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Preface to the special section

Tania Aspland^A

A

Professor and Vice President, Academic, Kaplan Business School Australia, Coeditor in Chief, Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching

Vanessa Stafford^B

B

Academic Learning Manager, Kaplan Business School, Australia

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Kaplan Australia is an Australian higher education provider, consisting of Kaplan Business School, Kaplan Professional, and four pathway colleges. All educators within Kaplan Australia have the opportunity to expand and share their cognate area's knowledge and increase their pedagogical skills and knowledge through various scholarship activities within the Kaplan Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) program. At its core, Kaplan's SoTL program aims to answer Lee Shulman's (2011, p. 4) question: "How does someone who already understands something learn to teach what they know to someone else?". It is through this program that Kaplan's educators learn not only to teach well but to understand and engage with their craft in a holistic manner.

One such avenue for growth is the Symposium of Learning and Teaching (SoLT). SoLT is an annual conference led by a small team of employees selected from across Kaplan Australia. It launched in 2020 on the Adelaide campus, with on-campus, virtual, and poster presentations over two days, before the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns moved it to a fully online version in 2021. While Kaplan is not registered as a research-focussed institution, we do follow Ernest Boyer's (1990) view on academic scholarship, which acknowledges that the craft of teaching is dependent upon reflective and inquiring educators who engage in a strong community of practice that shares its in-class challenges and triumphs for the community's benefit. The 2021 Symposium of Learning and Teaching's theme was "Empathy, Kindness, and Presence: Uncovering the Human(e) Element of Teaching and Learning". This topic was chosen during a tumultuous time of educational, professional, and personal upheaval across the world, due to the global pandemic.

The 2021 SoLT conference theme, conceptualised by Dr Susan Robinson, a senior lecturer at Kaplan, invited participants to consider the ways that Garrison's (2017) notions of teaching presence, cognitive presence and social

presence inform the human element of teaching. Teaching presence occurs wherever educators integrate the cognitive and social environment in the pursuit of learning goals. Cognitive presence describes the extent to which participants in a learning community manage to construct and assert meaning through reflection and discourse (Garrison 2017), which was a key objective of the Symposium. As educators are also the 'architects' and facilitators of the learning environment and the main source of teaching presence, participants were encouraged to discuss matters of design, learning adjustments, content, pedagogy, and assessment and how they facilitate the presences throughout their teaching repertoires. Central to the discussions in the context of the pandemic, colleagues also raised issues about the struggles and challenges of their ability to identify with a group, communicate openly in a trusting environment, and develop personal, professional, and affective relationships (Garrison, 2017) through social presence – in empathetic ways!

The theme encapsulates precisely what this group of exhausted educators were reflecting upon in November 2021, as they struggled through personal fatigue to provide quality and compassionate teaching to an even more exhausted student body. What is even more remarkable about this 2021 symposium is that of the thirteen presentations plus two keynote speakers over the two days, only a minority of presenters had presented before at such an event. The effort and bravery of educators willing to share, for the first time, their personal and professional insights into teaching and learning during such an exhausting period is a testament to the strength of Kaplan's educators and their commitment to their community of practice. As such, a sub-group of presenters seized the opportunity to turn their presentations into articles for submission to the Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching. It is our pleasure to present to the reader a selection of insights from Kaplan's 2021 Symposium of Learning and Teaching, one that spread the

importance of having empathy and kindness for our students and ourselves. In doing so, this special section allows us to disseminate our learnings to JALT peers for review, further learning, and hopefully, the transformation of educational practices in higher education.

References

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