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Cristina Costa & Huaping Li

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# Digital cultural knowledge and curriculum: the experiences of international students as they moved from on-campus to on-line education during the pandemic

Cristina Costa <sup>a</sup> and Huaping Li <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Education, Durham University, Durham, UK; <sup>b</sup>Foreign Languages College, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how COVID-19 affected the experiences of international students enrolled to UK on-campus universities and how they made sense, navigated and lived out the on-line university as the possible educational alternative put in place during COVID-19. We argue that 'emergency teaching' was normalised as digital education, leading students into a digital trap that constrained to a large extent their educational experience to access of expert knowledge. This curriculum issue is reflective of a lack of digital imagination which is compounded by a scarcity of digital cultural knowledge resulting in misrecognition of digital education as a field in its own right. We conclude that digital education would benefit from being understood as having its own logic of practice and localised within the cultural norms of its field of application: a digital field.

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Digital cultural knowledge; digital education; curriculum imagination; international students; COVID-19

## Introduction

The strategy of moving teaching and learning (T&L) provision from on-campus to on-line environments during the COVID-19 outbreak has been one of the largest and quickest transitions to digital education universities have experienced to date. By digital education we mean T&L as well as wider student experiences that occur online as a field of education in its own right.

As the World Health Organisation declared a state of emergency in March 2020, universities, worldwide, including the UK where this research is focused, started to show concerns for two particular aspects: (1) how to keep their education provision running despite the physical restrictions in place and (2) the impact of COVID-19 on student recruitment. For universities with international recruitment capacity, this also meant to explore how to keep that side of the business running in the face of a global health crisis impeding international travel. Yet, neither concern seemed to emphasise the pedagogical implications of such changes to the educational experience. Additionally, these immediate worries, although justifiable, if we accept how universities work, did not consider how this impacted on the wider 'student experience', a typical university slogan advertised to potential students (Pangrazio and Sefton-Green 2021).

These observations departed considerably from the first flurry of publications that predicted that on-line learning would be finally celebrated as an established form of educational offering in Higher

**CONTACT** Huaping Li  huaping\_li@shnu.edu.cn  Foreign Languages College, Shanghai Normal University, 100 Guilin Road, Xuhui District, 200234, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

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Education (HE) (García-Morales, Garrido-Moreno, and Martín-Rojas 2021; Kang 2021). Such optimism overshadowed critical debates of how educational practices were being deployed on the ground – now a digital ground – and the implications this would have for students and academics. Even though quick investments in technological infrastructure were made during this time (Williamson, Macgilchrist, and Potter 2021), it is unclear if equal weight was placed on pedagogical concerns. Therefore, the jury is out on whether these technological changes will yield durable and worthwhile results for education. What is known with a greater degree of certainty is that students' educational lives have been more disrupted than they have been extended by the digital solutions put in place (Costa and Li 2022).

The purpose of this paper is to access the complex meanings international students have attributed to their own HE experiences – T&L as well as wider academic livelihoods – during the pandemic and the role digital technology played in it. This may be different from what institutions understood to be their offer, with some pointing out to creative forms of education delivery (Dahn et al. 2022). For the purpose of this paper, we explore students' sense of being at as well as being part of HE. The purpose is to unearth how the educational and wider student experiences were perceived by our participants in the transition from the on-campus to the on-line university.

The educational changes driven by the pandemic impacted all students; yet this impact has had different contours for different groups of students. We problematised the research further to consider the experiences of international students, who were deemed as a vulnerable group during the global health crisis (Weng et al. 2021). This focus stems from the perceptions that international students were one of the groups of students who found themselves geographically displaced when UK universities decided to close campuses and proposed that students return 'home', irrespective of students' varied family associations, locations, or investments for living and studying in a different country (Chen et al. 2020). Although UK HEIs were fast to backtrack this decision, allowing those who could not or wished not to relocate to stay on-campus, international students faced additional adversities, including economic, cultural and/or emotional pressures (Xu and Zhao 2022). These pressures were amplified by expectations of an easy adjustment to an on-line academic experience (Humphrey and Forbes-Mewett 2021) when these students were still trying to make sense of their on-campus experience.

This paper explores how the pandemic affected the experiences of international students enrolled to UK on-campus universities and how they made sense, navigated and lived out the on-line university as *the* possible educational alternative during COVID-19.

### **From the on-campus to the on-line university: a(n un)natural transition**

Entering HE as an international student often means coming to grips with new contexts (Matsunaga et al. 2020), contexts that may require international students to revisit knowledges and expectations they carry with them so that they can develop understandings of how the university, as a field of action, operates. To learn how to navigate the norms of a new field, in this case, the UK HE system, means to develop a sense for the rules of the game (Bourdieu 1990). This is not an easy feat, but it is an important part of a process of self-formation (Marginson 2014, 2016) that should not be regarded as rejecting one's previously held knowledge, values or ways of being, i.e., the habitus, but which rather builds on these dispositions to create hybrid understandings (Xu 2022) of the new surroundings. Life on the international campus is thus better understood as a process of enrichment that enhances rather than rebuts the knowledge students bring with them through contact with new ways of thinking and doing critical to grasping the rules and lore of HEIs. Lareau (2015) names this phenomenon 'cultural knowledge', a key element of cultural capital *a la* Bourdieu that acts as a valuable commodity in making headway within the academic field. Having the 'right' cultural knowledge, the kind that aligns with the intentions of the field, is thus rendered as an advantage in playing and being in the game. Arguably, acquiring such knowledge is key to the investments – economic, but also social, cultural, and emotional – international students make towards their education. The spatiality of the university campus assumes symbolic

value (Yu 2022) in this regard. Being on-campus becomes crucial for such learning process and broader learning experiences to take place. Coming to university is not only an educational but also a socio-cultural experience. This aspect should not be downplayed in relation to any student, but even less so with regards to international students who often see themselves under-estimated and homogenised through discourses of deficit (Heng 2018) that result in experiences of otherness (Sawir 2013; Lausch, Teman, and Perry 2017). Such a take is limiting and misrecognises students' capacities for self-formation while 'embedded in many different associations, in multiple lives and meanings' (Marginson 2021, 13).

If we establish that being a student on the international campus requires the acquisition of cultural knowledge useful to navigating the field of academia with a higher degree of familiarity and command, then it is plausible to conjecture that other forms of cultural knowledge, those of a digital kind, may also be necessary when required to venture into on-line educational spaces (see Costa and Harris 2017). This is important to consider if we understand digital spaces as a field of its own (Costa 2014), with its own logic and norms. Moving from an on-campus experience to an on-line one as part of one's HE experience should not be regarded as an effortless process, but one that asks for an adjustment of the academic habitus.

While most students carry digital knowledge as a result of everyday practices (Martin and Rizvi 2014), the question remains how HEIs and students negotiate their understandings of the digital as both part of their T&L relationship as well as wider student experience. More importantly, how do these understandings of digital technologies translate into digital cultural knowledge relevant to the university experience?

This question is pertinent to both home and international students and one that remains under-researched (see Chang and Gomes 2017). Existing research often focuses on the technology used or available in western universities, paying less attention to the specificities of national contexts and especially the norms that different students associate with their digital practices (Henderson et al. 2015). Even though global convergence is a growing reality linking both hemispheres technologically, communicatively and financially (Appadurai 1990), this does not necessarily result in cultural homogenization, as the pandemic has demonstrated (Marginson 2020). This is also true in relation to digital technologies – despite its role in globalising the world – because digital behaviour is often country-specific (Gomes 2018). Failing to notice this critical aspect of digital use often omits the realisation that digital practices are rooted in socio-cultural and political understandings of individual and collective communication and participation (Macgilchrist, Allert, and Bruch 2020). Forms of interaction within a certain social arena – what Bourdieu calls field – follow a logic of practice that is attributed to such space. Even though one could argue that the rules of on-line conduct remain unwritten because of the relative novelty of the digital world as a field of social interaction with educational potential, these rules form part of a hidden curriculum (Öztoğ 2021) of practice pertaining to what it means to be on-line. We argue that key to that digital hidden curriculum is the cultural knowledge that embodies digital practices.

### **Digital cultural knowledge and the logic of higher education practices during the pandemic**

Digital cultural knowledge is herein understood as the know-how both institutions and students have of digital technologies and how they relate this knowledge to the educational experiences they aim to offer and attain, respectively. Digital cultural knowledge is not a unifying form of knowing, but constitutes a form of competence, that of being familiar with the cultural norms that distinguish a field, in this case, the digital field. As Bourdieu (1990) reminds us 'practice has a logic' (86). This logic is not necessarily related to reason; it is rather enveloped in a set of dispositions that agents embody and materialise as accepted ways of being and doing that substantiate the field of practice in question. Individuals' mastery in the field is thus dependent on how suitable their understanding of that field is. In this vein, not all knowledge carries the same weight, nor all

cultural understandings hold the same results. Cultural knowledge is specific to its context of application. This is true in the setting of HE, with on-campus and on-line forms of education featuring not only different logics of practice but also requiring distinctive forms of cultural knowledge.

On-campus T&L have its own logic of practice and present students and staff with established norms and approaches. Being a student on-campus thus comes with a specific set of knowledges that individuals strive and/or sometimes struggle to adapt to as they enter that space. Time is an essential tool in allowing students to become acculturated with the educational norms of a given educational space as they learn to embed themselves into the life of the institution. This may mean to develop understandings of the roles students and teaching staff play in the educational provision in place, including how, where and when each party contributes to the T&L dynamics; the places and spaces of socialisation and conviviality; as well as the sources of support and opportunity. All of these components make part of an all-encompassing student experience that goes beyond a mere T&L provision.

Research has documented well that the 'success' of such acculturation processes is varied according to students' intersectional experiences and identities (Reay 2018). This is because individuals that may deviate from the norms of the field may not only bring with them different cultural knowledges but also display varied cultural expectations. This can lead to a conflict between the field and individuals' habitus when both are not aligned, exposing a lack of coherence of existence, or dislocation. This phenomenon was coined by Bourdieu as 'habitus clivé', i.e., cleft habitus (2007, 103). In this vein, what happens when the field is forced to re-imagine itself – in this case, from on-campus to on-line? Can it continue to operate from the same frame of reference? If it does, what is the likelihood that it may enter in conflict with itself, not realising that its new location is organised via a different logic? This is an important issue to consider and one that requires close examination in relation to the context of the pandemic when HEIs were forced to relocate on-line: has this displacement provoked an intellectual question, a change of meaning, regarding how education can be re-organised and experienced in its new field of application?

There is a danger in considering on-campus and on-line education as symmetrical forms of education. To presume that they are is to expect that they are interchangeable fields of practice, which they are not (Costa 2016). While on-campus education enjoys a long tradition of T&L practices that are more likely to be recognisable, accepted and embodied by the agents that affect and are affected by it, digital education does not necessarily share the same conventions nor enables the exact same experiences. To take such a stance is to disregard the characteristics that govern each field and the cultural knowledges that assist individuals in navigating them. For example, the way presence is materialised on-campus is different from how it is evidenced on-line. One's online presence is noticeable through tangible interactions, appealing to dispositions of conviviality which are seen as key to an inclusive approach (see Peruzzo and Allan 2022). As such, it is reasonable to assert that digital education would benefit from being understood as a distinctive field of action. The purpose of this paper is to further this understanding through empirical evidence collected during the pandemic.

## The study

Although it is not the first time that a move to digital education has been used to respond to major health crises, it is the first time that Western HEIs have been affected to such a large extent. This presented a challenge to UK HEIs that had little experience to draw upon. The little knowledge that existed prior to the pandemic reported on the struggles academic staff and university administrators were faced with when obliged to transfer their teaching practices to on-line environments (Feast and Betrag 2005). Much less is known about students' experiences during public health crises, especially when their academic lives are migrated on-line. Given their position as the main recipients of this educational solution to a global health problem, it is something of an oversight that little effort has been made in exploring students' experiences in such drastic circumstances.

This study is centred on students' experiences, aiming to capture their voices and elicit reconstructions of lived experiences during the pandemic. Thus, we work with participants' subjectivities, focusing on how they conceived of their HE experiences when enrolled to on-campus HEIs.

A qualitative, narrative-based approach was adopted to capture in-depth understandings of common experiences and daily life occurrences in context (Caine et al. 2013). The empirical work consisted of digital narrative methods as instruments of data collection. This included diarised reflections for a period of 3 months ( $n = 18$ ) and narrative interviews ( $n = 24$ ) with international students studying in UK HEIs. Using participant diaries as a research method aimed to offer participants a reflexive voice, recounting and reconstructing experiences that often go undocumented (Cao and Henderson 2021). Diaries were also considered for their capacity to offer a less intrusive approach to exploring participants' experiences by inviting them to act as self-observers of their own educational practices (Alaszewski 2006), thus capturing their own lives as they were lived and narrated (Kaun 2010). Prompts concerning diary entries were provided, including retrospection about the initial on-line T&L experiences, interactions with peers, academics and wider university staff, challenges/opportunities regarding digital practices, ways of studying, socialising on-line, and differences between face-to-face and on-line T&L. Participants were also encouraged to freely follow their reflective minds. This iteration of data collection lasted 3 months and on average we received 6 diary entries per participant ( $n = 18$ ), generating a substantial amount of data for a qualitative research project. After this iteration of data collection, participants were invited to participate in a contextual interview, where the interviewer took participants' own diary entries into account as part of the interview to ensure the continuity of the reflection. The interviews aimed to tease out what a study day looked like, how their digital experiences unfolded during COVID-19, T&L and wider student experience, expectations and understandings of digital education. The research interviews were opened to other participants, engaging 24 international students in this phase of data collection.

Research ethics was granted by the P.I. university's Ethics Committee with the following reference: EDU-2020-09-28T11\_11\_49.

## Research findings

Within the remit of this publication, we highlight two key findings. The first finding relates to participants' reporting of curriculum reproductions in the context of digital provision, conveying a lack of curriculum imagination. Based on such accounts, we argue that 'emergency teaching' seems to have been normalised as digital education when the initial strategies of transferring educational practices online remained in effect as the pandemic progressed. Related to the lack of curriculum imagination, the second finding focuses on the scarcity of digital cultural knowledge appropriate to harness HE educational experiences. This inhibited students from discerning the logic of practice that distinguishes digital education as a distinctive education field. These findings are presented and discussed below.

### 1. Normalising 'emergency teaching' as digital education

At the beginning of the pandemic, some of the research participants were quite understanding of the educational alternatives made available to them. They tried to remain positive, focusing on the possibilities such times have brought them. This included (1) being appreciative of not having to commute, and being able to study at their own pace:

I am quite happy with the on-line teaching routines (...):

- 1) I do not have to commute to attend the classes;
- 2) I can watch the recordings over and over again, as well as adjust the playing speed. (Zhunsie, China, D1)

(2) realising that they did not need to put on an outgoing persona all the time:

On the good note, I used to be a fake extrovert (like just pretending to like all the parties) and this [covid isolation] has allowed me to step into my natural introverted role (...) and that has had a good impact on my wellbeing. (Maitria, Indonesia, D1)

Or (3) that they could develop other productive ventures as they were not required to be on campus:

The term has been a mixed bag academically (...). However, it has been a very productive term for me personally as I have continued my work in various spheres and tried to remain positive despite the ongoing global situation of the pandemic. (Vikram, India, D1)

As illustrated by participants' first diary entries excerpts above, some of the participants were initially sympathetic of the situation they found themselves in, showing their intent to make the most of the circumstances. This however did not mean a smooth adaptation, nor should it be confused with an understanding of resilience (see Mu 2021). Participants' testimonies and diarised reflections showed little to no intention of questioning or proposing transformations to the structural constraints of the on-line education provision they were offered as the alternative to their on-campus experience. In fact, despite debates about the transformative virtues of digital technology in the context of education (See Goodchild and Speed 2019 for a critique), participants hardly questioned the making of their on-line education provision, even though they felt uneasy about the solutions offered to them as the examples below show:

Being at the university during Covid times has been a strange and new experience, full of ups and downs. There were times when my hopes were up and others when I felt hopeless about the whole situation. Back at the start of the pandemic. ... we had to move to remote teaching only. No one had ever faced the situation before, and it felt like we were the Guinea Pigs. (...) We were restricted to lectures, and some practical zoom classes. We were faced with a new way to connect with each other and forced for the first time to embrace technology in an unusual way. (Gabriela, Brazil, D1)

The testimony above conveys the idea that participants' education provision was experimental, with observations also offered about the restrictions such approaches seemed to offer, deeming it unusual. This is further evidenced by understandings of diminished returns related to the wider university experience, and not just T&L arrangements:

Compared with before, the feeling of university is also greatly reduced. (Xiaochang, China, D1)

Interactions with peers and academics – social investments international students had started to make on-campus – were seen as critically affected during the pandemic, with the digital environments enabled by HEIs serving the key purpose of educational provision, as alluded below:

Under the current situation, I do not think I will be able to interact with people/university ethos as much as I have done in my first and second year. My current third year (summarised as isolated from all of my friends, only sitting in front of my computer and reading my degree never endingly) is really sad. (Taro, Japan, D1)

The sense of uneasiness in coping with the transition to digital education as motivated by the pandemic is eloquently expressed in participants' accounts from a perspective of deficit, of what is missing and in comparison to what was on offer on-campus. On-campus education as a term of comparison seems to hamper the re-imagination of their educational experience online. It is the impossibility to return to what was there before that is pointed out as insufficient, or unfit for a more inclusive and all-encompassing student experience, and not what has been offered as an alternative, as reflected in further diary entries and interviews:

[Pre-recorded lectures] are different from face-to-face because we cannot ask questions ... the lectures did not change much ... the seminars we had [before] had lots of discussions, but ... during the pandemic, a lot of modules I took ... the seminars are more Q&As. (Xiaochang, China)

Learning online seems to become more associated with broadcasts of information and functional interactions rather than meaningful learning encounters, curtailing any other forms of student

experience, including spontaneous instances of conviviality. This may justify the feelings of isolation that surrounded many of the participants' experiences:

... due to the current situation, what I only did is to sit in front of the screen for a whole [expletive] day with huge amount of anxiety, and just panicking in front of my downloaded must-read papers. (Taro, D6, Japan)

Other participants shared similar frustrations, indicating how highly impersonal their educational experience became:

We are just doing on-line teaching ... you go to the uni page ... access the recordings so we do not need to watch it in real time. (Zhunsie, China)

These accounts show a poverty of curriculum imagination that links digital educational experiences to the transmission of content and/or isolates the learner to the screen. It destabilises what students have come to know as education (Gourlay 2022). Yet, these accounts do not specifically ask or talk to what can be done on-line as an educational field. These accounts only provide a term of comparison with on-campus experiences, thus leaving any normative approaches HEIs may have adopted during the pandemic – especially those catering for content delivery – unchallenged. This hints at a kind of doxa – unquestioned understandings of practice – that is imposed by both necessity and contractual obligation of educational providers. This was not only witnessed via the experiences reported in this study, but also by the demands imposed by the Office for Students, as a regulating body keeping HEIs in check (see Office for Students 2020). The demands and recommendations suggested by the Office for Students was focused on 'delivery': on-line delivery (5), delivery of teaching and assessments (16), and delivery of performance (by the provider) (7) to ensure regulatory outcomes. This approach seems to relegate pedagogical concerns, of how T&L is arranged, to a second plan while emphasising the distribution of content. Such reading of digital education affects all students, but even more so students who make the extra investments to study abroad, within a new culture and a different environment, as such interpretation of digital education makes it difficult to tap into a hidden curriculum of relationships and interactions with learning value. In this vein, what this research unveils is that the delivery of content was never an issue to the research participants featured in this study. What was highly contested was the absence of valuable experiences to accompany this access to expert knowledge. There was an abundance of testimonies regarding how on-line education was mostly experienced through content delivery strategies, with interactions – formal or informal – minimised. This was regarded by participants as limiting of their HE experience. We explore this aspect in further detail below.

## ***2. Lack of digital cultural knowledge: Content delivery as a key educational solution in pandemic times***

Research participants were never critical of the quality of content they received. On the contrary, they rated staff expertise highly. What participants were less impressed with was the quality of experience that was being facilitated, or not, on-line:

I think they are doing pretty well, but not for the quality of study [experience]. (Vikram, India)

[it's] not the quality of staff, but the quality of training has suffered immensely on-line, and that comes with the platform, the way that it's been delivered on-line ... I think the quality of training has dropped on-line because it's on-line. (Gabriela, Brazil)

Underlining the testimonies above is an understanding of what is done in a classroom context has little effect on-line, even though there is less reflection as to why that is so. There is also an awareness that there is more to one's study experience than exposure to knowledge:

Some teachers they just talk, talk, talk and one of my courses ... students should turn their cameras [on], but [they don't] so most times it's only the lecturer with the camera on and we just listen. (Xiaohong, China)



And that the way on-line learning spaces were organised and timed limited the overall experience:

Face-to-face instruction is not only face-to-face during class time, but also includes a lot of greetings before the class and discussions after the class. I found that the lack of these experiences affected my learning. I can only organise my learning according to my own schedule. (Xiaochang, D3, China)

A special focus on content delivery seemed to downplay the wider student experience, almost as if rendering it impossible. Given the negative transformation the pandemic has had on academic staff (see Watermeyer et al. 2021) such suggestions should not come as a surprise. What is unexpected is participants' inability to imagine or act on the affordances of digital media to diversify their own educational experience. This is conveyed through a sense of helplessness, of only being able to work with what they are offered. Xiaohong's testimony above is revealing in this regard, describing how accepting teaching as knowledge transmission allows students to hide behind the cameras, leading to the depersonalisation of the T&L experience. Xiaochang's diary entry also shows how she sees the education experience being further curbed when contact is limited to scheduled classes. This seems to affect not only one's sense of inclusion in the learning experience, but also one's wider sense of belonging.

The reported lack of engagement should not be attributed to individuals' lack of digital skills, at least not of a technical kind. Participants showed to be frequent digital users, subscribing to different social media sites. What they seemed less in possession of was digital cultural knowledge, i.e., familiarity with the processes of digital education. This would be key to understanding and/or questioning the content delivery approaches that seemed to encompass the majority of their reported educational experiences during COVID-19.

This absence of digital cultural knowledge is mostly captured via participants' silences regarding this matter. Participants offered very little perspective pertaining to other educational possibilities within the constraints of the pandemic when asked to offer alternative approaches, despite their uneasiness with their on-line education experiences. That said, participants often highlighted that their use of technology was very different from that of their institutions:

I don't want to say that they're not doing their best, but I just wanted to appreciate that they're doing the best probably, but the thing is it doesn't really mirror the way I use my technology. (Taro, Japan)

When listing the communication tools universities often used as part of their educational strategies, participants often hinted how technology assumed a deterministic role as part of their educational experience:

They have Zoom, they have email. I don't know what other technology they can use. (Yan, China)

With some participants being a bit more vocal about this functionalist approach:

I think they can [provide opportunities for interaction], but I think probably they ran out of inspiration. It's more about, you know, how do you say it, objective situation. Like there's no one to blame and it's only the pandemic to blame ...

We are not at the university only, we don't only go to university for learning or getting grades, you know, getting assignments marked. We need to socialise and, you know, enjoy other benefits .... (Zhunsie, China)

The quotes examples above suggest that this lack of digital cultural knowledge is not only reserved to students' inability to see what else their educational experience during a pandemic could have been, but rather that institutions too seemed to lack the initiative to foster digital cultural knowledge that could drive curriculum imagination in more expansive ways, beyond a knowledge delivery approach that meets contractual obligations. This is where the crux of the issue lies: digital technology at the service of education seemed to a large extent to be viewed as instrumentalist, focused on enabling practical solutions without necessarily carrying pedagogical substance. This contradicts and misrecognises the way digital technology has embedded itself in daily life, affecting working, learning and social spheres of action.

Thus, we propose that digital education is best understood through its own logic of practice (see Bourdieu 1990), and that the field in which education is placed matters, with on-campus and on-line fields featuring different cultural norms. The considerations are therefore more than technical, they must also be of an epistemological and ontological nature, so that one's study habitus can recognise the need to adapt to the new field of application. Regarding the matters of logic of practice, Pierre Bourdieu (*ibid*) points to the need to go after the principles that govern a certain practice in its relationship between external constraints and dispositions; both products of economic and socio-cultural processes 'that delimit the range of possible action (...) or subject to universal principles' (46). Here lies the difficulty in reconceptualising educational practice for a digital context: it represents far more than a spatial difference; it offers possibilities and poses challenges that require to think and act beyond one's durable beliefs, what Bourdieu calls *doxa*. Below we will discuss this issue in further detail.

### **The digital trap: the illusion of a digital educational experience**

The research above shows that for the participants featured in this study their educational experience during the COVID-19 crisis was heavily shaped by access to specialised content, reducing both the business of the university to the delivery of expert knowledge and the student experience – T&L and beyond – to its consumption. There are many other issues left to report in this paper for lack of space, including failures to adjust study timetables when international students are expected to be abroad, feelings of marginalisation and of learner disempowerment, loneliness, fatigue and forgottenness (See Costa and Li 2022 for a full report) that further indicate the limitations of the HE experience during COVID-19. This should however not be attributed to shortcomings of digital education, but to an absence of curriculum imagination and digital cultural knowledge. The combination of the two entrapped digital education in an unnecessary functionalist approach.

In this vein, it is important to theoretically construct this argument so that vocabulary can be acquired when exploring this reality. We start by asserting that digital education suits a different logic of practice when compared to face-to-face education. Even though, digital education can draw on general educational principles, especially those of a communicative and intersubjective pedagogical nature (see Murphy and Brown 2012), it features a logic of practice that is ontologically and epistemologically associated with digital ways of being and doing. Co-production and participation – more than consumption – are key indicators of digital agency.

Digital technologies that are regarded as enabling T&L environments should be considered as a (sub)field of (educational) practice. Applying Bourdieu's work as a lens to understanding practice allows us to conceive of fields as spaces of social struggle with implicit rules, histories and traditions that set the boundaries of practice, of how the 'game' is played. During the pandemic, students experienced their education moving across fields – from on-campus to on-line. As an emergency measure, educational provision was converted from an analogue experience to a digital one. Yet, this translation of practice lacked localisation, i.e., an appreciation for as well as an understanding of the receiving context of application. This however is not an uncommon phenomenon as Bourdieu has pointed out (1991). When moving within homologous fields – which on-campus and on-line education are – agents are more likely to double down on the strategies they employ than they are to distinguish the norms associated with each (sub)field. This creates an effect of misrecognition (*ibid*, 214) in which translation of practice is not accompanied by an understanding of the receiving field. This approach is understandable when pressure to keep education provision running requires a quick strategy. At the beginning of the pandemic, universities were operating from a perspective of emergency, of what was possible and feasible. As COVID-19 continued to affect civic life, the HE experiences of international students that were migrated on-line seemed to stagnate, foregoing a much-needed crisis of meaning central to encouraging perspective transformation (Mezirow 2009). Participants' accounts indicate that little changed from the initial experiences of transferring

their education provision online. Yet, they seemed unable to conceive of educational alternatives that would satisfy their needs and wishes for a more inclusive experience.

As Thompson (2019) contends ‘the problem’ with technology is that ‘it is difficult to think about it outside the frames of reference long taken for granted’ (46). Digital technology is often viewed from a technical prism, precluding a more wide-ranging understanding of it as a field of practice with its own logic. This shows that a deterministic view of technology is still prevalent in education, one that is wrapped in an ‘image of thought’ (Deleuze 2004) that frames itself as common sense (133) and recognition (135) of what is regarded as educational practice and what is not. At play is a problem of (mis)recognition that affects curriculum imagination and highlights a lack of digital cultural knowledge by all parties involved.

As Bourdieu reminds us, acts of recognition are in essence acts of misrecognition (1990, 140-1). Without realising what distinguishes on-campus education from digital education, digital education is held ransom to an educational doxa that cannot conceive of a new field of practice. Yet, this is only one side of this issue. This misreading of digital education as an adjacent educational field is also reinforced by the *illusio* agents unconsciously carry with them from one field to the other. *Illusio* is defined as agents’ ‘investment in [the] game’ (Bourdieu 2010, 3), which in turn gives meaning to practice via *habitus* – values, norms, and thinking displayed by practical dispositions. *Illusio* implies not only commitment to the game (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 98), but also subjectification to a specific field of practice. This subjectification makes it difficult for individuals to play the game in any other way. *Illusio* is thus a ‘principle of perception’ (Lupu and Empson 2015, 1334) that legitimises the field by curbing any other forms of possibilities and imaginaries.

Some sub-fields assume a more dominant position when compared to others, thus exerting more power and clout. This is true of on-campus education which has traditionally received higher levels of recognition when compared to digital education, something the pandemic seems to have helped preserve (Abdrasheva et al. 2022). This form of domination is enabled by the symbolic capital – for example, prestige – that on-campus education enjoys. This has made it difficult for digital education to establish itself, both pre-pandemic and during it. Our research attests to this via research participants’ accounts, who caught between on-campus and on-line educational experiences seemed to have captured the rules of on-campus learning and accepted them as part of their digital education without much resistance, even if some uneasiness was reported. For example, participants dispute the quality of experience but appreciate access to expert knowledge. Participants position themselves as somehow powerless when it comes to their educational experience and as inserted in an impossible situation which leaves them or their institutions without alternatives. There is a sense here that participants trusted their institutions to exercise their pedagogical expertise within the limits of imagined technological possibilities. Yet, there seems to be little awareness of what these possibilities are. This shows that pedagogical understanding was constrained by both a lack of curriculum imagination and digital cultural knowledge. This precluded the perception of digital education as a homologous yet distinctive field of practice.

## Concluding thoughts

Our empirical work shows that considering digital education from an on-campus perspective has its shortcomings, with agents benefitting from digital cultural knowledge to navigate the digital educational field. This calls for an appreciation of the nature of the digital context as a field of practice in its own right and with its own logic of practice. This is an aspect of the hidden curriculum that would benefit from being made explicit to all parties involved.

Equally, it is key to bear in mind the experiences and knowledges of the agents that are meant to occupy that field and make explicit ‘the rules of the “new” game’. When on-campus educational provision is moved on-line, the norms students learn as part of their on-campus experiences do not necessarily apply in a neatly fashion to the on-line environment. Equally, students should

not be assumed to possess suitable digital cultural knowledge upon transition to digital education, just because they are digital users. Making the rules of the field familiar to students, scaffolding their entrance into the digital field, can ease their transition to this mode of education, highlighting the principles of perception that underpin digital study habitus.

It is not new that students are often seen as consumers in HE. However, digital education during COVID-19 took the perspective of consumerism to a new level, of students as knowledge consumers, hampering their sphere of agency where their educational experience was concerned. This may have been true of all groups of students, but it became ever more obvious for international students who may not only bring with them different cultural expectations, but also feature distinctive digital experiences.

We assert that COVID-19 led HE into a digital trap, where curriculum imagination was unconsciously usurped by a pedagogy of emergency, which, in the experiences of our participants, remained unchallenged despite the extended period universities remained online. This shows that on-campus institutions were ill equipped, where digital practices were concerned and operated largely from an on-campus perspective. They can be somehow excused if we consider that their focus is on face-to-face provision. However, as the world moves forward, universities should take stock of what they experienced and engage in curriculum development that does not limit their educational offering – T&L as well as wider student experience. To do so is to simultaneously deny universities' roles as fields of knowledge production and fail to deliver on the promise of a democratic, participatory digital education sphere.

Lastly, it is important to note the role of theory in making sense of the interrelationship between digital practices and curriculum engagements as a form of reflexivity and awareness of digital traps in educational practice. The application of Bourdieu's concepts to this study has given us vocabulary and direction to work with, offering critical conceptualisations to our inquiry. This is key to advance understandings of digital education with the objective of developing informed practices. Although we are mindful of the need to keep updating Bourdieu's theoretical contributions to digital times, we have shown that the burgeoning fields of digital education and digital sociology can contribute in this regard.

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## ORCID

Cristina Costa  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2117-8479>

Huaping Li  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0591-5360>

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