Pivoting Culinary Arts Education During COVID-19 Part Two: Embracing Disruption in a World of Change

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Abstract

This work follows from the article Pivoting Culinary Education During COVID-19 Part 1: A Review of Distance Learning Literature, whereby culinary lecturers from the Food Design Institute, Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand, tell the story of their response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to online distance learning. Through a story-telling approach, the lecturers recall their response to the management of their culinary learners' cognitive, social, and individual needs in a distance-learning environment.

Throughout the course, the lecturers continue to balance the students' motivational, social, and academic needs, factors which they know are important in a distance-learning environment (Maddrell, Morrison, & Watson, 2017). This article provides invaluable insights and learnings for culinary educators who are having to reimagine culinary education in a world of continued lockdowns and changing consumer purchasing and consumption behaviours.

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Introduction

This work follows the article *Pivoting Culinary Arts Education During COVID-19 Part One: A Review of Distance Learning Literature*, where culinary lecturers from the Food Design Institute, Otago Polytechnic, New Zealand, consider their response to the COVID-19 pandemic and how they moved into online learning. Using a narrative approach, this story speaks of the response of the teaching team to the management of their students' cognitive, social, and individual needs within a distance-learning environment. It explores connectivism as a response pedagogy in a disruptive education sector and an internet web of exploding information.

Throughout the course of the pandemic, the lecturers have to continue to balance the student's motivational, social, and cognitive needs—factors which they know are important to achieving student success within a distance-learning environment (Maddrell et al., 2017; Savvidou, 2018). Please note all student names have been changed to protect their identities, and the personal narrations are not actual recordings. Instead, the narrations are creative interpretations of the events that unfolded, which allow the reader to enter the classroom and feel as part of the changing landscape.

Setting the Scene

It is one day since the country was placed into lockdown, and the students have returned to their homes. Prior to lockdown, the Food Design Institute had used Moodle as its academic platform for curating course materials and Facebook for its 'just in time' information and class chats. Earlier in the year, a couple of lecturers had started to use Microsoft Teams (MST) for recording student presentations, but MST was not routinely used by the teaching team as an educational delivery tool. The story continues with Tim Lynch (a culinary arts lecturer) connecting with the students for the first time on MST.

Tim: Can you guys see me on the screen…can any of you hear me as well? Richard (a student), you need to turn your microphone on; you are talking, but we can't hear you. Can we also just check that we are all here? Who's missing?

Sophie: I think Jane is meant to be here, Tim. I messaged her on Instagram, and she said she was struggling to get good Wi-Fi at her parents' house.

Tim: No worries, I think I've managed to figure out how to record this session, and Jane can watch it later, if required. If you guys are OK with it, I'm going to hit the record button now. First of all, I want to say I've had lots of messages from you about your studies and how are we going to manage things. Rest assured that we have devised a plan, and I want to talk to you about this. You will also notice that there is a lot of negative media reports about the future of hospitality. The teaching team has been reflecting on these reports, and we have come up with a plan to reposition your project so that it is applicable to the current situation. If you guys just sit back and listen for the next few minutes, I'll explain the plan we devised.

For the last eight years, second-year Bachelor of Culinary Arts students have worked with local food producers to develop new artisanal food products for their businesses. Within this project, students would define the brand values of the artisan food business and develop food offerings that reflected the business values and market segmentation. Typically, these new food products would be available for sale at farmers' markets or bespoke food retail outlets.

In 2020, the project was initially conceived to involve two local food producers that the students could develop new artisanal products for. Early conversations with the food producers indicated that they both wanted a selection of their low-value food commodities (such as low-value meat cuts) to be redesigned to increase their value proposition. The first food artisan was a local pork producer whose focus was on sustainability and animal welfare, while the second food producer produced high-quality meat products through regenerative framing practices. Both industry partners were excited about working with the students and what new products could be offered alongside the existing product range.

In the two weeks prior to lockdown, students were introduced to the project brief and had commenced the process of researching the food producers' brand identity and market positioning. From this initial research, the students focused on identifying the underlying factors which influenced the purchasing behaviours

of the respective business's customers. At the time of lockdown, students had finished this market research and were enthusiastic about heading into the kitchen to develop some initial product prototypes to present to the food producers for feedback.

Unfortunately, physically making artisanal food products would no longer be feasible because lockdown restrictions meant students would no longer have access to the commercial kitchens. In response, the teaching team redesigned the project to ensure the students could meet the course's learning outcomes and project deliverables. The catalyst for this redesign was to embrace the changing landscape of COVID and reframe it as a design opportunity for the students. At Alert Level 4 (the highest level of COVID restriction in New Zealand), many food outlets could not be physically open, but some food producers could still sell their products online via contactless delivery. To ensure that the students' skills within product development were contextualized within the current climate, the lecturers shifted the definition of 'new food product' from an artisanal food item to a new system of artisanal food delivery.

Developing Social and Cognitive Presence through Student Motivation

Tim: OK, we are having to pivot the project due to COVID, and we will need to redirect our creative attention away from making food. We cannot get into the kitchens to design these food products, and even if we could, the food producers would be reluctant to take on a new product line due to the staffing pressures and the state of flux. With most people purchasing online during the lockdown, the lecturers have decided that the new product that you need to design is not a food product; instead, it's a new means to experience artisan food at home.

John (student): So, you mean we aren't making food in the kitchen anymore; instead, we are making food delivery boxes or something like that?

Tim: Yes, you're correct, John. A product can be a physical artifact or a new way to experience that artifact. Think of a taxi as an example of this. The product offering is an on-demand transportation service. However, when Uber entered the market, they provided a new way to experience the existing product. In essence, people are still getting the same product they always wanted; it's just they are getting it delivered in a different way. I'll give you a food example of this. Take soup, for example. You can experience eating soup on an a-la-carte menu, degustation menu or a buffet

offering; whichever way you experience the soup, it's still just soup. It's just that the way it gets offered to you and the experience around the soup is different. Online food deliveries are just another way people can experience soup.

John: Ok, I get it now. That's a bit of a shame because the sausage recipe that I conceived, I really wanted to test out. But I guess it would be hard for a new sausage to be introduced into the business right now with so much other stuff going on.

Tim: I think the important thing to note right now is that the hospitality industry is in a state of disruption, and this means things will end up looking different moving forward. As culinary teachers, it is our responsibility to prepare you for this disruption. I know many of you are a little worried right now, but this is an opportunity to do things differently. With that in mind, the first task that I have set you is to go out onto the internet and explore how other businesses are providing online delivery services. To get you going, have a look at Lashings bakery in Wellington. They offer an online brownie delivery service and have a few different models that people can opt into. In tomorrow's session, we will break into our groups to discuss our individual findings.

A key consideration when pivoting the project was the stimulation of the students' social and cognitive presences through the actions of the teacher (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). We attempted to achieve this by placing the students' concerns about their future careers at the centre of the project and used this to stimulate their enquiry skills and group debates and discussions.

The second consideration was to utilize the principles of connectivism pedagogy to guide students toward possible relevant information and to allow them to have opportunities to critically consider its appropriateness to the task on hand (Siemens, 2005). The principles of connectivism can be seen when Tim (the teacher) directs the students to relevant sources of knowledge; in this case, Lashings' bakery website. As Siemens (2005, p. 5) notes, "Connectivism is the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organisation theories. Learning is a process that occurs within nebulous environments of shifting core elements – not entirely under the control of the individual." The shifting sands of COVID had created chaos within the food and beverage sector, which meant that the product offering of the past (physical face-to-face purchases) was no longer relevant. Therefore, the students needed the skills to navigate through mass information and find relevant sources of knowledge to inform their new product offering.

Fostering Critical Thought and Debate

Tim: So, it looks like everyone is back online, great news. In today's session, I am going to put you into your groups via the breakaway function, and I would like each of you to present to your peers what you discovered from yesterday's research exercise. I am keen for you to discuss what businesses you thought had effective delivery models and what negative aspects you found in others.

Tim sends each team into their respective breakout groups.

Tim: Who would like to go first in the group and discuss what they found?

Jane (student): I can, Tim. I looked at the bakery website you recommended. What I liked was the ability to order what you wanted from their product range, but you could also subscribe to a monthly delivery service where they sent you a surprise selection of brownies at the beginning of each month.

Tim: Yes, it's a very interesting model—the subscription model. It's becoming quite popular with other businesses as well. Did you look at any other websites, Jane?

Jane: Yes, I did. I looked at a local café that specializes in local food, and they had moved from just selling their café food to also selling local eggs, milk, and vegetables from the suppliers they use. They had morphed their business from serving just café food and beverage to also providing pantry items.

Tim: Based on what you have seen, Jane, what possibilities might exist for the producer that you are working with? How might the practices used by these businesses inform what might be possible in your project?

Jane: I guess this initial research indicates that if you have people who are loyal to your business, you could utilize this to create a subscription model. Likewise, what the café is attempting to do is to work within their existing supplier networks to ensure all of the business's stakeholders can benefit from the delivery platform. I also think that by taking this approach, it allows the customer to feel that they are supporting the wider food community.

Tim: (turning his attention to another student) Sarah, what do you think about Jane's ideas?

Sarah: They sound like really good ideas, and I also found another business like the café Jane described. It was a restaurant that had teamed up with a meat supplier to sell their meat. The restaurant was providing recipes they had

designed to go with the raw meat, so people could cook delicious food at home. I guess it just depends on the customers' wants and needs. I suspect some people buying online just want a prepared convenience product, so the raw meat and recipe concept might not appeal.

Tim: This is a great discussion. So the question is, "Of the information you found, what is the most useful to adopt into the project?"

Jane: I guess the best thing to do would be to consider these ideas in relation to the project deliverables. Maybe we could present some of these ideas to the food producers for feedback. That way, we can use their input to come up with a workable outcome.

As a connectivist educator, the pedagogic intent is to help the student navigate and make sense of this information through a critical lens (Duke, Harper, & Johnston, 2013; Siemens, 2005). Hence, in the narrative above, when the teacher asks the student to present the information they have found, they also enact their critical-thinking skills as they ask them to draw connections between the information sourced and its relevance to the project's deliverables. Central to the decision-making process within connectivism is to embrace the diversity of opinions within the student classroom. As Duke et al. (2013, p. 6) comment of connectivism, "The core skill is the ability to see connections between information sources and to maintain that connection to facilitate continual learning." This approach to teaching and learning, therefore, sees the teacher's role as the initial instigator of these discussions, often acting as an agent provocateur.

As the weeks of COVID lockdown unfolded, the students continued their project online. Throughout, they were introduced to other food producers who shared their reactions and responses to COVID while also continuing to observe new ways of delivering food products to consumers online. The literature review had taught the team the importance of providing regular and personalized feedback to the students, ensuring their students stayed motivated and engaged (Savvidou, 2018). This feedback included using a combination of class, group, and individual weekly feedback sessions, with teachers ensuring everyone received personalized feedback within the confines of a small group project. Throughout, the teachers ensured that the social and cognitive presence of their students was at the forefront of their minds.

Through desktop research, engaging in the stories of others, and feedback from the industry partners, the students eventually developed a series of concepts that were pitched online to the food producers. These concepts included a series of cooked and raw product offerings for various market segments, a-la-carte and subscription pricing models, and an umbrella digital platform for artisan producers to sell collectively. In total, six concepts were pitched, and one of these was integrated into lamb producers' business operations. Taking inspiration from the café business that transitioned from its primary offering to also selling products in its supply network, the lamb producer developed an overarching brand that brought together a collection of bespoke New Zealand food offerings on one online platform.

Reflections and Implications for Culinary Education in the Future

In Part One, we provided an overview of the traditional master-apprentice pedagogy, which is still taught in many culinary programmes around the world. In New Zealand, it is still common to see a master-apprentice pedagogy in the initial phases of culinary education; however, Project-Based Learning (PBL) has become the dominant pedagogy in the final year of study. In 2014, the Bachelor of Culinary Arts teaching team was nationally applauded for its use of PBL as a pedagogically responsive means to develop trainee chefs' technical, cognitive, and soft skills. Indeed, the success of PBL has started to raise questions in New Zealand about its possible adoption into all levels of culinary education.

Yet, the immediate future for hospitality in New Zealand continues to look unstable and constantly moving. At the time of writing this article, COVID is somewhat under control within our communities; we still live under a cloud of doubt that things will never be the same again. The reality is that the world has only become more complex due to COVID, and the future requires students to have the the ability to navigate this complexity. As culinary educators, COVID has provided us with the opportunity to critically examine our philosophy of PBL and realize that while it is an effective tool for on-campus, applied learning, there are similar pedagogies such as connectivism that we can apply effectively within an online environment. What we know for sure is that we can no longer rely on our traditional, face-to-face teaching methodologies. As a team, we are learning to let go of our face-to-face instructional pedagogy and are reassured by research that flexible and blended learning approaches within culinary education are not only appreciated by students (Mulyatiningsih, Palupi, Ekawatiningsih, & Firdausa, 2021) but, in fact, achieve higher performance outcomes (Holik, 2019). As Tien, Lin, Yin, and Chang (2020) note, offering online blended and flexible culinary education is a student-centric approach to 21st Century

education with the added benefit of increased student motivation and creativity.

As we review our BCA programme in 2022, we have already made the decision to redevelop it to include on-campus, blended, and fully work-based delivery models. Pre-COVID, we had already commenced discussions about new delivery tools and methods; however, COVID accelerated these discussions by forcing us to enter the world of online education.

COVID has also been an opportunity to examine what defines the skills and knowledge to practice as a chef. Do our culinary technical skills need to expand beyond the traditional repertoire? With chefs posting every day on social media platforms to increase their business profiles, should media skills now be part of the culinary toolkit? Likewise, when chefs wrote menus in the past as drawcards to invite customers on the streets into their establishments, then maybe chefs need to acquire a basic level of digital marketing skills?

What COVID has forced us to do was reflect on everything we took to be true. Like our peers in the industry who are having to reconceive their business models, those of us involved in culinary education must re-examine our pedagogic delivery models and the skills and knowledge we believe to be true. If there has been one positive to come out of COVID, it is that we have learnt to embrace disruption and change.

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