study group complement each other. For example, one person may have solid linguistic abilities, while the other possesses visual skills. This mutual support enables them to learn new things. Gustav and Nils, for instance, explain how they establish study routines, leading to a positive spiral that makes it easier to succeed at university. As a result, this approach contributes to improving academic outcomes. This case exemplifies a characteristic of collaborative learning processes where participants can achieve significantly more together than individually (see Bruffee, 1999, p.9).

Making demands on oneself and each other

During the working process, group members tended to adopt the motivation and commitment of their peers when engaging in a task (Bruffee, 1999, p.9). Nils and Lukas emphasize that the work is inherently reciprocal, requiring continuous contributions from all participants within the study group. Thus, members hold each other accountable, which is evident when someone fails to fulfil their expected responsibilities.

> Nils: There have been instances in which we invited individuals who turned out to be free riders… In such cases, someone had to approach that person and express disapproval of their selective attendance. While studying together before exams may seem beneficial, showing up only when it conveniently suits one's schedule is not acceptable. The purpose of the study group is to support each other rather than solely seek personal advantage. Avoiding the study group because you have a good grasp of the subject matter, thereby reducing their own effort [in relation to the group], is not appropriate. Being present for significant portions of the study group sessions before the exam was also expected.

This example shows that membership of the study group entailed a mutual expectation of active participation, forming the foundation of a shared work ethic. Lukas succinctly captures the core principle: "If you seek assistance and resources, you must be prepared to offer the same in return – it should not be one-sided".

Certain experienced students embody this work ethic and serve as role models for the group in their approach to their studies. One interpretation of this phenomenon is that, by working together towards common goals, participants become cognizant of how to actualize specific values in this context (see

Aristotle, 1982; MacIntyre, 1996, p.161). As a result, these values can be internalized, leading individuals to set higher expectations for themselves through engagement in their learning group.

> Nils: Personally, I believe I have set higher expectations for myself. This is evident when observing individuals, such as Nina [a pseudonym], who already have prior study experience and hold high standards. It is not merely about trying to keep up; instead, it is about elevating the level of demands we place on ourselves. We do not want to underestimate or take her efforts lightly. We want her to appreciate the value of our collective study experience. Consequently, we must raise our own standards and push ourselves to the limit.

Often, the organization of learning is highlighted as a determinant of the values conveyed in pedagogical practices. In previous studies, teachers' conscious or subconscious choices are typically emphasized as a significant factor in imparting specific ideals, norms, and values (e.g., Anteby, 2015; Bourdieu, 1979; Jackson, Boostrom and Hansen, 1993). What makes the case in our study particularly interesting is that the organization of the learning process is entirely driven by the students' initiative, and the values that manifest within their work are grounded in reciprocity. These fundamental values also characterize the lessons the study group members wish to emphasize on their collective journey.

Learning collaboratively

When members are asked to reflect on the lessons they have learned from participating in the study group's work, the responses are characterized by what could be described as a set of collaborative core values:

> Nils: It is important to maintain humility, acknowledging that we do not know everything. Even if we have read something, seeking input from others offers different perspectives that can enhance our understanding of the subject. When faced with a question, we are compelled to reflect on our readings and consolidate our knowledge. However, I believe the most crucial aspect is to be humble, willing to ask questions, and seeking support from others. This proves immensely helpful.

> Gustav: It is essential to have an open-minded approach and be willing to share notes when feeling slightly overwhelmed. We can divide the reading tasks among ourselves to manage the workload.

> Lukas: I believe we should view ourselves not as competitors, but as collaborators.

In summary, active engagement in the study group's activities resulted in a profound comprehension of each other's viewpoints, thereby fostering a more intricate and comprehensive understanding of diverse phenomena. The informal nature of the collaborative process has facilitated instances in which participants provided and received emotional support, aiding in the contemplation of their own learning experiences.

Discussion

The depiction of learning situations and the construction of agency presented in this paper constitute a case study. Consequently, the examples we discuss and the conclusions we draw should not be generalized. Instead, they are based on our joint analysis and interpretation of the students' lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences were explored through, among other things, a semi-structured focus group interview. Our findings highlight the students' remarkable initiative

and adaptability, which played a significant role in fostering their agency and development as "self-directing learners". Knowles (1975) defines "self-directing learning" as a process:

> "in which individuals take initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes" (p.18).

One plausible interpretation of the students' experiences amid the COVID-19 pandemic is that it necessitated their transformation into independent agents who could assume control of their own learning. In other words, they had to develop into "self-directed learners". It is possible that students who were depicted as powerless in the media were those who had not yet reached a stage of readiness to take charge of their own learning (Wiley, 1983).

The findings of this study indicate that students who formed study groups and continued to attend campus regularly were able to maintain agency in their lives, thereby promoting their learning. Within these study groups, participants effectively balanced cognitive and social elements of learning, establishing a code of conduct that served as the foundation for what Johnson and Johnson (1999) termed "collaborative learning skills". This finding aligns with the research by Yasmin and Naseem (2019), who concluded that collaborative learning contributed to the development of autonomy and the associated empowerment. Hence, we can conclude that the students who took part in this study had achieved a significant level of agency and readiness for self-directed learning.

What is distinctive about this case is that the students themselves took the initiative to organize their learning collaboratively, as evident from the focus group interview. The study group emerged as a response to the barriers that arose when teaching shifted from the campus to a digital distance format (cf. Lee et al., 2018). Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic played a role in creating a new learning environment. This prompts a broader reflection on our findings in relation to systematic structures and bureaucratic endeavours of contemporary higher and further education. The depiction of student agency in our study differs significantly from other perspectives. These students are not powerless, lost, or disinterested in learning. Instead, they seized the opportunity during the pandemic to take ownership of the available space and created new conditions for learning to the best of their abilities. This way of studying is frequently thwarted by over-systematic and bureaucratically heavy course design.

When physical presence was no longer required for lectures and seminars, these students were able to gather in a shared space daily and support each other in their learning endeavours, irrespective of the emergency remote course design. Even group work with other students could be completed while maintaining the study group as a collaborative unit. It remains to be seen whether this study group will continue operating once classes return to normal and thousands of students come back to campus. Questions arise regarding competition for study places and the satisfaction of participants' social needs through alternative means. Based on our findings, there are potential educational implications for universities post-COVID-19. First, it is important to acknowledge the resilience of students. Second, informal and spontaneous learning groups hold value, and exploring ways to support them is a subject for future research. Third, it may be worthwhile to assess which aspects of teaching should occur on

campus and which can be effectively achieved through digital means. For instance, would the conditions for collaborative learning groups improve with reduced attendance and less heavy lecture and seminar schedules?

Conclusion

A core finding of this study is that students working together towards a common goal not only begin to recognise their own strengths and weaknesses but also develop a strong work ethic. One interpretation of that is that the collective learning efforts of the group contribute paradoxically to participants' development an autonomous and individualistic attitude towards their own learning. This is evident in the meta-cognitive reflections expressed during the discussions that highlight (1) the resilience of students, (2) the value of informal and spontaneous collaborative learning groups, (3) the high degree of agency among students, and (4) the potential benefits of a pedagogy that is less controlling and scaffolded. This affords spontaneous, creative, and inquiry-directed learning.

This study raises more questions than it provides answers. For example, how does the relationship between participants' mutual demands and the assumption of responsibility within the group contribute to the development of autonomous, self-directed learners? Moreover, to better understand the long-term relevance of this and similar studies, it is crucial to analyse teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that universities do not simply revert to old conceptions of pedagogy and old practices, but instead consider whether there are better ways of facilitating learning, including allowing students to be more autonomous and creative.

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