

Education for mental health case study

Masters in Education Learning and Teaching in higher education/ Education Team

Jon Taylor

Aston University



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Context

This module is the final-year dissertation phase of the M.Ed. Learning and Teaching in Higher Education and open to all staff engaged in the delivery or support of teaching at Aston University. The module aims to enable participants to explore, enact and evaluate personal transformation of academic practice in higher education. The philosophy of the module is explicitly orientated towards individual participants' interests in enhancing their professional practice through a structured enquiry. To achieve this, participants need to be confident to be conscious of their own identities as teachers, how this might evolve over time and how they can add research as a positive element of transformation of practice.

Key module information	
Typical intake	10-20 staff
Format	Seminars and workshops
Level of study	Postgraduate third year part-time MEd
Status	Optional
Credited	No – but output has been useful for SFHEA applications
Assessment	Part A (typically completed in the first six months) + Peer Review (10%) + Needs Analysis (15%) + Proposal (25%) + Ethical approval (proceed/do not proceed) Part B (typically takes 10+ months) + Final Research write up and reflexive report (50%)
Assessment feedback	Peer Review provides verbal feedback and a grade. All other assessments provide written feedback and a grade plus opportunities to discuss further through the discussant process.
Location	Classroom until March 13 2020, then Online (Blackboard Collaborate Ultra).
Teaching staff	One Teaching Fellow (Programme Director and session facilitator) two Senior Lecturers, one Senior Teaching Fellow (additional discussants)
Duration/frequency	Morning workshops to set the scene for the module over the first three months leading to two or three peer review sessions, then catch-up/community of practice sessions every six weeks. Access to a series of research methods CPD sessions.

Sessions – these vary between intakes according to needs and participant-led interests

Session 1: Introduction to the module, its philosophy and what it means to be on a negotiated programme

Session 2: A detailed look at the initial assessments and their formative role

Session 3: Reviewing progress and emerging research methods needs

Session 4: Making ethics applications

Session 5: Preparing for peer review

Session 6: Peer review panels

Session 7: Peer review panels

Session 8: Community of Practice

Session 9: Community of Practice

Session 10: Write up support prior to submission points

Rationale of negotiated study and its implications for staff wellbeing

The module is orientated towards a participant's engagement with a transformational study, where transformation relates to their approach, skills, or philosophy towards learning and teaching in higher education. Lectures are minimal but provide the critical formal scaffolding for participants to reinforce their knowledge and understanding of the research phase. Small group sessions are highly flexible to meet participant needs and interests as they progress through different phases of the module. Structured elements of seminar sessions and a comprehensive online resource (in a Blackboard VLE) are used for participants to obtain conceptual knowledge to frame the development of their transformation. The development of the project includes elements of self-assessment to determine individual development needs, consideration of ethics applications and a research proposal clearly linked to learning outcomes. The bulk of the synchronous time can therefore be used to expand on themes of interest for the whole group and development of facilitated elements of the community of practice such as sharing progress and problem solving. Individual supervision is provided via a discussant – the term being deliberately chosen to reinforce the ethos of ownership of the transformation remaining with the participant. The initial assessed elements have a considerable formative role which, in addition to peer review and sessions designed around discussion, build confidence in participants regarding both the value and practicalities of their proposed research. Scaffolding the learning within a community of practice environment further enhancing the social belonging felt by participants, inclusivity, and the ability to engage at a level that individuals are comfortable with has been seen to be key to the success of the module, particularly following to move online. Many of our participants may not have engaged in this level of study as students for many years (if at all) so the approach strives to create this safe and supported learning environment where it's OK to make and learn from mistakes. In negotiating and presenting their project ideas to the group, participants adhere to a broad criterion which encourages them to consider the relevance of their proposed research to the wider context of enhancing learning and teaching in higher education.

Outcomes of the Module

In the spirit of participants negotiating their own route to transformation, we present a single universal module learning outcome: On successful completion of the module, the participant will have transformed their academic practice through structured inquiry.

In addition, two learning outcomes will be designed by the participant then negotiated and agreed with a member of Education Team academic staff: one should relate to the enactment of the research project and one to the evaluation of the research.

Considerable flexibility is available to participants in terms of how they present their evidence of meeting the learning outcomes. However, whatever approach is taken, it must include a reflexive report where the participant considers the nature of their transformation and how their practice has evolved. In addition, the participant provides a rubric which is used to consider how each of the learning outcomes have been met (or occasionally not been met).

Evolution of the Module

The module was initially developed seven years ago. Most of the recent changes have been operational and indeed have resulted in the module leader feeling more empowered to support staff. There are some areas of 'desirable difficulty' associated with this form of study and the team are conscious that to be able to engage fully in an individual transformation project, students need to be guided rather than directed. Participants are often challenged by consideration of reflexive practice and engaging in the process of autoethnography and there are two areas where more formal support have been added over time. The guiding role has further developed with the team being more proactive in engaging with participants if they slip away from a cohort which can happen after taking a leave of absence. It has been clearly seen that staff as participants will put their own self-development to one side if there are competing demands for their time. Operational changes to the way we keep a track on where trailing students are in their studies has allowed us to bring them effectively back in to the programme as and when time becomes available to them.

The move online in response to the Covid-19 has seen the biggest changes to how the module runs and indeed to levels of student engagement. Re-establishing social belonging had to be curated and supported at the outset, but it has been noted that engagement levels are generally higher compared to face-to-face and that the whole cohort talks to each other, rather than to the three or four on their table when we met face-to-face.

Pedagogic approaches to support participant wellbeing

When the present module leader took over the programme it was apparent that completion of the research and write up within the year was a considerable challenge and a cause of concern for some participants. It has been seen to be vital to use the early sessions to reinforce the flexible nature of the module and openly discuss the fact that completion can indeed take more time than expected, a key element here has been to instil in participants their own responsibilities with independent study. Constructive alignment of initial assignments is key to getting participants to the point at which they can become research active and relatively independent. From this point, sessions become less frequent but more focussed on sustaining momentum and sharing progress within the community. The role of the discussant to support individual participants is a key factor in maintaining momentum through the research phase and although we advise participants to arrange meetings, a degree of proactivity is sometimes needed from the team to maintain the dialogue. One interesting area that has emerged is the timing of these community sessions, too frequent and/or at times of workload pressure points during the year can result in no progress to report situations and unintentional pressure on participants. You need to get to know your cohort and see what works for them and this has been seen to vary from cohort to cohort.

Successes

Feedback from participants has been incredibly positive regarding their own satisfaction in terms of output from their research and their own development as teachers. While the initial cohort to be affected by Covid-19 were drawn towards technology enhanced learning projects, those who started in 2021 have had more focus on wellbeing. Noticeable characteristics of the groups over the last few years have included;

- + participants form a lasting community of practice across subject areas
- + participants become engaged in university-wide and national projects
- + participants become aware of how negotiated learning can be used as a teaching method.

Recent research elements have focussed on areas such as

- + being an effective personal tutor
- + producing a set of resources for students on mental wellbeing and resilience
- + an empathy development toolkit.

Plus some excellent autoethnographic approaches with clear focus on individual wellbeing such as

- + the impact of imposter syndrome on academic identity and practice
- + an exploration of personal tutor wellbeing and the support provided to students
- + the impact of perfectionist tendencies on a teachers work-life balance
- + an exploration of personal learning networks through the Covid-19 pandemic.

Again, we see variation in the stakeholders associated with the research and typically participants engage with a view to support peers or students from the outset, or take a more introspective stance. Throughout the years the module has run there has been a recognition that challenge can be a positive element of the learning process.

“My journey through a MEd has been tempestuous, challenging, questioning and utterly transformative. I started down this path as a way of reinvigorating my teaching practice and yet less than 2 years later my MEd course has led me to a point where I find myself belonging to a group of colleagues, outwardly diverse but completely supportive. It is the process itself with the didactic and ever evolving nature of our collaborative group conversations that is the transformative part.”

M.Ed participant

“The unexpected discussions and revelations, the challenges and questioning are by far more important to me than the actual MEd itself. The research project which was once central feels a sideline, where once completion of the project and answering the research question was the goal, the aim now is to discover the questions and how to maintain our collaborative learning environment.”

M.Ed participant

Advice for other academics

- + Be aware that modules like this evolve over time.
- + Flexibility can lead to complications – ensure that you can effectively progress students through module/programme boards if they need to take a longer time to complete.
- + Communities of Practice can be incredibly effective, but they need to be cultivated and nurtured in the early phases.
- + The Chatham House rule of confidentiality in sessions is an effective umbrella under which to undertake open discussion of potentially challenging issues.
- + Staff will struggle at times to find the time to engage – keeping motivation up is important but so is knowing when to back off and not put pressure on participants.
- + Consider your own wellbeing. Don't underestimate the time required to support this type of study.

Contact us

General enquiries

+44 (0) 3300 416201

enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk

Media enquiries

+44 (0) 1904 717500

communications@advance-he.ac.uk

www.advance-he.ac.uk/contact-us

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