CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

ON PROFESSIONAL LEARNING DURING COVID-19:
CONTEXT, PRACTICE AND CHANGE

EDITORS: ROSALINE GOVENDER & ANTHEA H M JACOBS

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HELTASA

HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING & TEACHING ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

Critical Reflections on professional learning during COVID-19: Context, practice and change

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all higher education staff and students for their resilience and indomitable spirit during the Covid-19 pandemic.

You have inspired and continue to inspire in ways unmeasured.

THE EDITORS
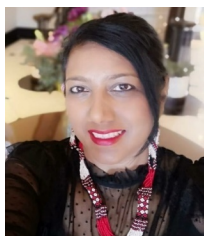
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FOREWORD

Real, authentic, messy at times, yet emancipatory and uniquely transformative South African higher education (HE) stories during the Covid-19 pandemic are offered under the title: **Critical Reflections on Professional Learning; Context, choice and change during the Covid-19 pandemic**. The collective efforts of our colleagues show up as the journeys of transitioning professionals within the global South higher education context. As part of its continuous contribution to learning and teaching, HELTASA (Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa) is required to respond and engage timeously to unfolding events and happenings, whether they pose threats or opportunities. The reflections of these authors in response to a changing HE landscape during the Covid-19 pandemic, amplifies the spirit of not only a transitioning HE practitioner but that of our Southern African HE institutions, sector and particularly that of HELTASA.

The unique 'voices' across this book is indicative of a restructured HE organisation offering collaborative platforms for academic developers, academics, professional staff and students towards more integrated tertiary learning, teaching and research practices. The unfolding reflective and reflexive stories in this book is infused with HELTASA's values of Relevance; Responsiveness and Resilience (3 Rs) underpinned by the principles of Capacity, Capability and Commitment. The vulnerable and relatable moments through each story enables the reader, HE practitioner and organisation to embark on their own deep dive and explore our pains, gains and transitions during the Covid-19 pandemic. The pages hereafter showcase individual and collective HE agency that can be harnessed and contextually adapted to negotiate and navigate potential challenges and opportunities even in moments of crisis.

Special tribute and commendation is paid to the   HELTASA's Professional Learning Project Team for their leadership in responding to the call for increasing our scholarship and courageously taking on this book project; to all the authors who have contributed to knowledge generation within the global South by sharing their stories of personal and contextual relevance, responsiveness and resilience in their vulnerable pandemic moments; to all our membership for your commitment and ongoing support and responsiveness; to a transitioning HELTASA who courageously took to the stern to weather the storm of change as transforming and transformative change and finally to all the readers of this book as you turn over the pages of inspiration to fuel your HE aspirations, I urge you to join us the HELTASA community and be part of our celebratory story "We did it our Way!"

Rieta Ganas President and Chair: HELTASA

INTRODUCTION

Rosaline Govender and Anthea H M Jacobs

In March 2020, following the global announcement of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, the president of South Africa declared a state of national disaster. All tertiary institutions in South Africa began to implement emergency measures, to meet the social isolation mandate, while continuing with their core business of teaching, learning and assessment. An urgent review of all activities to support and enable the academic project was conducted to make provision for the national lockdown measures. Academics were compelled to prepare for and institute Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) to replace conventional face-to-face student interaction with fully online learning. The purpose was not to replace the existing educational system, but to establish emergency online initiatives to ensure the continuation of the academic project. Consequently, ERT required the rethinking and adaptation of existing teaching, learning and assessment.

As reflective and reflexive practitioners, it is imperative that we interrogate and reflect on our professional learning during the Covid-19 pandemic which can "reveal new insights and understandings about who we are and what we do" (Ghaye 2011: 20). Gibbs (1988: 9) reminds us that "it is not sufficient to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting on this experience, it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost." This book is a collection of written reflections on academics' professional learning during ERT and how they managed the rethinking and adaptation of teaching, learning and assessment. It provides a snapshot of what transpired behind the scenes as the higher education sector prepared for and executed their ERT plans. The reflections also offer glimpses into how staff in higher education displayed resilience as they moved from feelings of angst, desperation, fear, trepidation and excitement to a sense of innovation, accomplishment and fulfilment. What is evident about the reflections are academics' honest insights into the scholarly and practical

measures engaged during ERT, as well as the support for each other through various communities of practice (CoPs). The reflections highlight some of the challenges and tensions that emerged, but it also presents an opportunity to celebrate the lessons learnt and to build on the possibilities for change in practice through professional learning. The reflections in this book span the South African higher education landscape and remind us of the quotation by David Barr[1], "We are not all in the same boat, but we are all in the same storm".

Theme 1: Reflections of journeys in professional learning

Reflecting on our journeys is vital to our professional learning and resonates with Schon (1987) who advocates for the "the expert who is awake to, and aware of, their practice, not just immersed in it" (1987: 26). Schon (1987) further expounds that we must reflect – 'in-action' and also 'on-action'. It is through these periods of reflection that we are able to transform our practice as higher education practitioners.

In *Moving beyond the classroom to embrace teaching and learning in a virtual space* the author reflects on his own trajectory of professional learning. He recounts his personal experiences of how the Covid-19 pandemic propelled him to learn new ways of engaging with students in humanising ways. *Transformative pedagogies in teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) during the Covid-19 crisis* draws our attention to the importance of linking the principle of transformation for a socially just world with ERT initiatives. This chapter highlights the magnitude of reflecting on our professional learning which has the ability to transform our thinking and practice. *The journey into e-learning is one of me-learning – reflection and changing pedagogical practices in an online world* provides a critical reflection of how professional learning transpired as the authors share their self-learning experiences during Covid-19. The authors assert that ongoing reflexive practice and creativity combined with researching, sharing and collaboration are key components in improving teaching and learning. In *Online engagement*

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[1] https://www.damianbarr.com/latest/https/we-are-not-all-in-the-same-boat

with students during a pandemic: Lessons learned in first year mega psychology classes the authors discuss how reflective practices underpinned their personal and professional development. They focus on the potential of collaborative professional learning and the incumbent deep connections as they endeavoured to improve their practice by acquiring novel ways of navigating the new-fangled learning and teaching terrain. **Reflections from implementing a faculty strategy for academic professional learning during a global pandemic** provides a reflective account of their encounters in designing and facilitating professional learning support during the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors purport that professional development should be holistic and responsive to the needs of academics and should be informed by an ethic of care.

Theme 2: Creating spaces for connection

Chism (2006) contends that space can have a powerful impact on learning; we cannot overlook space in our attempts to accomplish our teaching, learning and assessment goals. This has become especially important during ERT. With the shift from in-person to online interactions via ERT, lecturers and academic developers were required to create online spaces to hold the academic project. In **Building online communities: Exploring the conditions for interpersonal and cognitive connections** the question of how to re-create spaces for connection and community in the online environment was addressed. The authors offer suggestions for ways in which various online communities might be maintained and strengthened to enhance teaching and learning beyond Covid-19. The chapter entitled **Catalytic power of a pandemic: On enacting agency in professional higher education spaces through communities of practice** builds on this notion of the value of the pandemic for establishing CoPs, by critically reflecting on how CoPs contributed to the author's agential metamorphosis. The author makes recommendations on how higher education stakeholders can use CoPs to elicit and enact agency in professional learning spaces. In **I am still**

here: Lessons learned from incorporating social presence in remote teaching and Exploring the ***interplay of confidence, authenticity and risk through professional learning*** the authors remind us of how ERT stripped away the sense of connection between lecturers and students as well as with their own identity. In the former chapter, three important aspects to try and restore this disconnection is offered: (1) Familiarity (creating spaces where students feel seen and heard); (2) Being present ('showing up' in both the asynchronous as well as the synchronous spaces); and (3) Online identity (teachers incorporating their unique personalities into the online sessions). In the latter chapter, the notion of leading by example is emphasised. These strategies present different ways of interacting with students, colleagues and self, a notion which is carried through to the chapter, ***Narrowing the geographical divide: A critical reflection of an affordance of the Covid-19 pandemic for collaborative professional learning and development***. In this chapter the authors offer an account of how the pandemic changed their interactions with each other. They elaborate on the affordances experienced as academics from different universities working together online, and how it opened future possibilities for collaboration. An interesting perspective on the online learning space through a university online management system is provided in the chapter ***Reflecting on the online teaching space as a 'boundary object' in pandemic times: Making the invisible visible in an academic literacy course***. It suggests how a university learning management system can act as a 'boundary object', integrating context and content, allowing students, staff and the university to connect during ERT. This enabled academics to revisit past teaching, learning and assessment practices and create new pedagogical approaches.

The chapters in Theme 2 confirm the observation by Gravett *et al.* (2022) that the move to ERT is blurring the boundaries of higher education spaces and places, reorienting what it means to teach and to learn in a digital higher education landscape.

Theme 3: Transforming online pedagogies

The Covid-19 pandemic compelled higher education institutions to make a rapid transition from familiar ways of teaching. Whilst some practitioners were primed for ERT and made a smooth transition, others had to quickly learn how to navigate the online terrain. In this section of the book the authors critically reflect on how they transformed their online pedagogies for ERT and document the learnings that ensued.

Reflecting on pivoting to emergency remote online teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown: Feedback from three English Second Language (ESL) teachers proposes practical suggestions on how ESL teachers may be supported in their professional development to navigate digital learning. The author affirms that reflection is an effectual means to manage and develop ESL teachers holistically. In *Higher Education versus Covid-19 Impact: Toward an Inclusive Higher Education* the author discusses the findings from a survey conducted with a reasonably large sample of students as respondents, providing a synopsis of students' experiences with ERT. The author advises that universities should invest in digital infrastructure in order to decrease the digital divide that exists amongst students and also inculcate practices that support the well-being of students. *Getting the balance right: Reflecting on the 'study pack' as a pedagogic tool for self-directed learning in an Extended Curriculum Programme during the Covid-19 pandemic* uses Mezirow's (1978) ten phases of transformative practice to critically reflect on providing sufficient meaningful pedagogic tools for student success and fostering student self-directedness. The author concludes that the process of critical reflection is emancipatory and transformative which is fundamental to professional learning. *Using a transformative learning pedagogy remotely: Reflections of early career academics in the context of Covid-19* provides a reflective perspective on the significance of supporting early career academics to adapt pedagogy

and assessment tools for online provision in order to ensure that the intended learning outcomes of modules are achieved.

Theme 4: Reimagining alternative ways of teaching in HE

The move to ERT was a catalyst for change of the teaching, learning and assessment project for some academics, allowing for pedagogies that are more focused on developing students' enquiring minds as lifelong learners. Unfortunately, experience has taught us that this is not true for everyone. We therefore continuously need to interrogate and improve our teaching, learning and assessment practices to ensure that we address the need for a transformative student experience. The chapters grouped together under this theme speak of innovative ways in which this could be achieved. The wide variety of contexts represented in Theme 4 makes for truly interesting reading. Moving from the context of wine science of the "information-finding missiles" chapter to the context of dance education, the lessons from ERT are insightful.

In ***Developing learning partnerships in the postgraduate classroom***, the authors employed the Theory of Connectivism, Healey, Flint and Harrington's model (2014) of engaging students as partners in higher education; and Prensky's "pedagogy of partnering" (Prensky, 2010) to engage students as partners in the design and delivery of the curriculum. As facilitators of learning, they demonstrate the pedagogical shifts required to design learning activities that encourage sustained and active student participation. ***Guiding information-finding missiles: A reflection on adapting assessments to maximise student learning in the online environment*** reveals how the author had to find alternative ways to assess during ERT, so that students could demonstrate creativity, originality, and critical thinking, rather than just recalling/finding information. The author emphasises that adapting assessments for the online environment can be a valuable opportunity to reimagine ways of doing things that incorporate students' lived experience, thus creating new knowledge. In ***Reflections on a***

compulsory 'dance-at-home' course for pre-service student teachers during lockdown, the author reflects on new dance teaching praxis which emerged during ERT. Students had to provide evidence of participation in dance activities by means of video recordings, photos or writing a short reflection. Pedagogically, this new method of teaching dance education is unique as it develops students' autonomy. In **Writing centre tutors' experiences and perceptions of online academic support: Reflecting on the digital transformation during the Covid-19 pandemic**, the context moves to tutors at a writing centre during ERT. The authors argue that tutoring in a multimodal environment contributes to transformation as it enables more students to participate successfully in diverse communication processes. Whilst on the topic of multimodality, in **Rethinking (English) academic literacy practices during a pandemic: Mobility and multimodality**, the author critically reflects on how the pandemic has demonstrated to what extent mobility and (in)stability are 'unrecognised norms of academic literacy'. The author suggests that teaching practices would be transformed if these norms were recognised, with possible implications for decolonising English teaching, learning and assessment at postcolonial universities. In **Transition to Online Pedagogy During Covid-19 Pandemic: Reflecting on Experiences and Perceptions of Lecturers and Students** the authors used the reflective framework of Gary Rolfe (2001) and the theoretical constructs of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (Engeström 2001) to reflect on first-year engineering educators' and students' experiences and perceptions of multimodal instruction, learning and assessment, transitioning from face-to-face (F2F) to online environment.

The chapters in Theme 4 demonstrate academics' courage and reflexivity, which according to Babalwa (2020) are requirements for a truly transformative student experience. The Covid-19 pandemic and resultant migration to ERT have shown that academics are able to adapt and reimagine teaching, learning and assessment, which bodes well for navigating an uncertain higher education landscape.

Conclusion

"Learning to become a professional involves not only what we know and can do, but also who we are (becoming). It involves integration of knowing, acting, and being in the form of professional ways of being that unfold over time" (Dall'Alba 2009: 34). The onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic provided a "portal, a gateway" (Roy 2020: 3) for higher education practitioners to pause and reflect on what we are doing as professionals and who are we are becoming. The pandemic also opened up spaces for re-imagining and forging new learning pathways for professional learning. Seen through the lens of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on professional practice, the book opens up perspectives on a wide variety of teaching, learning and experiences, demonstrating how it can be used to re-imagine the higher education landscape.

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Theme 1: Reflections on Journeys in Professional Learning

CHAPTER 1

Moving beyond the classroom to embrace teaching and learning in a virtual space

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Abstract

The closure of higher education institutions in early March 2020 necessitated engagement with new ways of teaching and learning, notably virtual teaching and learning. In this chapter I provide a personal account of my experiences as a lecturer who had to move out of my comfort zone to embrace my new role as a lecturer in a virtual space, outside the confines of the physical classroom. During my lecturing career that spans a period of 25 years, I always preferred face-to-face contact with my students above digital approaches and even when some of our colleagues in the faculty tried to convince us of the advantages of supplementing our face-to-face classes with digital teaching and learning in 2010, I was very resistant to their suggestions. At the time I did not foresee us moving into digital teaching spaces for a very long time. However, the onset of Covid-19 and the closure of our university signalled a new chapter in the story of my lecturing career, as I was thrown into the virtual space. I realised that if I wanted to survive I could either sink or swim. Eventually after finding my way through the maze of digital platforms, I learnt how to occupy the virtual space confidently and to engage my students productively in teaching and learning. As I continue to gain new skills in teaching and learning in a virtual space, I have come to realise the advantages of remote teaching

and learning and how I can tap into my own creativity to facilitate meaningful learning experiences for my students.

Keywords: remote teaching and learning, virtual teaching, reflective practice, Covid-19, digital platforms

Introduction

The rapid spread of the coronavirus globally in 2020, necessitated the implementation of various measures by countries to curb its proliferation, both from within the borders of the respective countries and internationally. The onset of this virus prompted the President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, to declare a national lockdown with effect from midnight on the 26th of March 2020 (DHET 2020). This unexpected announcement led to the closure of all higher education institutions, which placed the onus on South African universities to decide on the measures that they would implement to conclude the 2020 academic year successfully. In deliberating on the various options, however, they realised that the only way in which universities could continue to function, was to transition from face-to-face to remote teaching and learning (Ngubane *et al.* 2020). This, however, posed many challenges, since neither lecturers nor students were adequately prepared for remote teaching and learning, and furthermore many students did not have access to digital devices or data to access learning material for the realisation of effective remote teaching and learning (Tamrat and Teferra 2020).

In my role as a lecturer at a higher education institution, I was confronted with similar challenges, since I did not have the requisite skills for remote teaching and learning, neither did I embrace such an approach to pedagogy. However, since there was no other alternative, I

came to the realisation that I could either adapt to the changed circumstances or continue to hope that face-to-face classes would resume. Unfortunately, the latter did not materialise, and online classes were implemented.

This chapter provides an overview of my personal journey from initially being negative towards remote teaching and learning to embracing it, and learning how to navigate across the various digital platforms to engage students meaningfully in connected learning through the adoption of a humanising pedagogy (Freire 1970). Although it was uplifting for me to gain new skills, I also became aware of the many challenges that students experienced as they struggled to adapt to remote teaching and learning given the connectivity, data and emotional challenges (Van Deursen and Van Dijk 2019). In this reflection, I provide insights on how I felt initially and what happened, thereafter I will explain and analyse what happened by aligning my reflection to Rolfe, Jasper and Freshwater's (2010) reflective model which provides the research framework for my self-study.

The self-reflection process

The advantages of self-reflection for one's practice are manifold, but one of the most significant advantages is that it enables one to become more aware of one's strengths and limitations and to reflect on how one's practice could be developed for enhanced learning. While White (2004) regards reflection as one of the most important characteristics of successful teachers, Robins *et al.* (2003) contend that besides being empowering, it enables a teacher to make informed judgements and professional decisions.

According to Dewey (1933) reflective practice can be described as a cognitive process which focuses on active, conscious, and deliberate

thinking for the purposes of problem-solving. This was expanded on by Schon (1991) who proposed two levels of reflection namely reflection-in- action and reflection-on-action. Whilst the former allows for continual interpretation, investigation, and reflective conversations with oneself about the problem, the latter focuses on reflection after the event or experience of teaching and learning (Sellars 2017). In my self-reflection, based on my transition to remote teaching and learning, the focus will be on reflection-on-action.

There are various models of self-reflective practice including those designed by Gibbs (1988), Mcniff and Whitehead (2005), Rolfe, Jasper and Freshwater (2010) and Kolb (2014), among others. The model that will undergird my experiences in transitioning to remote teaching and learning is Rolfe, Jasper and Freshwater's (2010) model of self-reflective practice. The three stages of this model require that one consider what happened, the implications of the occurrence and the consequences for future conduct. These stages are explained with reference to a focus on three guiding questions namely *What? So What?* and *Now What?* which represent the three phases of the learning experience (Rolfe, Jasper and Freshwater 2010). My reason for selecting the latter model for reflecting on my experiences during remote teaching and learning is that the guiding overarching questions and the supplementary questions enabled me to reflect more insightfully on my experiences than the other models would have enabled. While the *What?* question enabled me to frame the problem more succinctly in terms of what happened, the *So What?* question enabled me to reflect comprehensively on the implications of the problem for my own remote teaching and learning practices and the *Now What?* question enabled me to reflect on what I needed to do in the future to improve my own remote teaching and learning.

I will first respond to the what question by providing a description of what happened when I was required to change my pedagogy to remote teaching and learning. Thereafter, I will explain what the experience and situation meant with reference to literature to support my views in response to the 'so what?' question. Finally, I will provide an overview of how this experience has enabled me to develop my practice and motivated me to learn from my initial concerns by responding to the 'now what?' question. The elucidation of the self-reflective process, based on my transition to remote teaching and learning, will be structured according to the three questions as per Rolfe, Jasper and Freshwater's (2010) model.

My story

What?

When our university closed in March after the president announced the country wide lockdown, I was at a loss as to how I would proceed with my classes in my role as a lecturer at a higher education institution, given that I was inadequately prepared to present lessons remotely. The students included both pre-service students registered for a module specialising in the teaching of English at Home language level, which was a component of the PGCE programme; and a module on second language teaching and learning that was a component of the Bachelor of Education (Honours) language specialisation programme.

After the imposition of the lockdown, many students contacted me electronically expressing their concerns relating to how they would be able to complete their studies successfully that year, given the sudden termination of classes. Eventually, when classes were presented virtually, many students struggled to cope as they felt disconnected from the learning process and yearned for a resumption of face-to-face

classes. I also struggled initially to adapt to online classes, given that my philosophy of teaching is based on the tenets of a humanising pedagogy (Freire 1970) which I believed was only possible via face-to-face contact and not remotely via digital platforms, as I could not imagine how lecturers and students could be connected in this way for effective problem-based learning (Liu and Long 2014).

However, when face-to-face contact was no longer possible, I had to reconsider my attitude towards online teaching and learning and to critically reflect on my transition to remote teaching and learning. I realised that this required a major paradigm shift which entailed coming to terms with my negative attitude towards digital teaching and learning, and reflecting on how I could move from where I was with my limited knowledge of remote learning, to where I needed to be (Park 2010).

So what?

While we were awaiting directives from our university on the way forward, I spent time reading Who moved my Cheese by Spencer Johnson (1998) on the importance of adapting during periods of change. Reading this book was therapeutic as it enabled me to reflect more critically on the road that I would need to travel to embrace the change to online teaching and learning. It was especially after reading Johnson's book (1998) that my insights to the change process and adapting to change were enhanced. The story revolves around how different groups experience change. While the mice Sniff and Scurry went in search of new cheese when the cheese was moved, since they were always on the move; the Little People Hem and Haw kept on returning to the same place, hoping for the cheese to miraculously re-appear. Later however, Haw realised that he would need to change his

strategy and search for new cheese if he hoped to change the situation, but Hem remained depressed and in denial.

I realised that I could either behave like Haw and be proactive by adapting to change and embracing it or be complacent like Hem, and wait for the situation to return to how it originally was. After reflection and introspection, I realised that if I adopted a more positive attitude and made a concerted effort to adapt to the changed scenario, there was the potential that this could contribute to my own personal and professional development (Van den Heuvel 2020).

Johnson's (1998) focus on a process of meaning-making to adapt to change also enabled me to integrate the challenging situation into a framework of personal meaning, using value-based reflection. According to Park (2010) meaning-making focuses on the ability to constructively reflect and process challenging events, which results in a sense of meaningfulness. The process of meaning-making includes being able to link the change to personal goals and values; it goes beyond understanding the content of change (Van den Heuvel 2020). My engagement in the process of meaning-making contributed to my ability to accept change and to reflect on the skills that I would need to develop in order to adapt to remote teaching and learning. This openness to change, arising from the meaning-making process, enabled me to focus on the new demands placed on me during the change process and to gradually disengage from my old view of teaching and learning within the context of a classroom experience, and to learn to adapt to the changed scenario (Van Dam 2013).

After realising that change was inevitable, and that I had to empower myself with skills if I hoped to present lectures virtually, I attended workshops offered by my university on how to use Moodle, watched

videos on various approaches to e-learning and read widely on research conducted in the field of remote teaching and learning (Goh *et al.* 2017). This initial engagement with the field, provided me with limited insights into the various options that I could explore for enhanced remote teaching and learning and what the process entailed. I realised, however, that this was the beginning of a journey of discovery that could stretch over a long period of time (Van den Heuvel 2020).

Another challenge that I was confronted with, however, was how to present my lectures in a humanising way given that my philosophy of teaching is based on a humanising pedagogy as espoused by Freire (1970). The components of Freirean (1970) thinking include dialogical engagement, problem-based learning and relationship building. I perceived technology to be a barrier to learning since human contact is absent, as the students participate in lessons in their own individual spaces disconnected from other students, which inhibits their personal and social development.

Initially when we were given a directive from the university management to commence lectures remotely, I felt constrained since I had not acquired the requisite skills in using digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom for remote teaching and learning. Consequently, I decided to write up my lectures in a conversational style by incorporating reflective questions and e-mailing them to students. In reflecting on the initial strategy adopted, however, I felt that besides being time consuming to prepare, these lectures tended to disengage the students from learning as they did not appear to read the lectures, and neither did they take the time to respond to the reflective questions. Furthermore, some students felt that these written

lectures were disempowering as they were overwhelmed with extensive reading material with virtually no opportunities for connecting via digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. It was clear that this initial approach to engaging students in some form of learning was disempowering and was furthermore not aligned to my philosophy of teaching as there were virtually no opportunities for dialogical engagement (Freire 1984). According to Bartolomé (1994) the achievement of humanising teaching experiences for students is dependent on the establishment of a synergy between a teacher's philosophical orientation and his/her instructional methods. Based on my practice there was a mismatch between my philosophy of teaching and the instructional methods adopted.

In reflecting on my practice, I resolved to approach a colleague, who guided me through the practices and procedures of the Microsoft Teams digital platform, under whose guidance I was able to acquire the requisite skills to navigate the platform and engage with it for optimal learning. This process of reflecting on my action for improved learning is what Freire describes as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (1970: 145). According to Freire (1984) it is in the intersection of reflection and action where people become more fully human, power is shared by students and educators and the continuous process of re-humanisation occurs (Bartolomé 1994; Huerta 2011). Bartolomé (1994) further asserts that teachers should abandon uncritical approaches to teaching and learning in favour of reflection and action. This allows educators to "recreate and reinvent teaching methods and materials by always taking into consideration the sociocultural realities that can either limit or expand the possibilities to humanize education" (Bartolome 1994: 177).

As my skills in the application of the Microsoft Teams digital platform were enhanced, I engaged students more interactively and at times was able to discuss issues that affected them individually, since many of them felt constrained during the experience. This led to the process of dialogical engagement which was missing from my initial engagement with them, and which, according to Freire (1984) contributes to the enhancement of individual and collective critical consciousness. Dialogue for the development of critical consciousness focuses on one's lived experiences, the social and political conditions that lead to inequity and oppression, and stimulates action aimed at interrupting and disrupting oppression (Souto-Manning 2006). I discovered that dialogical engagement was possible via the Microsoft Teams platform, since students could respond directly to my questions and it afforded them the opportunity to pose their own questions, albeit virtually (Goh *et al.* 2017).

During my face-to-face contact lessons with students prior to the lockdown, I used problem-based learning extensively to enable students to engage critically with issues of concern through interactive meaning-making. Although I was initially sceptical about the extent to which this could be implemented virtually, my engagement with digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Moodle and E-mail correspondence motivated me to explore how connectivism could promote problem-based learning. According to Siemens and Downes (2009), in the process of learning, connections are created by crossing boundaries between human and non-human nodes through the establishment of an interconnected network. Since the connectivist learning process views students as active participants and not passive recipients, they are able to access, share, critically engage with, and use information for learning (Siemens 2005). I thus discovered that through

my engagement with connectivism, problem-based learning could be interactively implemented by providing students with skills that could enable them to search across the various nodes for information to substantiate viewpoints. This aligns to Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy which posits that teachers need to create ample opportunities for learners to be active participants in the learning process and not passive recipients of learning. Since the content is only one of the nodes in the learning process, Siemens (2006) points out that it is imperative that teachers create online teaching and learning opportunities for learners that focus on the development of critical thinking skills so that the learners are not side-lined by the content at the expense of critical engagement with the content. According to Siemens (2006) since learners are autonomous nodes in the system, they have different aims and consequently respond differently in terms of their engagement with the content. Hence, the focus should be on the diversity of their interpretation, rather than on similarities. The implementation of problem-posing education in this way, encouraged students to connect their everyday lives to global issues, think critically about actions that they could take to effect change, and identify connections between self and society (Bigelow and Peterson 2002; Schugurensky 2011). I discovered that the process of connectivism across teaching and learning nodes stimulated critical inquiry and creative transformation as students were actively involved in interrogating issues of concern from multiple perspectives (Bahruth 2000; Schugurensky 2011).

To ensure that learners engaged critically with the various nodes, I focused on providing them with unstable, controversial, unsolved, and real-life problems to involve them actively in the learning process (Al Dahdouh *et al.* 2015). Consequently, at times, learners felt uncertain

about what needed to be done and how they needed to engage with the tasks, which as highlighted by Al Dahdouh *et al.* (2015: 16) forced "them to search for answers, to ask help, to seek for patterns and, in other words, to form connections, in an attempt to solve the problem ahead". Hence, in my role as the lecturer connected to a good network in the field such as other researchers, books, journals, websites, databases, and mobile applications, I was able to support students to plant themselves in the network, to be connected to its nodes and to be a part of it (Al Dahdouh *et al.* 2015: 16).

According to Downes (2010) connectivist learning involves dialogical engagement for the social construction of knowledge which implies that learning is not only about knowledge consumption but knowledge construction. During the dialogical engagement process, connectivists provide students with skills to connect with other people in other contexts by using search engines, social media and other means (Anderson 2016). Hence, in consideration of the tenets of connectivism, it was logical that my assessment focused on students' engagement with the connections between subject fields, ideas and concepts (Siemens and Downes 2009) and not on disconnected learning. The outcome of this approach to assessment was that students found the assessment tasks engaging, meaningful and enjoyable and not disempowering (Black and William 2009). An important lesson, however, that I learnt from my engagement with connectivism, is that its success is dependent on lecturers' awareness of the possibilities of internet access and other technological resources for effective learning so that each individual student may gather and share information irrespective of challenges faced (Bell 2011).

During my face-to-face contact lectures with students prior to the lockdown, I always made an attempt to inquire about their well-being

and espoused an open-door policy, encouraging students to discuss issues of an academic or personal level with me. These meetings with students ensured that they were motivated, remained positive and felt appreciated. In this way, as highlighted by Huerta (2011) and Salazar (2013) my approach to a humanising pedagogy focused on building trusting and caring relationships with students, since I was prepared to listen to their interests, needs, and concerns; model kindness, patience, and respect; tend to their general well-being, including their emotional, social, and academic needs; and create a support network for them (Fránquiz and Salazar 2004; Rodriguez 2008).

During lockdown, however, I wondered how I could ensure that our rich interpersonal relationships were maintained, as this did not appear possible via e-learning platforms. I tried to overcome this challenge by e-mailing students regularly to inquire about their well-being and invited them to share their challenges and concerns with me. This seemed to work well as highlighted by the following e-mails from students in which they explain what the emotional support that I provided meant to them:

Student 1 expressed her appreciation as follows:

*You have been such a stable source of **strength and support** to us during this difficult time! You also shared such **kind words** with me before I faced my surgery, and I would like to thank you for going above and beyond as a lecturer. It does not go unnoticed and it does not go unappreciated. [own emphasis]*

This was further articulated by **Student 2** as follows:

*I would like to express my gratitude to you for being so **understanding and supportive** towards me during this trying time. I*

*have dawned upon the realisation that lecturers like you are extremely rare. You demonstrate all the great qualities of an excellent lecturer who is such an inspiration to not just me but all your students. Your efforts most definitely do not go unnoticed by those who are fortunate enough to have you **as their guide and friend**. [own emphasis]*

The students' views of the support that they received during a difficult period in their lives demonstrates that my humanising approach to teaching could still be realised via e-mail correspondence. Through my personal connectedness with students, I was able to embed my understanding of the humanising pedagogy in building relationships, which according to Huerta and Brittain (2010: 385-386), "respects the human, inter-personal side of teaching, and emphasizes the richness of the teacher-student relationships". Furthermore, it aligns with caring literature in education and is inclusive of respect, trust, mutual understanding, active listening, mentoring, compassion, and interest in students' overall well-being (Gay 2010; Bartolomé 1994; Cammarota and Romero 2006).

Now what?

Now that I have gained new skills in remote teaching and learning, I have come to realise that e-mail correspondence could be used in humanising ways to support students' emotionally and psychologically and that typed out lecture notes are too overwhelming for students. I have also resolved to enhance my knowledge of digital platforms and to explore other ways of ensuring that my classes are more learner centred (Goh *et al.* 2017). This is an area that I still need to work on as the online classes, unlike face-to-face classes, tend to be more teacher centred with a degree of questioning. I am still growing in my

understanding of how to ensure that students' voices become more prominent in my virtual classes. The paradigm shift to remote teaching and learning has contributed significantly to my personal, academic and professional learning, since I am now more open to embracing change and exploring how the principles of the humanising pedagogy, as espoused by Freire and others, could be realised within the context of remote teaching and learning (Park 2010). I have learnt that innovative learning platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Moodle, as highlighted by Chinyamurindi (2020), create opportunities for interaction and communication, albeit in a virtual space, and that effective teaching and learning can take place across the various nodes of learning. Some of the features that align to Freire's humanising pedagogy relate to the sharing of ideas and dialogical engagement via oral communication, typing messages onscreen, the sharing of power point presentations and trying to solve problems by searching the internet for information (Chinyamurindi 2020; Darby 2020). Hence, as pointed out by Ngubane *et al.* (2020) e-learning tools create multiple opportunities for enhanced learning.

Perhaps the fact that I was thrown into the deep end and that I had to learn to swim, contributed to my transformative approach to teaching and learning via digital platforms. I realised that embracing a pedagogy of discomfort that was very demotivating at the onset, enabled me to move out of my limited vision of teaching and learning to embrace new ways of pedagogy in times when the pedagogies that I am so married to, cannot be practiced (Van Dam 2013).

The lockdown forced me to move out of my comfort zone and to think more deeply about how I embrace change during periods of uncertainty and how to move from where I am to where I want to be. This is part of

the learning process that contributed significantly to how I view the world and how I currently perceive teaching and learning in a digital space (Van Den Heuvel 2020).

Conclusion

Adapting to remote teaching and learning in a spirit of openness enabled me to reflect on my own remote teaching and learning, and to explore new ways of engaging with students in humanising ways, albeit in a digital space. Although I have learnt how to adapt to the changed scenario, I believe that higher education institutions need to engage more optimally with the implementation of professional learning opportunities for lecturers so that they can be empowered to implement remote teaching and learning in their classes. Furthermore, it is incumbent on lecturers to enhance their professional learning by taking it upon themselves to develop skills in areas of remote teaching and learning that they perceive require attention, by attending workshops, learning from colleagues and by moving out of their comfort zones so that they can grow personally and professionally.

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CHAPTER 2

Transformative pedagogies in teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) during the Covid-19 crisis

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Abstract

According to its vision for 2040, Stellenbosch University (SU), my institution of employment, aspires to be a globally recognised, research-intensive university, with a core value of transformative equity that redresses the inequalities of the past. This aspiration translates to an important principle, namely transformation for a more socially just world, which constitutes one of the pillars of SU and should be reflected in all its teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) activities. This chapter argues that the use of this principle in TLA activities needs not be entirely suspended as a result of the crisis of Covid-19 and the resultant focus on Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). The pandemic, or any other potential emergency, does not unavoidably lead to limiting or eliminating the link between TLA and transformation (Czerniewicz *et al.* 2020). This link may be preserved if TLA-related transformation — for a more socially just world — is reimagined and adjusted to the changing circumstances of the pandemic. To demonstrate this possibility, I reflect on a critical incident in my position as academic developer. The critical incident is an exploration of the key TLA pedagogies as indicated in abstracts that were submitted for reflective-type presentations in a scholarly space (conference) during the height of the Covid-19 crisis, and the subsequent emergence of ERT. In response, the following

question emerged: has ERT allowed for the maintenance and/or expansion of TLA pedagogies, related to transformation for a more socially just world, or was the focus solely on teaching and learning in the online space? I reflect on this question in the context of the Transformational Learning Theory of Mezirow (1978). The reflective insights gained could inform my professional learning practice and direct professional learning initiatives for improvement. My findings led me to the viewpoint that the principle of transformation is unalienable from TLA, even in times of crisis and an increased focus on online TLA. Teaching, learning and assessment experiences during Covid-19 provide impetus for changed thinking and practice, which is essential for professional growth and learning, and ultimately transformation.

Keywords: transformative pedagogy; teaching, learning and assessment; reflection; pandemic; ERT; Covid-19

Introduction

Research suggests that that the most defining skill for the 21st century is not related to technology or teaching in the online space, but rather to the ability to solve problems, and adapt to change (Rahman 2019). The communities in which we live, work and play have become multicultural microcosms of the world; therefore, we need more critically minded, creative thinkers with an understanding of the impact of this expansion on our everyday lives. In higher education, it is critical to develop students who can rightfully take their place in an ever-changing world, and who are prepared to deal with the challenges of social justice. Social justice relates to the principle that "every effort should be made to ensure that individuals and groups all enjoy fair access to rewards" (Furlong and Cartmel 2009: 3). It is therefore critical to teach towards transformation for a more socially just world.

According to Khedkar and Nair (2016), TLA for transformation can be achieved through a transformative pedagogy, which signifies a movement away from the traditional role of lecturers to deliver content in their area of specialisation, and towards teaching for critical thinking. The authors state that pedagogical capacity used to be of secondary importance in the earlier years of higher education. However, it has become imperative for lecturers to teach in a way that allows students to critically examine their beliefs, values, and knowledge with the goal of developing a reflective knowledge base, an appreciation for multiple perspectives, and a sense of critical consciousness and agency (ibid.) for graduates to take up their place in the world of work. A transformative pedagogy holds the potential of achieving this goal.

To gain a better understanding of the term 'transformative pedagogy', I conducted an analysis of the concept by consulting the relevant literature. A 'transformative pedagogy' is defined in literature as (i) an educational philosophy that combines social constructivism and critical pedagogy (Tinning 2017; Ukpokodu 2009); (ii) a progressive educational approach that includes a constructivist-based pedagogy for the promotion of social justice to transform students and society (Seimears, Graves, Schroyer and Staver 2012); (iii) an approach which encourages students to critically examine their assumptions, grapple with social issues, and engage in social action (Meyers 2008); (iv) a pedagogy that focuses on students coming to understand learning processes and developing their reflective capabilities (student-centred) (Carey *et al.* 2018); (v) a pedagogy which encourages interactions between lecturers and students with the aim of recognising social and economic inequalities, and endeavouring to create a more just society (Cummins 1999); (vi) a form of praxis with a commitment to bringing about personal and social transformations by making connections

between teaching and learning and living (Farren 2016); (vii) a pedagogy which enables lecturers to connect their knowledge, experience and expertise more firmly with important social issues, all while actively participating in community projects and encouraging their students to do the same (Baatjes, Baduza and Sibiya 2014); and (viii) a pedagogy that encourages both lecturers and students to reflect on their role as engaged citizens, and what it means to be socially responsible (Giroux 2012). As I share my story, and evaluate and interpret the data, the above-mentioned guiding concepts serve as a clarifying step in the reflective process, as it enhances the focus of my reflections (Cline 2011).

This chapter argues that the use of the principle of transformation for a more socially just world in TLA need not be entirely suspended because of the crisis of Covid-19 and the increased focus on ERT. As Czerniewicz *et al.* (2020) argue, the migration to ERT in response to the Covid-19 pandemic had definite implications for transformative considerations in higher education TLA. The social justice link may be preserved if TLA-related transformation is reimagined and adjusted to the changing circumstances. To demonstrate this possibility, I reflect on a critical incident in my position as academic developer. My position is at the head of organising a scholarship of teaching and learning conference, which aims to address all aspects of TLA at SU in an open, supportive and intellectually stimulating atmosphere. It provides a platform where academics can share best practices, research findings, and innovative ideas about TLA. My reflection is premised on an exploration of the key TLA pedagogies as indicated in abstracts that were submitted as part of reflective-type presentations for a conference that took place during the height of the Covid-19 crisis, and the subsequent emergence of ERT. The following question arose: has ERT led to a sole focus on teaching

and learning in the online space, or was allowance made to consider the maintenance and/or expansion of TLA pedagogies as it relates to transformation for social justice? I further argue that TLA in higher education communities living through traumatising times, such as Covid-19, should be underpinned by a 'transformative pedagogy' as an important building block to prepare students to think critically, and deal with various challenges they may encounter in the world of work. As a pedagogy which is directed by social justice, it has a pivotal role to play in our quest for transformation.

I reflect through the lens of the transformative learning theory of Mezirow (1978). Reflection is important because learning comes not only from doing, but also from thinking about or reflecting on what we do. When we participate in new experiences, or experiences that are outside of our comfort zone or the space where we feel safe, as was the case during Covid-19 and our introduction to ERT, there is often a lot of learning that can take place through reflection (Sy and Cruz 2019).

Mezirow's transformative learning theory is defined as an orientation which holds that the way we interpret and reinterpret our experiences is central to making meaning (1994). Against that background, transformative learning is the idea that whilst we are getting new information, we are also evaluating past ideas, and shifting our worldview as we obtain new information through critical reflection. This kind of learning experience involves a change in our perceptions, and we examine things from new perspectives to make room for new insights and information. In the context of this chapter, it would mean that my exploration of the abstracts submitted for reflective presentations at the scholarship for teaching and learning conference could reveal new insights, enabling me to determine whether ERT has

allowed for the maintenance and/or expansion of TLA pedagogies related to transformation for a socially just world.

Mezirow presented three types of reflection (Kitchenham 2008) and their roles in transforming meaning schemes and perspectives, namely, content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. In content reflection, a person thinks about the content of the problem or situation. In the context of this chapter, I refer to my story as content reflection. In process reflection, one considers and evaluates the strategies and methods used to contemplate the problem or situation. For this chapter, it would mean reflecting on and explaining the methods I used, to try and answer the reflective question of whether ERT has allowed for the maintenance and/or expansion of TLA pedagogies related to transformation. In premise reflection, where one becomes aware of one's thoughts, feelings and actions and the reasons for them (Argyris and Schön 1974), I confront my personal assumptions and values in relation to the reflective question at the heart of this chapter.

My story

In line with Mezirow's 'content reflection', I tell my story. One of the main tasks of my position as academic developer is the professional development of university lecturers. During recent conversations with academic staff, as well as online webinars within my division, the issue of the increased importance of a transformative TLA approach in the context of ERT during the Covid-19 pandemic was raised. Not only is it an opportunity for lecturers to instil new ideas and principles related to social justice and the world of work after students graduate, but the uncertainty of an unpredictable future brought about by Covid-19 also presents an opportunity to rethink and reset higher education

practices. It reminded me of Bozalek, Ng'ambi, Wood, Herrington and Amory's (2014) exploration of the relationship between the use of emerging, increasingly popular technologies for TLA, and their transformative effect on higher education. It highlighted a need to reflect on and explore the key TLA pedagogies, as indicated in abstracts submitted by academics for reflective-type presentations at the 2020 scholarship for teaching and learning conference (at the height of Covid-19 and ERT). As convenor of the abstract review panel, I was uniquely positioned to do so. The following questions arose. Did these abstracts relate to transformative TLA? Was there any consistency with Bozalek, Ng'ambi, Wood, Herrington and Amory's (2014) observation of emerging technologies becoming increasingly popular in TLA? Has ERT allowed for the maintenance and/or expansion of TLA pedagogies related to transformation for social justice?

The second part of Mezirow's reflective framework relates to 'process reflection'. As such, I reflect on and explain the methods used to try and answer my reflective question. I describe the practical steps I followed to generate and analyse the data. In 'premise reflection', I interrogate my personal assumptions and values in relation to the reflective question of whether ERT has allowed for the maintenance and/or expansion of TLA pedagogies related to transformation for social justice.

Data analysis

The data set consists of the titles and keywords of sixty-three abstracts submitted for reflective-type presentations at the 2020 scholarship for teaching and learning conference. Keeping in mind the research question - has ERT allowed for the maintenance and/or expansion of TLA pedagogies related to transformation for a more socially just world,

or was the focus solely on teaching and learning in the online space? I focused my analysis on the themes of 'social justice' and 'digital pedagogies'. The pie chart in Figure 1 represents the results of my analysis.
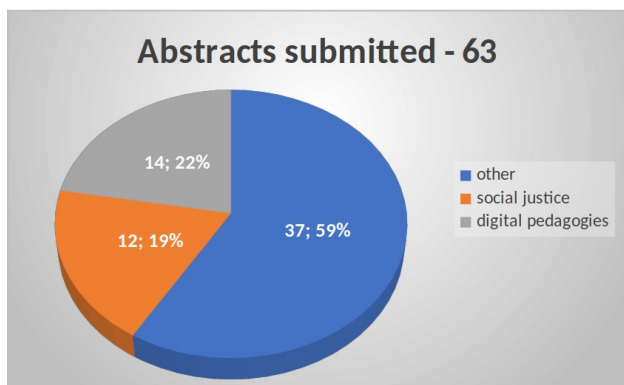
Figure 1: Results of analysis

As illustrated in Figure 1, twelve of the abstracts related to social justice, with topics ranging from support for postgraduate students; first-year student experiences of ERT; decolonisation; transformation of TLA during ERT; inclusive and multilingual approaches; and historical empathy. Fourteen of the abstracts related to digital pedagogies. The rest of the abstracts covered other matters, including community engagement matters, such as community-engaged teaching and problem and practice-based learning, as well as matters around student-centredness, such as student motivation and the development of critical thinking skills.

As seen in Figure 1, fewer abstracts focused on social justice (12, or 19%) versus those that focused on digital pedagogies (14, or 22%). Reflecting on the results of my analysis, I theorise that the slightly smaller focus

on social justice may be ascribed to the context of the pandemic, and the focus on the transition to ERT, when support for both lecturers and students took centre stage. Czerniewicz *et al.* (2020: 958) describe this as a "pedagogical challenge". The authors contend that the rapid transition from face-to-face teaching to ERT has stumped many academics, plunging them into uncertainty. The authors furthermore argue that when pedagogical choices are challenged, it may affect considerations of social justice, for example in the case of the current analysis. Other matters, such as the notion of community engagement and student-centredness, came through stronger. This is an interesting extension of the vision of SU, where lecturers are encouraged to advance and develop knowledge in service of society and, in so doing, aim to transform local communities (SU 2021). The greater focus on student-centredness could possibly be attributed to the theme for the conference, which was set around the notion of 'care' during ERT. Caring for students and others was high up on the agenda of institutional conversations, encouraged by Tronto's care perspective (2010), highlighting that all human beings need and receive care, and give care to others. The care relationships among humans are part of what mark us as human beings. The professional development space I found myself in at the time, adopted the theme of 'care' to address and show empathy with the various vulnerabilities of staff members.

Premise reflection and conclusion

In this section, I confront my personal assumptions and values in relation to the reflective question of whether ERT has allowed for the maintenance and/or expansion of TLA pedagogies related to transformation for social justice. My exploration revealed that both the concepts of 'digital pedagogies' and 'social justice' were, to differing

degrees, reflected in the abstracts relating to reflective-type presentations as submitted for presentations at the scholarship for teaching and learning conference. Accordingly, I set out to answer the question: how do these relate to one another, as well as to a transformative pedagogy? I take my cue from Fataar and Fataar-Noordien (2021), who similarly explored the link between digital technology and current debates in South African higher education, including social Justice. I add the possibility of a transformative pedagogy. This possibility is nested in digital technology being at the outskirts of educational practice (Knox 2019). My analysis confirms that there are indications for 'digital pedagogies' to be reconsidered and moved from the outskirts to be more aligned with transformative pedagogies. The same applies to transformation for social justice. My analysis demonstrates that it is an important consideration for academics which, I believe, should not be viewed in isolation. Czerniewicz *et al.* (2020) identified the following key elements for consideration of social justice matters highlighted by Covid-19 and the transition to ERT: historical, geospatial, and economic inequalities; existing contexts, histories, and cultures; the complexities and entanglement of different inequalities and structural arrangements; and challenges of parity of pedagogy. This suggests that understanding a 'transformative pedagogy' as a holistic process is important, since a transformative pedagogy covers a wide range of scholarly pursuits for social change.

My reflections have potential implications for future higher education practice and professional learning. Baumgartner (2019) contends that critical reflection promotes transformative learning, which rings true in terms of my experience upon writing this chapter and might also be true for other higher education practitioners. Not only has it led to a

better understanding of the notion of 'transformative pedagogy' in terms of digital pedagogies and social justice, but also holds the potential for renewed and reconsidered approaches to professional development or learning opportunities, and other TLA encounters within the framework of a 'transformative pedagogy'.

This reflective chapter forms part of a publication focusing on context, choice and change during the Covid-19 pandemic. I draw links to this theme by contending that the consideration of a transformative pedagogy has been accentuated due to the crisis of Covid-19. I acknowledge that the pandemic has changed the contexts in which TLA practices are implemented, not only due to ERT but also because certain knowledge and competencies are more relevant in the pandemic context. The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us of social inequalities and exclusion (Czerniewicz *et al.* 2020), therefore this is an opportune time to reconsider teaching pedagogies. Covid-19 presents an opportunity to reimagine and readjust TLA pedagogies; to pause and critically reflect on the value of teaching for transformation and social justice. It is my hope that, as we transition out of the Covid-19 pandemic and into an uncertain future, we re-imagine TLA.

In conclusion, it is important to note that employing a transformative pedagogy does not happen overnight. It is not simply about implementing revised TLA strategies but involves new perspectives and continuous critical reflection. I return to the importance of reflection referred to earlier in this chapter. Similar to Coutts (2019), I believe that lecturers should continuously reflect on their own actions, and critically question their TLA practice as they seek ways to meaningfully engage with issues of transformation, especially in the context of a pandemic, such as Covid-19.

My exploration shows that the Covid-19 pandemic and ERT created opportunities for a transformative pedagogy via 'digital pedagogies' and 'social justice' perspectives. Nevertheless, we should not forget that not all students have equal access to technology (Zhao and Watterston 2021). The issue of digital divide remains a significant problem around the globe. It is important for us to deliberate on a suitable transformative pedagogy and find creative ways to make education more equitable. Further critical reflection will contribute to the transformative pedagogy discourse, especially around the conversations related to the professional learning of academics.

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CHAPTER 3

The journey into e-learning is one of me-learning – reflection and changing pedagogical practices in an online world

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Abstract

As academics, we have become accustomed to a life of being in control – control over curriculum, pedagogical approaches and assessments. The onslaught of the global Covid-19 pandemic dramatically altered our academic spaces. Suddenly from being in control we were pushed into a virtual world where we had spent little time before. The world we knew, which offered us a semblance of control and familiarity with respect to written texts, hard copy notes, and face-to face lectures was in the past. The present means dealing and coping with the rapid speed of the change to online teaching. This, in turn, means navigating through unfamiliar unchartered waters and a drastic reversal of roles. The latter entails becoming learners in a new space, while at the same time, being lecturers trying to teach and maintain the integrity, accessibility and learning we have prided ourselves with providing in a physical space. Our online encounter has led to critical reflection and adaptation on many levels. This study highlights the reflection and adaptation of two academics teaching a scientific writing module,

covering their overlapping journeys as learners and as academics in the virtual space. It shares their formal and self-learning experiences and how these informed their pedagogical practices to cope with working in a new world. This study uses Rolfe *et al.*'s (2001) model of reflection and an adaption of SWOT analysis (Humphrey 2005) to discuss our personal reflections and pedagogical practices as academics and the measures taken to keep academic literacy alive, despite growing software assessment limitations, technical and time constraints. Rolfe *et al.*'s (2001) questions of "What?, So what? and, Now what?" guide this study of experiences encountered, the challenges faced, and the blended learning approach implemented to teach and assess academic writing in an on-line environment.

Keywords: academic writing, blended learning, online, pedagogical practices, reflection, virtual

Introduction

The onset of Covid-19 in South Africa and its impact on traditional tertiary teaching, resulted in many academics being forced to make quick and drastic changes to their pedagogical practices. This study presents by means of self-reflection and anecdotal evidence, the personal narratives and experiences of two such academics, forced to navigate through online learning in an effort to ensure they are able to cope, survive, grow and achieve their teaching and learning obligations of academic literacy. The focus on academics' responses to adjusting to an unprecedented way of being and doing in a new teaching and learning environment is likely to be shared and understood by university lecturers across various institutions locally and abroad.

Literature review

The Covid-19 pandemic and its consequential lockdown effects forced traditional, contact tertiary education institutions into online modes of teaching and learning. This changed the course of higher education and propelled some lecturers operating in traditional face-to-face classrooms, to enter the remote or distant digital e-learning space. A review of the literature reveals a proliferation of studies in higher education dealing with online learning experiences across countries, institutions, and disciplines. A study by Zalat *et al.* (2021) in an Egyptian university explored medical staff's perceptions, experiences and challenges of e-learning and factors influencing its acceptance and use as a teaching tool. In a local context, Maphalala and Adigun (2020) explored the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of academics with using e-learning to support teaching and learning at a South African university. Their study identified challenges such as a deficit in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure, erratic internet access, low levels of technical assistance and inadequate training opportunities that affected academics' morale and enthusiasm to create interactive content for virtual learning.

Sulaiman *et al.* (2019: 430) in their study of teachers' perceptions of assessment and alternative assessment in the classroom, concluded that "[to] assess students' knowledge and skills, teachers need to implement several assessment instruments such as writing, test, project, assignment, simulation, portfolio, journal, exhibition, observation, interview, oral exam, and peer evaluation." Many university lecturers restructured their assessment practices to accommodate the online platform, which meant that it was no longer 'business as usual'. Alvarez *et al.* (2009: 322) argue that "teaching and learning in virtual

environments imply making changes to the organization of teaching and, subsequently, a change in the teacher functions" and that "online teaching and learning requirements are not limited only to a set of knowledge and experience; the challenges a teacher faces are linked closely to the particularities of interacting and communicating online."

There is currently limited local research investigating the impact of Covid-19 directly on academic literacy. Mahyoob's (2020) research on the challenges of online learning, especially for university students with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at a university in Saudi Arabia, highlighted the difficulties in English language skills and other English courses such as writing, speaking and reading. One of Mahyoob's (2020) findings was students' lack of real English language practice with their teachers during virtual classes and this negatively affected the students' ability to learn English. As academics we were able to identify with such challenges as majority of our students are English Second Language (ESL) speakers. Lin *et al.* (2021) explored the quantitative and qualitative experiences and challenges associated with a blended English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in a course offered at a Taiwanese university. They allude to the uneven level of English proficiency within the class, which may cause some students to feel excluded and believe they are less capable than their peers. In addition, in developing and enhancing students' writing skills, there is the constant fear of students copying their work from the internet and not paraphrasing.

Methodology

This study is a personal reflection of the online teaching experiences of two academics who are the authors and participants in this study. To convey and capture our subjective narratives, we (the authors) engage

with the reader through the use of personal pronouns to reflect our own stories through our own voices. We are reflective academic practitioners and researchers who teach an academic literacy module called Communication in Science to first year students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Our combined lecturing experience spans 35 years. Data was obtained from our personal reflective journals and insights on online teaching. Data was accumulative and extended from March 2020 until September 2021. A qualitative descriptive research design was adopted for this study. Data was thematically coded to describe and address the research questions.

Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper's (2001) reflective model was used as a framework to explore our subjective experiences, guided by three key questions: *What?*; *So what?*; *Now what?* These questions provided the basis for describing our academic journey as we embarked in our new role as 'digital learners' and captured the nature of our sudden transition from a physical contact-learning space to virtual e-learning. The questions guided our experiences, emotions, struggles, challenges, changes and achievements. While this study presents our academic perspective, our response to students played a significant role in the way our journey was being shaped. The "*So what?*" question guided a deeper level of reflection as we learnt about ourselves - our relationships, thoughts, understanding and actions, and how we responded to and adjusted our pedagogical practices in a new world to ensure that learning objectives were achieved. The *Now what?* question served as a driving force for how we constantly reviewed our practices while adapting to new ways of teaching and learning.

Our reflective accounts are mapped against the theoretical framing of SWOT analysis (Humphrey 2005). We selected this framework alongside

Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper's (2001) reflective model because SWOT offered an opportunity to capture strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) in a new environment, whilst providing the opportunity to consider both internal and external factors. While the concept of a SWOT originated in a business context, it has since been used across a wide variety of disciplines, including higher education. Dampson *et al.* (2020) used SWOT to investigate users' perceptions of the Learning Management Systems (LMS) at a Ghanaian university. It was also used by Hightower *et al.* (2011) as a way of assessing the effectiveness of e-learning platforms and software by identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Studies have shown that once internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) are identified, strategies can be developed to improve strengths, eliminate weaknesses, benefit from opportunities and manage threats (Parker *et al.* 2013) which this study hopes to address.

Findings and discussion

What was our experience transitioning from face-to-face to online teaching?

Our teaching and learning experiences pre-Covid-19

Our personal narratives offer insight into our experiences and the pedagogical changes that characterised our teaching practices when we were thrust into the online teaching and e-learning platforms. Prior to Covid-19, we reflected, reviewed and revised our module content, outcomes, mode of delivery and assessment practices every semester. This was done in light of the changing student cohort, their progress and performance. By reflecting critically on our teaching methodology and student learning, we explored new ways of content delivery and

assessment practices. This was our way of measuring our learning outcomes which contributed to our professional growth and development.

Teaching academic literacy to first year students in groups of 130 was primarily conducted in the traditional face-to-face setting. Our interaction with technology could be considered limited prior to Covid-19, where we simply integrated digital media into the face-to-face classroom in the form of audio-visual aids (videos, computers, PowerPoint presentations, whiteboard, and overhead projectors). This aforementioned simplistic integration of technology was complemented with printed material and pen-and-paper for teaching and assessments. This was the status quo until the global pandemic arrived and fundamentally altered the traditional mode of university teaching and learning.

Our teaching and learning experiences during Covid-19

Online learning is defined as learning experiences in synchronous or asynchronous environments using different devices (e.g., mobile phones, laptops, etc.) with internet access (Singh and Thurman 2019) using video conferencing, Zoom, recorded lectures, webinars and Microsoft Teams. Our teaching approaches included the synchronous learning environment where students attended live online lectures, allowing for real-time interactions, with the potential of instant feedback. Despite our leaning towards real-time teaching, we were flexible and allowed for asynchronous learning environments where lecture content was made available beyond the 'live lecture' on different learning systems and forums. This was primarily due to students' own personal and educational constraints (network/device issues, time availability, geographical location, health issues and family

circumstances). The transition to online teaching and learning practices was, therefore, immensely challenging due to our digital unpreparedness, trepidation and the need to re-think teaching philosophy and pedagogy, and to revisit course content, outcomes and assessment. What worked well in the contact-teaching environment was suddenly not compatible with online teaching. There was no time to think of whether we were ready for change; change was imperative and there was no pause button. The need to adapt was urgent, critical and necessary and in order for adaption to take place reflection was key. Where previously, our reflection arose from student performance in assessments and their responses in our lectures and module evaluations, the new form of reflection was mainly focussed on us, our preparedness and competence to teach differently in a new changing space.

This need for reflective practice has been more critical during the switch to online learning platforms, a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdown measures. We started record keeping in journals. These were short personal and informal notes of our experiences; some of which arose from conversations with each other and colleagues in other disciplines. These conversations shone a light on how we could make significant changes to teaching online and learn from shared experiences. From the casual and formal engagements with our colleagues from different disciplines within the academic programme in which we teach, we found a common link. Each colleague might have been engaged in imparting knowledge in a unique discipline, but the anxieties and tensions of coping and adjusting to online teaching and lecturing were strikingly similar. We were constantly learning on various levels. Personally, we were becoming more aware of our emotional and mental states, and those of our

students, stemming from their frantic emails about their challenges in trying to cope and manoeuvre through online learning. We had an idea of their challenges but not having the physical contact with them to understand and help solve such challenges was distressing. Our interaction with students was largely confined to the digital and/or electronic space. As indicated in the journal entry of one of the authors (Snapshot 1), the digital screen can broadcast technology from any space, but the physical barrier is real.

These barriers impacted on us as well as our levels of control. On a personal level, we were also facing numerous challenges, more especially because we felt ill-prepared for online teaching. We attended all available webinars, seminars and short courses offered by our university in the hope of easing successfully into the digital realm. We ravenously digested the numerous wellness articles circulated by our human resources department in an effort to radiate positivity. We made the time to read up on how to de-stress, 'deskercise', sleep, breathe, meditate and laugh. We exchanged coping mechanism strategies with friends, family and colleagues to help with the rapid transitioning to a new teaching mode and the isolation from a comfortable shared physical working space that characterised our traditional tertiary careers. During the lockdown, with time, we became enthusiastic and confident in creating and recording PowerPoint lectures and narrations and it was not long thereafter that we were no more camera-shy! Zoom, skype and Microsoft Teams dominated our academic circles. However, it still felt like each of us was working in a bubble.

Professionally, we felt isolated, but also realised we were not alone; others within our department, university and in other institutions faced similar emotions. Usually in the traditional contact setting, we might

have chatted with a colleague, line manager or faculty officer with a query or idea. But with the move to online teaching, learning and engaging, we felt isolated at times - writing an email and a tap on the send button was certainly not real engagement, not if your query needed more discussion or interrogation which was previously so easily accomplished over a coffee in the faculty tea room. Working in isolation was not the only challenge.

Many of the challenges we faced were a consequence of us having to teach a literacy module using digital technology. It is only when we exchanged discussion on challenges with colleagues that we realised that teaching and testing language and literacies on a digital platform was stressful and academics whose courses were content-based had similar difficulties. We brainstormed how best to assess essay, report writing and multiple-choice questions (MCQs) without compromising institutional standards and quality. Snapshots 1 and 2 are a personal account of one of the author's roving emotions about grappling with new ways of teaching. Our shared ideas enabled us to empathise, encourage and assist each other as we traversed the unfamiliar territory of purely online teaching and learning practices. Mathew *et al.* (2017) describe reflective diaries and journals as strategies for qualitative enquiry. Continual dialogue about teaching is valuable in the mutually cooperative environment. Collaborating, sharing and discussing one's experience with peers allows one to reframe and broaden one's own theories of practice (Brookfield 1995). We adopted the approach of shared experiences, and in the process, we were able to learn valuable lessons about ourselves, how to face and overcome difficulties and improve our teaching and learning practices for students.

Snapshot 1 of my online space... my thoughts in my journey

The online space is a unique space, like outer space. I sit behind my screen, isolated from my colleagues where useful exchanges of pedagogical practices took place. Now, I have my new students in my module, students I've never seen, or heard. Also, much like me, they are hidden behind their screens isolated from their fellow students who new to campus seek comfort in numbers and can hide away from being seen or heard. You cannot see them or intervene like in a physical face-to-face space. I would say it is a space of learning.....of adapting ... and of evolving ... it is a world where in order to survive, you need to learn and not just learn but learn quickly. (2020)

Snapshot 2 of my online space ... my thoughts in my journal

The journey to outer space, unlike our experience, is one which involves a great deal of preparation, it takes time, it takes training, it takes mental stamina, and it takes the ability to adapt....to leave behind large spaces and travel in a confined space for a length of time. The move to online was also leaving behind the world as I knew it but it was so fast, I found myself no longer in control....the only certainty was uncertainty.....as far as planning went it was a watch and see, hear and go kind of approach.....waiting to hear from the powers that be ....what will be our next step....it was a stressful time. (2020)

Snapshot 1 was the author's feeling of alienation, confusion, discomfort and tension in the early period of being forced to change. Snapshot 2 can be viewed as a time of acceptance of one's new academic path. The shift in the author's thinking and narration is indicative of embracing change. The physical closure of universities albeit temporarily - with no

real indication of a period when 'normality' might return meant that traditional teaching and lecturing had to make way for novel and innovative ways of delivery, namely the radical, drastic change to online teaching for which we were totally unprepared.

SWOT analysis

The SWOT analysis in Figure 1 captures the emerging themes of our experiences, emotions, challenges and highlights.
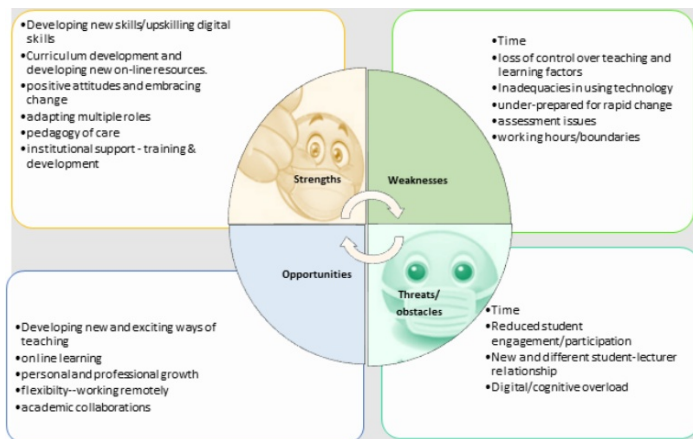
Figure 1: SWOT analysis of themes emerging from academics' reflective journals

Strengths

Fortunately, UKZN facilitated the transition to online learning by offering staff digital interventions, technical and educational support and training. Students also received a reasonable level of academic support, especially since many of them, like us, were unprepared for the digital space we found ourselves in. We eased students into this new teaching and learning space, and willingly demonstrated greater care to help them cope with and assimilate their learning; to navigate through the institutional online systems; and to achieve some measure

of academic success, despite the challenges. This pedagogy of care we demonstrated ties up with Noddings' (2012) ethics of care notion. From the perspective of care ethics, "the teacher as carer is interested in the expressed needs of the cared-for [student], not simply the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum as a prescribed course of study" (Noddings 2012: 772). As practitioners, we re-aligned our academic content and gradually inducted our students into the virtual space by means of scaffolded tasks that included digital literacy alongside academic literacy. This took the form of mock online quizzes, self-paced tests, videos, short writing pieces with feedback and guidance and the creation of chat spaces on Moodle, the university learning system.

The discourse in the academic scientific writing module is based on analysing texts from scientific journals, textbooks and reports. These are in print form and our traditional classroom spaces were spent deconstructing the content by means of skimming, scanning, highlighting, creating mind maps and annotations. Moving academic literacy tasks online meant moving our students to a visual platform and we found ourselves creating visual graphics, colour coded texts and images, and relying on YouTube videos, and hyperlinks. Google search became a reliable friend.

Weaknesses

Time, lack of control, and assessment issues

Adapting to the new digital world took time. So much was unchartered terrain. The preparation became more tedious, almost endless, especially because our traditional mode of teaching, explaining, questioning and engaging students did not apply as seamlessly. Our control and reach diminished and required more of and from us, i.e. our

time, energy and mind - as we constantly questioned: *How do I teach this differently? How do I adapt this for online teaching? How can I make it easier to understand and ensure learning occurs?* It was a journey of constantly questioning, evaluating, changing … a journey of learning, often through trial and error.

Online teaching is not without challenges. We spent extended periods at our 'home' work stations, resulting in a sense of functioning in isolation. Even our discipline and staff meetings seemed impersonal. Online teaching required more intense lesson preparation. While teaching practices required constant revision to suit the online mode and to assimilate students' varying learning styles; assessment practices needed to be secure to curb the risks of students cheating and copying. With time and as teaching online became the norm, we realised that cheating was a reality. We had to deal with inflated test scores on MCQs and short questions in quizzes, and heavily plagiarised essays. MCQs had no institutional software programmes at the start of the transition to deter or detect student cheating. Students who wrote online essays as a test task were able to plagiarise verbatim more easily via their own online search-copy-paste options on their devices as opposed to sit-down essay writing under the scrutiny of invigilators. We were forced to create short quizzes as assessment tasks, a test technique more suitable for content-driven modules rather than academic literacy. Where previously our sit-down quizzes allowed us to ask questions that required detailed answers, shorter quizzes meant greater reliance on one-word answers, with the major drawback of students having access to the internet for help with answers. We missed marking with our red pens and its age-old impact on students. The digital cross on an on-screen assessment lacked the impact of a cross and a scribbled comment with red ink. We had to then grapple with

devising measures to address these concerns and concluded that online teaching and assessments needed frequent amendment, exposure, and dialogue across modules, disciplines and the university.

Academic literacy courses normally have focused writing tasks. These are longer formal laboratory reports and scientific essays; and short paraphrasing, summarising, paragraphing and quantitative literacy tasks. Although these were achievable as online assessments, as were quizzes and MCQ tests, there was minimal focus on formal oral assessments. Oncu and Cakir (2011) noted that because of the lack of face-to-face interaction, informal assessment could be challenging for online instructors. In their study on e-learning challenges, Zalat *et al.* (2021) reported that 44.2% of their teaching staff found exams in an online course more difficult for students. Staff perception on this might be attributed to the fact that most of the online tests are based on MCQs that allow testing a large number of students quickly, and across a vast expanse of content than that permitted by essay questions. With the switch to online teaching, our feedback on essays became more technical than personal and the element of chatting with the student/s about strengths and weaknesses of their writing took a different form. Our students were encouraged to respond to marking-feedback sessions during online lectures and tutorials, but there was a sense of participant hesitancy more especially from students whose performance was poor. Online learning did not allow us to get to know our students as well as we do in contact sessions. On Zoom platforms, most of the students chose to speak without a video and many were not keen to be transparent about the difficulties they faced with their assessment task and the feedback they received.

In the traditional face-to-face teaching mode, student essays were physically hand marked with copious written feedback and allocation of

marks. This was followed by an interactive feedback session with students individually, in groups or as a class. However, the switch to online delivery meant that essays were computer-generated and electronically marked. This affected the emotional aspect from the marking-feedback experience. There was also absence of observational and physical participatory evaluations of students' writing in the physical classroom.

In our traditional classrooms, we encouraged student participation by using the approaches of group research projects and oral presentation, peer discussions, think-pair-share and questioning. By the end of the first trimester, we knew a number of our students by name. However, with online teaching, we coaxed and coerced students to participate and engage in lessons by creating chat and discussion forums but these were not used as diligently as hoped. Student Zoom attendance was sporadic, and students were not as vocal; there was a distinct and worrying lack of active involvement and response.

Threats: The lecturer-student relationship

The switch to online and calls to reach out to students meant that lecturer response and responsibility needed to be reconsidered. Equal access to online learning for all students became a priority and we were faced with a moral responsibility and obligation to ensure our students had equal and fair access to education, so that 'no student is left behind'. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2020) called for plans to save the 2020 academic year and emphasised adoption of the principle of 'no student gets left behind' to best facilitate online learning so that all students be given a fair opportunity. This entailed us offering extra and continuous support and we drew on our strengths of being caring and dedicated. We answered

emails throughout the day and often late into the night. We repeated lectures and delivered joint lectures so students could benefit from each lecturer's disciplinary strengths. We taught challenging sections repeatedly, using varying methods such as videos, audios, slides, narrations and mind maps. We uploaded numerous detailed files explaining and dealing with different sections or parts of an essay and uploaded sample essays with detailed comment boxes highlighting the *Do's* and *Don'ts* of writing an academic scientific essay. We helped students who registered late to catch up and offered multiple opportunities to access formative assessments.

Despite our own challenges of adapting to online teaching and juggling work and personal obligations, responsibility to our students often took precedence. In the unprecedented times of the pandemic, we donned more hats - overnight, we became counsellors, academic advisors, IT specialists, administrators, mentors and virtual on-screen presenters. We found ourselves investing more time assisting students, answering endless email queries and re-teaching content. These are some of the adaptations and strengths that we developed in the face of the pandemic and grew as 'digital learners' on a personal and professional level. While we were adding to our repertoire of learned abilities (in our learner mode), at the same time the very things we were learning and caring about, also became a threat to our personal space. The boundaries between work and home became blurred as work stretched beyond normal work hours, encroached on our family time and responsibilities and lead to mental fatigue. Balancing work and personal family time amidst anxiety and fear about the pandemic was a nightmare.

Reduced student engagement/participation

As practitioners with a history of teaching in traditional contact university contexts, teaching virtually meant that every lesson and assessment required detailed analysis to determine whether the mode of delivery was successful and aligned to lesson outcomes. The reflective practice we were accustomed to needed revision to suit the remote online teaching mode. One such example is where we taught a section on composing a scientific report on an experiment using yeast to aid fermentation. In the absence of a physical laboratory, we conducted the experiment in our kitchens and uploaded the home-made video. Where possible, students could replicate the experiment at home. In the absence of our watchful eye, we had to assume the students were both accurate and critical of how they conducted the experiment. In the absence of students having done the experiment, the method section of the report would have to be factually correct. So, this meant revising learning goals to suit the online mode.

Formative and summative assessments were constantly under review to ensure validity and maintain academic integrity. There were additional factors linked to student participation and response to virtual teaching and learning. These were students' personal experiences (health, home-workspace, Covid-19 impact on family, finance) and national concerns (digital divide, power outages and network connectivity). A study conducted by Landa *et al.* (2021) highlights the challenges with access to online teaching, learning platforms and resources for students from poor rural communities in South Africa. Our students can identify with many of these factors.

We were committed to assist students, but the absence of human contact made the engagement and interaction unnatural. After the first

semester, many students who chose not to use the video option in virtual lectures continued to remain faceless. The disconnectedness created by online modalities has been widely experienced at other institutions. Feldman's (2020) study at a South African university illustrates the need for connectivity and human interaction that moves beyond the systemic organisation of the institution. Similarly, Visser and Law-van Wyk (2021) conducted a study at a South African university and reported students' difficulty adjusting academically and feeling socially isolated three months into the Covid-19 lockdown. This, in all likelihood, would have escalated with the extended lockdown periods.

Opportunities

What did we learn from the situation?

The experience of online or remote teaching illustrated the significance of ongoing reflexive practice and creativity. It heightened the need to collaborate and stay connected and to focus on one's mental and physical wellbeing. As academics we learnt that the online teaching space required navigation, adjustment, hard work and evolution. We learnt that just as we were "somewhat newcomers" to the digital field, so too were our students. The online teaching space is not an easy option especially for students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds with limited exposure to the digital world, challenging personal learning constraints, and technological and infrastructural obstacles. We had very little knowledge of the extent of our students' digital literacy. With the surge in the pandemic across South Africa in early February 2021, the closure of tertiary institutions and the strict national lockdown, we were deprived of physical interaction with our students on campus. Like us, our students were thrust into an e-learning domain, for which they were ill-equipped or wholly

unprepared. On one hand, majority of the students needed more time, space and experience to navigate online learning. On the other hand, online platforms gave students' exposure to and engagement with digital technology and the option of real-time and self-paced learning.

Our teaching and learning practices need to be fluid and open to change. Social media platforms which students indulge in, like WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook have gained popularity as academic tools and can be utilised alongside university-wide learning platforms (Moodle, Google classroom, Microsoft Teams and Kaltura). ICT, e-learning and digital/online learning can enhance higher education learning. Academics can integrate these resources with social media platforms and together with face-to-face interaction offer knowledge using the blended learning approach. Using innovative and creative online technology to facilitate teaching and learning can work alongside traditional teaching approaches. After the initial anxiety and hesitancy of online teaching, the benefits of the creative blended learning classroom have become a viable option, especially in light of the 4th industrial revolution. With blended learning, students can acquire knowledge according to their personal pace, needs and interests.

Students need to also take charge of their own learning. As a way of developing student independence in an online space, we varied our pedagogical approaches and assessment practices to allow for greater student involvement in their learning. In the first semester, our response to students in the development of academic literacy was intensively supportive and nurturing especially because of the adjustment to online delivery. However, in the second semester as students displayed competence with online learning, we gradually

withdrew the support. Dialogic collaboration among colleagues within and across disciplines was useful for academics grappling with online platforms as a teaching/learning tool.

The way forward

Like in the fantasy film Wizard of Oz, we are all on the yellow brick road searching for answers. Introspection and reflection help us on the path to exploring, learning and navigating through this new terrain. Researching, sharing and collaborating are key in improving the teaching and learning experience for both students and ourselves. For those of us resistant to change, the pandemic forced us to adapt or be left behind.

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CHAPTER 4

Online engagement with students during a pandemic: lessons learned in first-year mega psychology classes

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Abstract

In 2020, soon after meeting our first-year students in class, the pandemic obliged us to think of learning and teaching in different ways. As a team of lecturers from three different campuses in an aligned module, we collaborated to use what we had learned before the pandemic to aid us in the online learning and teaching environment, but it was not sufficient. We needed new skills, perspectives, approaches, and technologies to engage the very large ("mega") classes we teach online, so we attended many professional learning opportunities. We aimed to create quality assessments, maintain effective communication, and foster an ethic of care, while not leaving any student behind. Using Lebrun's pragmatic learning model, we started developing an environment that offered engagement, support, scaffolding, and personalised learning, while also making provision for

different ways of learning and personal circumstances. Using feedback from students, we continuously improved our approach. It has been a period of professional learning and continuous development for us as a lecturer team to upskill and remain relevant. We have learned that a properly constructed and aligned learning environment is crucial for learning. This professional learning will enable us to craft our future plans to manage mega classes in a blended way. Going forward, we will have tools in our toolkits to create an optimum hyflex/blended learning space for students at the North-West University. We will continue to use technology to create an online space conducive for engagement, interaction, and reflection, but also plan in-person face-to-face sessions in a very different way than before. This will be done to facilitate more discussions and application, making psychology relevant to the South African student.

Keywords: mega class, psychology students, online engagement, professional learning, pragmatic learning model

Introduction and background

The number of students interested in studying psychology increases annually at the North-West University. Students registered for the PSYC111 module (Introduction to psychology) increased by 25% from 2180 students in 2018 to 2734 students in 2020. In person face-to-face interactions involved more than twenty scheduled class times across three campuses, with only three lecturers, making this a challenging module. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, we had already started to move to a more blended approach by building online lessons and content to use with our students, including additional elements such as YouTube videos, journal/newspaper articles, infographics, and sound clips. We also relied on resources made available by the publisher of

the textbook, to aid our face-to-face efforts. We built this with the idea of having it readily available to students outside of class time, or when they needed to refer to something before an assessment.

We were excited to meet the new first years in 2020 and introduced them to online activities and functions on our Learning Management System (LMS). We continually had to offer additional support and guidance to the students in order to help them understand the LMS and online activities. Five weeks into the semester, South Africa went into a national lockdown (Insession 2020; SAnews 2020), having declared a national state of disaster on 15 March 2020, and life as we knew it would change for 21 days. Students vacated their dorms to go on an early recess and lecturers and support staff had to move the required items from their offices to their homes to enable them to effectively function in an emergency remote online learning and teaching environment (Kgwadi 2020a: para. 6 line 2). Little did we know the national lockdown would last for more than 21 days.

Although engaging with students during remote online learning and teaching has been a challenging journey, it also brought valuable growth, insight, learning, and development. In this chapter, we will share our reflection on our journey of professional learning using the critical reflection process of the 'What, so what and now what' as explained by Rolfe *et al.* (2001), while also showing how we used theory to guide our online engagement practices. The 'what' refers to the changed teaching context; the 'so what' refers to what we did to adapt, change, and improve and the 'now what' refers to lessons learned and where to go from here.

Teaching context (the 'What')

In an instant, the teaching context as we knew it, changed. Emails, Skype, Zoom meetings, webinars, training opportunities, and talks between the University Management Committee and relevant members of every faculty, seemed to be never-ending. Panicked parents and students phoned and emailed to get answers to questions that we did not have the answers to. The university released weekly updates to staff and students alike, to help them make sense of the emergency online learning and teaching process that would follow (Balfour 2020: para. 1 line 1; Kgwadi 2020b: para. 2 line 1).

Realising that we could no longer afford to have only a part of our content available online for the students, the lecturer team met daily. It was no small feat to have to adapt and change strategies almost instantaneously. We each brought our ideas and skills to the larger group. We relied heavily on one another's strengths and created the online content necessary to help students make sense of the work systematically and logically. Lebrun's model guided us, as discussed in the following section. Lecturers and students alike had little time to prepare for emergency remote online learning and teaching; and what was possible in the short time is in no way reflective of the usual online courses, but rather it shows the important aspects that are brought about with a sudden change in modality (Engelhardt *et al.* 2021: 3). Through this, we learned to adapt, change, and improve our strategies.

Adapt, change, improve (the 'So what')

In developing the online content and learning environment, we were guided by literature. Although different learning theories could have assisted us with understanding learning, these theories seldom offer a holistic and practical guide to designing learning and learning

environments. With his pragmatic learning model, Marcel Lebrun (2007), using Biggs' (1996) constructive alignment as basis, bridged the gap between theory and practice. He made provision for the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) which has become an integral part of our learning and teaching context across South Africa. Lebrun's model suggests that learning activities should be aligned with the teaching method, the assessment, the objectives, and the tools used. This is illustrated in Figure 1.
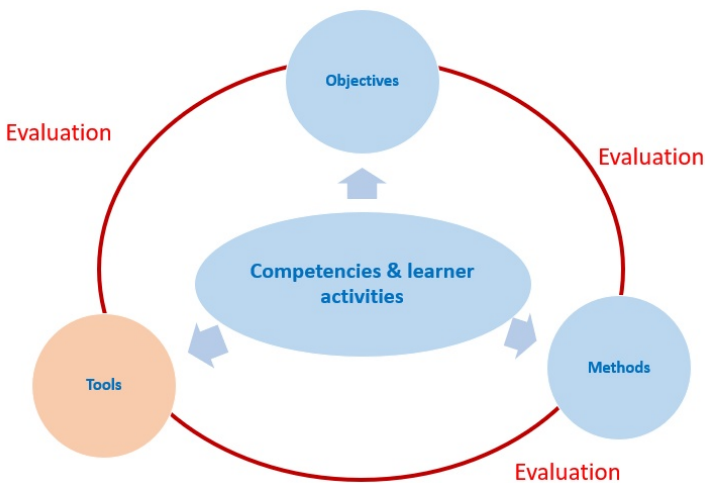
Figure 1: Constructive alignment (Lebrun 2007: 117)

In this alignment (Figure 1), the objectives to be reached and pedagogical methods used, should be aligned with appropriate tools to foster student learning and enable the student to develop competencies (Lebrun 2007). Building on this constructive alignment, Lebrun's model includes 5 important aspects: 1) the *information* provided to students, 2) the *motivation* to get involved in 3) *activities*,

and then 4) *interactive* engagement that leads to the 5) *production* of knowledge. This is also known as the IMAIP model, "I'M An Innovative Professor" model (Lebrun 2007: 120). As shown in Figure 2, this is a continuous loop of input, process, output in the learning process and many theorists' concepts can be implicated in this process. In addition, Lebrun emphasised the importance of the specific context of the learning (Lebrun 2011: 7).
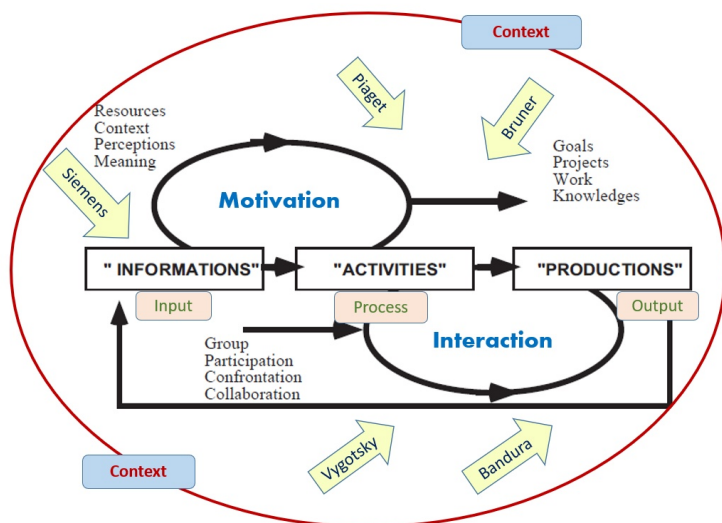
Figure 2: Adapted from Lebrun's pragmatic pentagonal learning model (2007: 120)

Using this model as a framework, we started adapting our learning and teaching experience to be fully online in April 2020. We created content online, varying between text, video, audio, images, and diagrams aiming for a multimodal learning experience (Bouchey *et al.* 2021: 35-54). The comprehensive lessons on the LMS took students through the content step by step, and outcome by outcome. We made sure to create activities throughout to encourage students to engage with the

information that will help them to achieve the outcomes. They also had the liberty to do this at their own pace within a given period. Students were required to complete in-lesson activities (multiple-choice questions or reflection questions) before they moved on to the next study unit.

We kept in mind that the tools, methods, and assessments needed to be in line with the objectives/outcomes. Even in choosing tools to use, we asked ourselves whether it was adding value to the students' learning or just adding work to keep students 'busy'. We also realised that we did not know all there is to know about the LMS or using online tools effectively. This is also in line with the findings of O'Keefe *et al.* (2020: 2) that educators and instructors need help in understanding and developing effective high-quality online instruction.

We were always aware of the 'context.' We knew that most students initially only had a smartphone to engage in learning, so we needed to ensure that information was accessible and mobile-friendly. In addition, students did not necessarily have data in the beginning, therefore the LMS being zero-rated for most cell phone carriers gave us peace of mind that all students would be able to access the content (Kgwadi 2020c: para. 4 line 2). Later, the university provided data packages to students for learning, and we were able to use external tools, like Flashcards, which helped students master the concepts. We enhanced the quality of the assessments and promoted academic integrity by making use of test banks and randomisation.

To ensure that we did not overwhelm students, we made tutorial videos explaining how to approach online learning, where to find information and indicated what we expected. What we found to be important was frequent, clear communication with students, not only to make sure

that they were on track, but also to motivate, encourage and support them. At first, the interactions and engagements were challenging. Engaging students through technology is different from engaging in contact, face-to-face sessions (Means and Neisler 2021: 23) and we had to adapt our methods. Students did not have data or devices to allow for live online sessions (e.g., on a platform like Zoom). We could only have asynchronous interaction. This was identified as a non-engagement factor (O'Brien and Toms 2008) and limited student engagement via the LMS. By 2021, we realised from students' feedback that there was a need for more interaction and a means to engage with the lecturers and ask questions directly. We subsequently started a weekly live 'question & answer' session on Zoom to allow for this interaction and student engagement. These sessions were recorded and shared on the LMS so that those students who could not attend, could watch them. In addition, we took time in the weekly 'question & answer' sessions to show our commitment and support, bringing in the warmer human element as opposed to the colder screens of online learning.

We constructed the assessment plan in a way that allowed for sufficient scaffolding. Doo *et al.* (2020: 69) found that scaffolding led to improved learning outcomes when compared to learning outcomes where no scaffolding was present. Being first-year students, they were overwhelmed by the workload and the stress of the pandemic made it more challenging. Students had the opportunity to do small engagement activities for learning, including reflective tasks, before engaging in bigger quizzes on the same content and eventually the bigger tests. Students could use the learning platform to help them better understand the content and retain the knowledge for future use (Saye and Brush 2002). Additional support was offered through means

of Supplemental Instruction (SI) sessions where students could ask questions to facilitators regarding the content they did not understand or aspects that were unclear to them.

SI played a vital role in assisting students achieve the learning outcomes. Numerous studies have found that SI is valuable in student experience and performance, especially in large classes (Adebola *et al.* 2020; Bowman *et al.* 2021; Erasmus 2017). This proved to be even more so in these times with no personal contact with lecturers and peers in class. The idea was that the SI leaders, senior students who have completed the module, facilitated smaller groups in which the content was discussed and explained. This too had to move online. At first, it mostly happened on platforms like Telegram and WhatsApp, but later Zoom or Google Hangout, etc. were incorporated. Lecturers had weekly check-ins with these SIs to assist and guide them in this new model. Based on feedback from students, SIs helped, not only with the content but also with the adaptation and motivation during the trying times. The SIs themselves also developed additional skills through this experience.

In terms of support on a smaller, more individual scale, it was important to provide students with adequate support opportunities. The feedback from students echoed what Al-Kumaim *et al.* (2021: 6) and Kalman *et al.* (2020: 3355) found in their studies. Students struggled to adapt to the new way of learning. They experienced work – and information overload and had personal challenges such as insufficient data, connectivity problems, non-conducive learning environments, mental health problems, and/or pressure from family while learning from home. As Adams *et al.* (2021: 7) suggested, we learned in this period that caring for students goes beyond understanding their

difficult circumstances. It also included the effort that went into providing the module content in a better way, the scaffolded assessment, the communication plan, and the overall institutional and managerial support. In addition to creating quick links on the LMS site to support pages offered by the university, we also created "TUF": The Ultimate Fighter Toolkit that provided tips on online learning and ways to stay motivated, which was also suggested later in the work of O'Keefe *et al.* (2020: 9). Despite these efforts, we still heard sad stories, for example, students not owning an appropriate smartphone and having to borrow one from a neighbour for a few hours a day to study, or a student sharing a three-room shack with nine family members and struggling to focus on studies. These types of stories necessitated the adoption of an ethic of care in supporting our students.

As part of the university's commitment to an ethic of care (North-West University 2019), no students were to be left behind. We therefore had to identify at-risk students using the available information. At-risk students can be defined as students who are likely to fail or have not had the opportunity to engage with online learning, due to various contextual factors. Monitoring the frequency of students' logging in to the LMS, and their progress in completing assessments, we were able to determine which students were at-risk and we reached out to them using email. We extended an invite to them to explain why they were unable to complete the work or why they had not been engaging with content. Being guided by theory and feedback from our students helped us to create a more engaging online environment that would lead to better student well-being and success. It also forced us to reflect on our own learning and teaching approaches.

Reflection

Professional learning and growth were inevitable. The pandemic forced each of us to change the way we saw learning, teaching, and student engagement. One author with over 10 years of experience reflected that the sudden move to online teaching was overwhelming. Similarly, the second author realised he needed professional learning to adapt. The third author who just started his lecturing career was faced with the curveball of online-teaching instead of in-person teaching. This sudden change challenged us to continuously re-evaluate how we see learning and teaching, student engagement, assessment, and support.

We formed a collegial bond as a module team, and this created an unseen benefit during these challenging times. At the onset of the pandemic, the two more experienced authors attended multiple webinars, workshops, and colloquiums to improve their ability to engage students using the LMS and to improve their technical skills. They then upskilled the third author when he joined the team. This enabled us to use our skills, strengths, and experience to assist one another, grow and develop an engaging learning and teaching environment.

Through our reflections we learned about the importance of student feedback and how understanding their socio-environmental and personal factors can contribute to quality learning experiences and student engagement. By enabling students to have a voice, they were active participants in their learning, and they had the opportunity to engage not only with the content but also with the lecturers and their classmates. This feedback and engagement helped us grow and see where we could improve and provide further support. In this way, our critical reflections allowed us to form a mutual understanding that

working together as a module team, continuously attending professional learning opportunities, and allowing students to be active participants in their learning created a positive online environment that enabled engagement within a mega class, while also promoting student well-being.

Our reflections are supported by the newly suggested model of Al-Kumaim *et al.* (2021) which proposes an integrated conceptual model in teaching practice that focuses on students' sustainable well-being by incorporating personal factors (self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-regulation), technical factors (digital literacy, appealing design, and mobile interactive design) and socio-environmental factors (family support, university support, and emotional engagement) (2021: 11). The use of scaffolding assisted in improving students' self-efficacy. It also assisted in improving self-regulation and self-determination by allowing students to be autonomous and take responsibility for their own learning. The use of online interactive methods such as engaging in-lesson activities and a well-structured LMS assisted students in developing sufficient digital literacy for the module. By adopting an ethic of care, we were able to identify at-risk students and provide them with the necessary information and guidance on university support structures available to them, in this way engaging with them on an emotional level.

Lessons for the future (the 'Now what')

In the critical reflection process, as explained by Rolfe *et al.* (2001), it is important to get to the 'now what' - focusing on how this experience and what we have learned will influence future practices. As Hattie (2021: 14) argues, this experience of instruction during the Covid-19 era, has evidence of aspects that went well and afforded us to rethink and

let go of certain practices that we might have been stuck in. Going forward, we will have tools to create an optimum hyflex/blended learning space for students at the NWU. We will continue to use technology where appropriate, create an online space conducive for engagement, interaction, and reflection, but also plan in-person face-to-face sessions in innovative ways. In this way, we will create a blended, hyflex learning environment (Joosten *et al.* 2021: 17).

One element that has been complicated to implement in psychology undergraduate classes, even before the pandemic, was sufficient time to apply the theory to real life. Long hours are spent in class covering the content and theories resulting in real-life applications lagging. We believe that by effectively using the online space, the in-person face-to-face classes we conduct in the future could be better used to connect theory to practice. Creating a space for students to share their lived experiences would foster a sense of community amongst the class, as discussed by Means and Neisler (2021: 10). Instead of using valuable time with students to repeat content, we will be able to create an improved flipped-classroom approach for optimal learning.

In this chapter, we shared our journey of teaching a mega class during the pandemic, and how engaging in reflective practices assisted us to develop professionally as well as personally. Deeper connections made with colleagues during this time will play a positive role in future collaborations. We no longer function in silos struggling to create learning tasks and assessments, but we have people that we feel at ease with to turn to for help and guidance when necessary. It took a pandemic to help us get back to the basics - building quality relationships with students and colleagues alike! We developed skills to use ICT to reach individual students in mega classes and allowed

students to work through content at their own pace using different approaches to learning. We have learned that a properly constructed and aligned learning environment is crucial for learning.

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CHAPTER 5

Reflections from implementing a faculty strategy for academic professional learning during a global pandemic

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Abstract

Joining a new institution is challenging; doing so eight weeks before the advent of a pandemic was extremely challenging. Two new online learning specialists, together with the support of their manager, in a faculty's Teaching and Learning Centre at a South African university, reflect upon personal experiences that highlight the challenges and affordances of supporting professional learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The two online learning specialists had to establish personal relationships with each other, their manager and the broader institutional community, in addition to building networks with the academics they needed to support. The faculty team had to work with the central support unit, as well as with faculty teams in other faculties to support academics in their transition to remote teaching and learning. Adopting an ethic of care philosophy, the team conceptualised

and implemented various professional learning interventions for academics, while they themselves grew accustomed to the faculty and institution. In a short space of time, many academics in the faculty and institution looked at the team for advice, guidance and reassurance. Fortuitously, the period enabled the team to form/join support networks and communities of practice, both within the faculty and the institution. These experiences laid the foundation for a faculty support strategy for the future, and the design of short courses to further support the professional learning of academics and their capacity to develop and implement pedagogically sound blended and online offerings.

Keywords: academic development; ethic of care; online learning; professional learning; reflective practice

Introduction

In this chapter we reflect on our experiences of supporting academic professional learning during the South African lockdown at the end of March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. We are three staff members from the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (CLM) Teaching and Learning Centre who were required to support academics to transition to what became known as Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL) (Hodges *et al.* 2020). While a long-standing staff member at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), the Head of the CLM Teaching and Learning Centre (Author 2) had been appointed to this position less than a year before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, two online learning specialist posts were created in 2019 for establishing the CLM Online Learning and Teaching (COLT) Unit within the Centre. The motivation for creating these posts stemmed from the institutional strategic objective to expand online and blended

learning within the institution, particularly with the faculty launching fully online programmes. Consequently, one online learning specialist joined the faculty in January 2020 and the other joined in February 2020. Little did the faculty know how fortuitous these appointments would prove to be during the rapid transition to ERTL, going far beyond the initial focus on the expansion of online offerings within CLM.

By the time the university campuses had been closed and the country's first lockdown started in March 2020, the three of us had barely become acquainted. An urgent priority became finding ways to work together to prepare academics to resume the academic project within less than a month from the date when lockdown began. The faculty traditionally relied on professional learning from the central institutional teaching and learning unit, so the availability of faculty-based professional learning support was novel for all involved. Using the ethic of care as a theoretical framework and adopting a critical reflection methodology, we individually share reflections of our experiences during ERTL and what we learned from these experiences. Collectively, we then reflect on how this has influenced our practice and what can be done to improve future outcomes.

Theoretical framework and methodology

In this chapter, we draw on the work of both Noddings (1988; 2012) and Tronto (2005) about the ethic of care. Noddings' (1988; 2012) perspective of the ethic of care is used as a lens for our approach to the professional learning of faculty academics during ERTL. Tronto's (2005) dimensions of an ethic of care is used to consider the support provided by the manager to the two online learning specialists in the team during the same time. Noddings (1988; 2012) emphasises that adopting an ethic of care perspective recognises the relationship between

teachers and students (or academics and academic support staff). It involves "listening, dialogue, critical thinking, reflective response, and making thoughtful connections among the disciplines and to life itself" (Noddings 2012: 771). Correspondingly, Noddings (1988) proposed a model of moral education consisting of: modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. For example, a teacher can *model* caring through adopting a broader or more holistic perspective than just academic achievement. Teachers can model ways of engaging in intellectual activities and ways of interacting with others. Teachers can encourage open *dialogue* that supports the development of trust and caring relations. Similarly, teachers can enable caring *practice* that creates opportunities to practice learning in a safe space, interact with other students and reflect upon learnings. Finally, teachers can practice *confirmation*, which affirms students through knowing them, developing trust and encouraging "responsible self-affirmation" (Noddings 1988: 222).

Similarly, Tronto (2005) identifies four dimensions to practicing an ethic of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. First, an *attentive* carer is aware of the needs of the cared-for, which is necessary to be able to provide care (Tronto 2005: 252-253). Second, a *responsible* carer assumes responsibility for the cared-for (i.e., taking the caring upon themselves), without which care would likely not manifest (Tronto 2005: 253-254). Thirdly, a *competent* carer is equipped with the relevant skills and abilities to provide the required care to care-receivers (Tronto 2005: 254-255). Lastly, care-receivers must be *responsive* to the care provided to be able to reap the benefits of that care (Tronto 2005: 255-256).

To guide the writing and analysis of our reflections, we adopt the critical reflection approach proposed by Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper

(2001). This consists of three stages of reflection: "What?," "So what?" and "Now what?." The "What" focuses on the problem or situation and the roles various stakeholders assumed. The "So what" focuses on the lessons learned from the situation and the associated broader issues, by linking theory and practice. Finally, the "Now what" focuses on what needs to be done to resolve or improve the situation and the broader consequences for future practice (Rolfe *et al.* 2001). Each of us used this reflective approach to "free write" about our experiences in supporting academics during the transition to ERTL. Our reflections are shared individually in the next two sections (the "What?" and "So what?"), followed by the final section (the "Now what?"), where we explore lessons learned and the impact of these lessons on future practice.

Reflections of Supporting Academics to Transition to ERTL ("What?")

Guiding two new team members in developing strategies for academic professional learning during ERTL (Author 2)

The biggest challenge for me was not so much getting to know the team members, but to support and guide them through the process of rapidly upskilling CLM academics for ERTL. My role was to co-strategise, provide support to the team, encourage and guide them where needed, and help with logistics and communication. This was not always easy owing to the sudden move to remote working, a lack of guidelines or exemplars for supporting new staff members to become accustomed to a new working environment during a global health emergency, and the fact that all three of us were still getting to know one another. I was acutely aware of the continuous pressure under which the team was working. They had to keep abreast with emerging developments regarding ERTL, develop and adapt resources for the CLM context, while they themselves were still getting to know me, one another, and the

faculty. They spent many nights and weekends preparing for daily webinars dedicated to the upskilling of CLM academics, all while dealing with the uncertainties of the pandemic and its impact on their lives and the lives of their families and loved ones. I was concerned about their personal wellbeing under pressured circumstances, the impact of social isolation on their mental health, and the increased risk of burnout (Gewin 2021) they were being exposed to as a result of this all. I felt a deep sense of responsibility to help in whatever way I could, both with the work that needed to be done, as well as providing collegial and emotional support during this period of immense disruption. Ultimately, the aim was to foster a sense of unity among the three of us and help them, where possible, to aid CLM academics with the rapid shift to ERTL.

Finding ways to manage the support required for academics to transition to ERTL (Author 1)

With the sudden transition to ERTL, there was limited time for planning and innumerable uncertainties to contend with. I just had to put my head down and do what I could to help others. I think being able to focus on work helped me to cope with some of the challenges associated with Covid-19. As a team, before university campuses were shut down, we had a few brainstorming sessions to discuss what knowledge and skills academics would need to be able to make the transition to ERTL and what professional learning opportunities we could offer. We quickly realised that in a faculty with hundreds of academics, we could not develop or offer everything that was needed in such a short timeframe. So, we purposefully adopted the approach of trying to reuse or adapt existing resources, where possible, such as Open Educational Resources (OERs) being made available by

universities and individuals in different countries. Using an ethic of care perspective and drawing from my own experiences, I tried to model good online learning and teaching practices. We created a support site on the institutional Learning Management System (LMS) and launched a series of webinars. We also made the conscious decision to use the support services and resources offered in the rest of the university, such as the institutional Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development (CLTD) and other faculty teaching and learning units. Being new to the university, we had met a few of the people in these teams before, but many people were unfamiliar to us (and we were unfamiliar to them). We liaised with those we knew and used their networks to reach out to others over time. We shared and pooled the resources that had been developed and invited CLM academics to the webinars from various other units that covered different topics.

Relying on experience to deal with the challenges associated with ERTL (Author 3)

Having worked for fifteen years in online teaching and learning as an LMS administrator, instructional designer and facilitator, I felt quite at home during the sudden move to ERTL that occurred at the start of the lockdown in South Africa. I had worked in a variety of situations under pressure that required quick thinking and a rapid response. These made the ERTL situation feel very much like 'business as usual.' Those situations, which required me to adapt quickly, find solutions to the various issues at hand and act swiftly stood me in good stead. It was the first time, in a long time, where I was finally able to use my experience and skills in a particularly practical, useful and purposeful way. Having said that, I was also acutely aware of the enormity of the challenge ahead of us. We had to reach and assist hundreds of

academics in a limited space of time. It was obvious, given the constraints at the time, that the only way to accomplish this was to do a series of short training sessions (webinars) via Microsoft Teams, supplemented by remote system and pedagogical support where possible. It was particularly encouraging that a large number of academics attended each session and that these academics were from a range of different faculties in the institution. Nevertheless, although our reach was far greater than one would have expected at our institution, I knew that there was a veritable "black hole" into which some of the academics in our own faculty had disappeared. They, and their students, were the ones that I was most concerned about.

Lessons learned from Supporting Academics to Transition to ERTL ("So what?")

Lessons learned from supporting the team using an ethic of care perspective (Author 2)

I feel that I demonstrated *attentiveness* by carefully listening to the needs expressed by the team, whether for information, to help garner input or advice, or to distribute correspondence. I also tried to create a sense of support and empathy through this *attentiveness*, which in time aided with the collegial bonds that would form among the three of us during this time. Drawing on Tronto's (2005) second dimension, I feel I demonstrated *responsibility*, as I was acutely aware of the pressure the team was under and felt an urgent need to provide support in whatever way I could. Moreover, I acted on this sense of responsibility by meeting with them frequently and offering help where needed. I believe I possess the *competence* required to provide care in the way Tronto (2005) describes it, as I worked as an Academic Advisor for approximately five years prior to becoming Head of the CLM T&L Centre.

That role aided me to develop and refine the requisite skills and abilities to care for others, which is what I drew on during ERTL to provide support to the team. Lastly, regarding the *responsiveness* dimension of an ethic of care as described by Tronto (2005), both the team members and I were implicitly and mutually responsive to one another, with them taking on board the support I offered to provide, and me being responsive to their expressed needs.

Lessons learned from the strategies adopted for supporting academics in ERTL (Author 1)

During the Covid-19 disruption we had to operate under unprecedented levels of uncertainty, which required a great deal of flexibility. It also required an awareness of what you can do and what you cannot do in these circumstances. Adopting an approach of utilising resources from elsewhere and relying on support services and resources created in other parts of the university, freed up our time to be able to concentrate on what we had to do and the resources we had to develop ourselves. It also helped us avoid working ourselves to exhaustion and exceeding our human capabilities during those initial weeks and months of the pandemic. Although we were incredibly busy and the first half of 2020 was an incredibly stressful time, we were still able to manage the situation to the best of our abilities in those circumstances. Feedback from academics indicated that many appreciated our availability to support them during this time. The experience also forced us to find ways of communicating and collaborating remotely. As a team, we met regularly to discuss our progress, plan for what needs to happen next and share information. As we were still new to the university and our positions, we were still in the process of "forming" when the pandemic affected us. It meant that

trust had to be established quite rapidly for us to support each other through the experience. My evaluation is that promoting the values of openness and sharing, as well as demonstrating that "we cared," enabled us to better support CLM academics during the crisis.

Lessons learned from supporting academics and the lack of engagement from some academics (Author 3)

Many academics felt that they would not need to do more than conduct synchronous lecture sessions and upload their lecture notes and slides to the LMS, without giving any further instructions, support or guidance to their students. The academics who had attended our online sessions and signed up to our online toolkit site (created to provide "just-in-time" help, videos, and documentation) had at least some idea of how to approach the situation. However, there were some academics who did not attend the synchronous training sessions and who never contacted us for help and support. These academics, their courses and their students are what concerned me the most, as we were not able to establish dialogue with them. Short-staffed as we were, there was no time to identify and reach out to academics who were not engaging with us or to undertake an audit of the existing LMS course sites in the faculty. Looking forward, the question becomes "How do we reach those academics who see an LMS as just another form of Dropbox or Google Drive, and who do not see the need to take a carefully considered approach in the online teaching environment?"

Future directions: Professional learning for academics ("Now What?")

This section highlights the collective lessons learned from the individual reflections, both for improving future support for academic professional learning and supporting new staff during a disruption.

The need for continuous learning

The rapid transition to ERTL necessitated the three of us to find solutions to unprecedented problems and required new and alternative approaches to professional learning and staff support in constrained circumstances. While this period undoubtedly placed huge demands on both staff and students, it was also a steep learning curve for each of us. It compelled us to reflect on our experiences regularly, in order to adapt and refine approaches and the resources provided to academics. This formed part of the continuous learning mind-set we had to adopt, owing to rapidly changing contexts as new information about the pandemic and approaches to ERTL became available. Consequently, adopting an ethic of care perspective to guide our actions during this time, helped us to think holistically about the support needs of the academics we worked with. Quite positively, this experience has resulted in novel and responsive ways of approaching professional learning for academic staff in CLM, which continues to benefit CLM academics as we move beyond ERTL towards more authentic blended and online pedagogies.

Extending the reach of academic professional learning

As we shift beyond ERTL, we need to find a way to extend our reach within the faculty in terms of upskilling academics in the use of technology in and for teaching. The conundrum is how to do this without being prescriptive or coming across as too forceful. The reality is that both online and blended learning will continue to be a reality for many educators for the foreseeable future, and there are approaches and skills that can be of benefit to both academics and their students. In this light, we will need to develop a gentle but persuasive approach to the introduction of blended learning in CLM that will enable us to

reach more academics than only those with an interest in online and/or blended spaces. Using an ethic of care motivates us to consider the support needs of academics holistically, rather than considering their pedagogical, technological and emotional support needs in isolation. As we transition beyond ERTL, we have adopted a different approach to staff professional learning in the faculty. Instead of the webinar strategy which was followed during ERTL, the team is developing and offering a series of short courses for this purpose. We believe this will help us build better relationships with academics and support them to make informed and meaningful choices about how they teach and incorporate technology in their course design, as promoted by Mihai (2021).

Forming team bonds to promote cooperation

For us, having to deal with the experience of the disruption enabled the rapid development of team bonds in a remote setting. Through a system of regular check-in meetings between the two online learning specialists and among the three of us (depending on the matter at hand) and regular communication via email, WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams, a sense of unity and collegiality began to emerge. As a result, the three of us now have established weekly check-in meetings. This inter-connectedness has not only strengthened collegiality among us but has also seen greater collegial bonds form among units within the CLM T&L Centre, which in itself is still quite new. As we continue to shift away from ERTL and towards more authentic online and blended pedagogies, the bonds forged, lessons learned, and experiences gained in 2020, continue to inform our approach to and strategy for academic professional learning in CLM. At its core, our collective strategies focus on holistic support and development that is responsive to the needs of

academics and others we work with, while an ethic of care also informs how we work with one another and others.

Forming communities of practice to encourage collaboration

Our experiences of sharing and collaborating with other academic support staff in 2020 resulted in the forming of an institutional learning design Community of Practice (CoP) at the start of 2021, with representatives from CLTD and all faculty teaching and learning units. The aim of the CoP is to share good practices, discuss challenges faced, and share resources developed, among other things. Our evaluation is that this CoP would likely not have started, or that there would not have been interest in contributing to it, without the shared experiences of and collaborative efforts during the disruption in 2020. It highlights the importance of community and collaboration in professional learning for academics and is something that continues to guide and inform the way the three of us engage and interact with each other.

Conclusion

It can be said that learning does not occur if it is not reflected and acted upon (Gibbs 1988). In this chapter we have shared our personal reflections as three individuals working in a faculty teaching and learning unit at a large research-intensive public university in South Africa. Our collective experiences highlight the challenges and affordances of supporting professional learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as supporting staff members new to a faculty/ institution during a disruption. The two online learning specialists (Authors one and three), who were new to the university and faculty, had to establish personal relationships with each other, their manager (Author two) and the broader institutional community, in addition to building networks with the academics they needed to support. The

faculty team had to work with the central support unit, as well as with faculty teams in other faculties to support academics in their transition to remote teaching and learning. In a short space of time, many academics in the faculty and institution looked to the team for advice, guidance, and reassurance. This chapter is relevant to those who find themselves in new professional spaces in higher education contexts and provides considerations for the professional learning of academics in a post-Covid-19 world.

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Theme 2: Creating Spaces for Connection

CHAPTER 6

Building online communities: Exploring the conditions for interpersonal and cognitive connections

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Abstract

Emergency remote teaching and learning (ERT&L) arose out of necessity in 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and continued in 2021. A critical but often over-looked aspect of ERT&L was the feeling of isolation that increased significantly for staff and students alike, with the remoteness making it difficult to connect and form communities. Given the importance of connection and community in learning, academic success and general wellbeing, the question that unfolded for us as academic developers involved in the academic support of students and staff, was how to re-create spaces for connection and community (interpersonal and cognitive) in the current online environment. In this chapter, we reflect on this question in the context of the various communities within the Academic Development (AD) spheres in which we were involved during the Covid-19 pandemic. These included postgraduate writing communities, a community of Instructional designers at the institution, and faculty teaching and learning communities that emerged between AD staff and lecturing staff. Data was generated through an autoethnographic approach involving free writing of our experiences, followed by coding and

thematic analysis using the Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 1999) which focuses on the three types of presences required for the successful functioning of online learning communities, viz., social, cognitive and teaching presence. Four characteristics emerged that enabled the transformation of the online space into a platform for knowledge building and knowledge sharing. We discuss these characteristics and the implications thereof for ongoing student and staff support, with a cautionary note on the impact of social positioning on community engagement. We conclude with some suggestions for ways in which the various online communities might be maintained and strengthened to enhance teaching and learning beyond Covid-19.

Keywords: Community of Inquiry, online teaching and learning, academic development, social positioning, Covid-19

Introduction

With the necessity to move to Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERT&L) due to the Covid-19 pandemic, feelings of isolation and disconnection set in for many staff and students. As Academic Development (AD) practitioners, we not only felt isolated from the staff and students whom we engage with, but also from each other due to the disparate positioning of AD practitioners across the university. However, as we scrambled to find solutions to the teaching and learning challenges at hand, it became apparent that we could benefit from online collaboration and collective problem solving. Communities of Practice (CoPs) thus became important third spaces (Oldenburg 1999), creating a sense of belonging, connecting, and learning in our virtual meetings.

CoPs can be defined as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015: 1). Members of a community of practice gain access to a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems. In other words, members benefit from a shared practice. The communities which we report on here were either intentionally created for a particular practice (e.g., writing skills development), while others emerged organically amongst colleagues with shared interest in teaching and learning, and who were experiencing similar challenges during ERT&L. As a result, these online communities became spaces of collective critical inquiry and reflection. This type of engagement, coupled with the fact that these community learning spaces were computer mediated during ERT&L, reminded us of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (1999), shown in Figure 1.
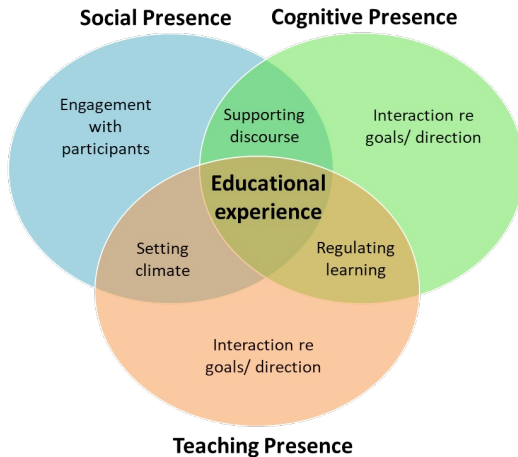
Figure 1: The Community of Inquiry Framework

(Garrison, Anderson and Archer 1999)

The Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 1999) highlights social, cognitive and teaching presence as three key types of presence required for effective online engagement and learning. The CoI framework is geared towards the creation of meaningful educational experiences through the establishment of cognitive, social and teaching presences (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes and Fung 2010). Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) argue that attention to these presences in an online community, supports collaborative learning and discourse associated with higher levels of learning.

It should be noted that CoPs and CoIs are not synonymous. However, we found that the guiding principles of both types of communities aptly described how we navigated our online spaces, reached out to each other, reached out to the staff and students, and learnt new ways of doing and thinking linked to our work in the online environment. We therefore drew on both frameworks to reflect on and analyse our participation in three specific learning communities, linked to our different sub-fields of AD work within our AD unit based in the Faculty of Science within a research-intensive university in South Africa. However, for purposes of consistency, we hereafter refer to these as CoIs, although, the underpinning principles of CoPs still apply.

To provide more context, Author 1 is primarily involved with the ongoing professional development of academic staff in the area of teaching and learning, while Author 2 is focussed mainly on undergraduate and postgraduate student support for writing and other academic literacies. Our communities (and our reflections in this paper) are thus, similarly structured. One CoI exists for engagement with postgraduate students, the domain of interest here linked to the writing students needed to complete in order to fulfil their degree

requirements. The other two CoIs focus on support for teaching and learning development (one being an intra-faculty specific community between our faculty teaching and learning (T&L) unit and academic staff in the faculty, and the other an inter-faculty community of practice among AD staff from different AD units throughout the university).

This chapter arose as a consequence of our discussions on our experiences of being, at various times, both participants and facilitators in the aforementioned communities, and how we approached the creation of spaces for connection (interpersonal and cognitive) in the current online environment. From these initial discussions emerged the idea to use an integration of the CoP and CoI frameworks to analyse and better understand the nature of these communities, our primary aim being to use this nuanced understanding to inform future online community engagement and AD praxis.

Data collection and methods

This study involved an autoethnographic approach as it allowed us to look at ourselves and our work in a meaningful and thoughtful way, within the larger educational context that Covid-19 created at our institution and in our praxis. Although originally used in culture studies, autoethnography has been used in higher education. For example, lecturers have used autoethnography to explore their teaching experiences, the impact their teaching has on students as well as reflecting on social justice teacher education as captured in the volume edited by Fitzgerald, Heston and Tidwell (2009), as well as their experiences of academic culture (Walford 2004). This research methodology privileges the self in the research design, recognising that experiences of the self can contribute to a deeper understanding of various social phenomena (Hamilton, Smith, and Worthington 2008).

Hamilton *et al.* (2008) further suggest that autoethnography can reveal the professional identities of those who write them through situating the researchers within a specific context. This calls for 'strong reflexivity' on the part of the researcher, drawing on the influence between self, co-participants and the setting they find themselves in, reflecting and introspecting on how these three aspects influence each other (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2016). The approach was, therefore, ideal for our study on the nature of online AD CoIs.

For this study, we made use of self-narratives that can be categorised as personal documents, to explore our current phenomenon. We each wrote in-depth narratives to reflect on our experiences of the AD communities in which we participated, guided by questions that were framed according to the domains of the CoI framework (Table 1).

Table 1: Questions that guided the narrative inquiry, based on the three types of presence that underpin communities of inquiry

CoI focus area	Cognitive presence	Social presence	Teaching presence (facilitator perspective)
Postgraduate writing CoI	• Is there opportunity for reflection? • Is there room for sharing and connecting ideas? • Is there space for collective meaning making and creative problem solving?	• How do students communicate? • Is there space for emotional expression? • Is there opportunity for group cohesion?	• What curriculum principles guide interactions with students? • To what extent are facilitators and students available to each other?
i) Intra-faculty T&L CoI between AD practitioners and academic staff **ii) Interfaculty T&L CoI consisting mainly of AD practitioners from different disciplines and with different competencies**	• Is there opportunity for reflection and constructive critique? • Are there opportunities for perspective sharing? • Is there acknowledgment of different expertise and competencies? • Is there opportunity for creative problem solving?	• Is there risk-free expression? • Is there group cohesion? • Are participants open to collaboration? • Is there opportunity for perspective sharing?	• What principles guide facilitation? • Is there space for sharing personal meaning? • To what extent are CoP members' competencies expressed and valued?

The data generated from the narratives were examined in a four-step approach starting with compilation of the 2 independent narratives, which were drawn together into one document. This was followed by inductive and deductive analysis of the data to reveal emerging clusters of meaning and themes, which consequently allowed for interpretation

of the data in a meaningful and contextualised way (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang 2010).

Findings and discussion

Although our study was structured on the three domains of online CoI, our analysis revealed that in light of the nature of our work, for us as AD practitioners, social presence appeared to underpin both teaching and cognitive presence. Indeed, this may in fact be true for any teaching and learning interaction, given that teaching and learning, whether online, face-to-face or blended, is a socially constructed event. It also addressed the need for connection and community which we craved due to the isolation created by the pandemic, and to rehumanise the people who during ERT&L became "names in my inbox, or initials on my screen when we did consultations, workshops, or classes" (Author 2). The importance of social presence in CoIs was reiterated by closer examination of the data, which revealed the existence of a further four characteristics related to social presence, that enabled effective engagement and learning. These included that CoIs had to be 1) **supportive and safe spaces;** 2) **underpinned by the principles of democracy and equality;** 3) **collaborative;** and 4) **seen as a platform for knowledge sharing and knowledge building.**

Considering the first characteristic, i.e., CoIs as safe and supportive spaces, Author 2 reflected the emphasis in the postgraduate writing CoI was to develop a supportive and safe environment in which everyone felt comfortable to share their feelings and frustrations around writing. This was achieved through an icebreaker activity where each participant introduced themselves by sharing a 'poster' with their research topic, where they are in the writing process, what they would like to focus on during the week, and a meme that captures their feelings about writing.

The meme seemed to be particularly powerful, as most students' choices reflected frustrations linked to postgraduate study or feelings of imposter syndrome. This led to an open learning environment that showed the participants that they were not alone - many frustrations were quite similar. This opened everyone's eyes and set the tone that this was a place where one could share one's insecurities and vulnerabilities, and that through sharing in this supportive space, participants could connect with others and work towards addressing the issues they were facing.

Similarly, Author 1's reflection also revealed the importance of creating a safe and supportive space in intra-faculty communities, recalling that when this intention was held by the facilitator, it created the conditions for participants to speak openly of their concerns about feeling ill-equipped to transition to ERT&L, and of the anxiety arising from not knowing how to transform lectures and assessment for the emergency online learning environment. It was also noted that both inter- and intra-faculty CoIs became a place to voice frustrations and to share uncertainties and vulnerabilities, as well as a place to share 'wins' and positive stories of ERT&L.

Interestingly, Author 1 also noted that inter-faculty CoIs (consisting primarily of AD practitioners), soon became a place where such staff could voice one's feelings of marginalisation within the wider university community, a feeling that is widely reported in the literature on AD practices. This is further linked to the next two characteristics of CoIs that emerged in our data - democracy and collaboration.

In the context of the postgraduate writing CoIs, Author 2 noted that within all these, a democratic space emerged with a relatively flat hierarchy. In the writing retreats the facilitator was not the 'beacon of

all knowledge', but someone also on her own writing journey, a sentiment that was explicitly shared with the participants. This stance opened the door for participants and the facilitator (Author 2) to negotiate and collaboratively set the agenda for each day. The group thus, decided what they wanted to do, discuss and explore for each session, thereby creating a democratic and collaborative online CoI. The collaborative nature of the writing CoIs was further evidenced in the organic formation of smaller collaborative groups, with students from different Schools in the Faculty creating informal groups to write together (pomodoro groups), as well as support groups on WhatsApp to keep in touch. Some students also formalised these into weekly catch-up meetings where they could write to each other to ask for peer advice. In addition, Author 2 noted the transition from knowledge acquisition as the primary motive for engaging in the CoI to knowledge creation observed in the discovery sessions, in which students and Author 2 shared tips, tricks and resources that they picked up through their writing endeavours.

Democracy, collaboration, knowledge sharing, and knowledge creation were also mentioned as important guiding principles by both authors in recollections of intra- and inter-faculty CoIs. Both authors described these CoIs as spaces in which colleagues journeyed together on the ERT&L road, with participants sometimes adopting the Vygotskian perspective of the facilitators as the more knowledgeable other (MKO) (Vygotsky 1978). However, given that ERT&L could not have been predicted or prepared for, it was important for the authors to explicitly address the expectation by acknowledging their limitations in knowing the best practices for the prevailing circumstances, and to actively elicit academic staff experiences and challenges of ERT&L with students to facilitate co-learning. In this way, the CoIs provided a common space for

sharing experiences, expertise, resources and lessons learnt, and for collaborative peer learning within a community of practice and inquiry as we "collectively navigated our way through the good, the bad and sometimes, the ugly of ERT" (Author 1). The intra-and inter-faculty CoIs were thus noted as rich spaces for the discovery of new insights about students and learning, leading to the emergence of innovative teaching and learning practices. The inter-faculty, AD focussed CoIs in particular, were viewed as vibrant and dynamic knowledge creation hubs, with a variety of university staff from previously separated divisions and departments (e.g. information and communications technology, AD, instructional design, curriculum design, quality assurance, and senior management) collaboratively researching emergent teaching and learning phenomena and finding solutions to the multi-faceted challenges presented by ERT&L.

It is important to note however, that as much as the online CoIs were predominantly regarded in our reflections as being democratic, collaborative and appreciative of different stakeholder expertise, there were moments noted in which we, as facilitators of these CoIs, felt the need to moderate certain voices that were underpinned by preconceived notions of right and wrong. Such intervention was at times needed to maintain the safety and collaborative nature of the CoIs. The data also revealed that this phenomenon appeared in both intra-and inter-faculty teaching and learning CoIs, with the potential for AD and instructional designer voices to sometimes be silenced in the intra-faculty CoIs in particular. This was attributed to the historically hierarchical nature of academia as well as the historic positioning of AD and Higher Education Studies on the margins of academia (Green and Little 2013), rather than as recognised fields of academic and professional practice. Social positioning (Lawson 2012; Lawson and

Morgan 2021) sometimes appeared to play a role in conditioning the nature of the social presence and social interactions, where the different institutional positions and roles one occupied either enabled or constrained participation.

It was, therefore, important for us to remain aware of potentially difficult power dynamics and preconceived notions of academic legitimacy and to address this both implicitly, and sometimes explicitly as well, to highlight and normalise the fact that teaching and learning is a multi-stakeholder endeavour, as pointed out by Padayachee and Dison (2021). A key part of this process of addressing power dynamics in CoIs with diverse participants is acknowledgement of contributions from both experts and relative newcomers (Lave and Wenger 1991). Also important for us as AD practitioners was the need to remain cognizant of the influence of our own social positioning relative to other stakeholders particularly in the intra- and inter-faculty CoIs, and to exercise our own agency in making our contributions heard. It is worth noting however, that despite these perceived constraints, we both experienced a genuine willingness from most participants in these CoIs to transcend traditional academic hierarchies and disciplinary and professional boundaries, and to embrace the contributions of different role players, perhaps in part, because the emergency circumstances required it. However, as we shift out of emergency mode, the long-term sustainability of such interactions is uncertain, especially CoIs involving academic staff, as this would require further commitment in an already highly constrained academic climate. Nevertheless, we will continue to explore ways to sustain CoIs for staff and students due to the significant potential benefits.

Conclusion

Our reflections on the nature of the online CoP and inquiry revealed the importance of creating and maintaining a strong social presence in these learning structures. However, genuine and meaningful participation depends on the creation of a safe, democratic and supportive environment, acceptance of all voices (regardless of institutional position or rank), and collaboration. Embedding these principles in online CoIs greatly enhances the creation of personal and cognitive connections that are essential for cultivating a sense of belonging, legitimate participation, leading to shared meaning making and knowledge creation.

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CHAPTER 7

Catalytic power of a pandemic: On enacting agency in professional higher education spaces through communities of practice

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Abstract

This chapter critically interrogates the agential metamorphosis the author experienced over an 18-month period during the Covid-19 pandemic, by means of numerous diverse communities of practice (CoPs). As a mid-career academic occupying a middle-management leadership position in a faculty, at a large, research-intensive public university in South Africa, the author first outlines the numerous professional tensions that characterise the dual roles he holds in the faculty. Underpinned by Social Realist principles and Archer's (1995, 2000, 2005) notions about morphogenesis, the chapter explores the temporal interplay between structures (in the form of CoPs) and agency (in the form of the author's agential metamorphosis). The chapter postulates that the Covid-19 pandemic served as a catalyst in this interplay, affording the author unique opportunities to become part of numerous diverse CoPs that evolved organically during this time. Synergistic with this evolution, was that of the author's awareness of his own agential potential and the intentionality with which he came to enact agency in the professional spaces he occupies. By linking the CoPs to four professional meta-identities, the chapter allows for critical reflections on how each CoP contributed in unique but interconnected ways to the author's agential metamorphosis, catalysed by the

pandemic. The chapter concludes by making recommendations on how higher education stakeholders can use CoPs and critical reflection about agential potential as ways of eliciting and enacting agency in their own professional spaces.

Keywords: agency, community of practice, critical reflection, morphogenesis, morphogenetic framework, morphogenetic cycle, social realism

Introduction and background

When South Africa first entered hard lockdown on the 27th of March 2020 because of the global Covid-19 health emergency, acute disruptions to normative ways of doing and being became a common characteristic of daily life. During those early days, there was great uncertainty about what the pandemic would mean for the world of work, for family and loved ones, and for the self. I recall religiously reviewing national and global infection rates, the ratio of death per capita per country, and news about global economic disruptions. For the South African (SA) higher education (HE) sector, as was the case globally, there was immense urgency to shift contact teaching and learning (T&L) to remote and online modalities. In time, this would become known as Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL) (Hodges *et al.* 2020). At the large research-intensive public university where I work, less than a month was earmarked for this shift (teaching would resume on 20 April 2020), which would require: i) the upskilling of academics to use online modalities to teach; ii) adapting curricula to ensure the coverage of core content; iii) the orientation of students to study remotely to be able to continue learning; and iv) addressing a range of associated challenges (e.g. resolving mobile data issues for students and academics, ensuring students have adequate learning

devices, and grappling with remote/online assessment approaches, to name a few). In the end, the mandate to resume with the academic project on 20 April 2020 was realised. However, much would emerge in the subsequent literature about the way in which ERTL perpetuated the systemic inequities and inequalities entrenched in SA HE (Czerniewicz *et al.* 2020), the social impact of Covid-19 on youth enrolled at tertiary institutions in SA (Sifunda *et al.* 2021), and burnout among HE staff (Flaherty 2020). It is against this backdrop that I write this reflective practitioner account about my professional growth and agential metamorphosis during this time. By exploring the role of numerous communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) in facilitating this process and the intentionality with which I sought out these CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) as spaces to engage, collaborate, be collegial, do research, and practice care, I hope other HE professionals will find my reflection useful as a guide for their own professional learning and growth.

Context

More about me

I would describe myself as a mid-career academic who occupies a middle-management leadership position in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (CLM). CLM is a large faculty, with approximately 5000 undergraduate (UG) and nearly 6000 postgraduate (PG) students, and more than 700 members of staff (academic, professional, and administrative). Within the faculty, I hold dual roles as CLM Assistant Dean for T&L (ADT&L), and Head of the CLM T&L Centre. Although there are parities between these roles, they are in essence quite different. The former sees me chairing the Faculty T&L Committee, representing the faculty on the institutional Senate T&L Committee, forming part of

the Faculty Executive Committee, taking ownership of T&L matters (broadly speaking) within the faculty, and advising across numerous levels on matters of assessment, curriculum design, pedagogy, and more[1]. Regarding the latter, since my assumption of duties as Head: CLM T&L Centre, the Centre has grown from two staff members (myself included) in August 2019, to 11 by August 2021[2]. I am responsible for the day-to-day management of the Centre, working closely with members of the three units in the Centre around strategy, operation, and matters related to learning and teaching.

Acutely disrupted socio-collegial realities

An intense sense of disequilibrium became a familiar part of daily life from the time SA first went into lockdown and continued for most of 2020 (Corbera *et al.* 2020; Flaherty 2020). Apart from the effect the pandemic had on my personal life and the way it disrupted my daily routine, the advent of the pandemic and subsequent rapid shift to ERTL resulted in immense pressures at work (Egan and Crotty 2020). As ADT&L I found myself included in numerous committees, task teams and working groups, dedicated to interrogating or resolving any one of the numerous challenges brought by the shift to ERTL. This took place in addition to my responsibilities within CLM, both as ADT&L and Head: CLM T&L Centre, where we were grappling with the rapid orientation of students for emergency remote learning (ERL) (de Klerk *et al.* 2021), the rapid preparation of academics for emergency remote teaching (ERT) (Krull and MacAlister 2022) and the myriad concomitant challenges that came with this shift. I often felt flustered, frustrated and exhausted,

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[1] I am not claiming sole responsibility for T&L matters in the faculty.

[2] This expansion is credited to the strategic vision, leadership and commitment from the Faculty Executive Committee and Dean, and efforts by the appointed staff members.

finding myself in a constant state of flux. I experienced an intense urgency to find answers or solutions to problems and challenges for which there were no exemplars or guidelines to draw on. From challenges related to remote assessment and stimulating engagement in online spaces, to learning device and mobile data constraints, every day and week seemed to perpetuate the intense sense of disequilibrium. What made this experience more challenging for me personally, was the loss of established socio-collegial support networks that had been in place prior to the pandemic, while on campus (see the study by Filho *et al.* (2021) which outlines the impact of the pandemic and social isolation on academic staff and students at numerous universities).

Looking back, I perceived those early days of the pandemic as particularly challenging because of the acute disruption to established socio-collegial networks. As someone prone to mood disorders who has struggled with mental-health challenges in the past, I consider myself particularly attuned to my own emotions and that of the people I work with. I deem this a strength and use it to my advantage to build and evolve support networks in the professional spaces I occupy, not only for the purpose of the work that needs to be done, but also for my own wellbeing and (hopefully) the wellbeing of those with whom I form these socio-collegial networks. I would describe most of these as nascent CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010); professional and collegial support networks within the workplace that had the potential of becoming more robust CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) (although that was not necessarily the intention). Nevertheless, they served their purpose as social spaces where I could engage with colleagues about personal and professional matters, take interest in the work and lives of others, and (when necessary) soundboard or

brainstorm problems that may arise in professional spaces. Seldom did they become more than spaces to engage and brainstorm though, and when they did, it was usually a coincidence.

Enabling structures and professional identities

I would describe my initial reaction to the acute disruption of socio-collegial support networks as an implicit sense of unease and disequilibrium. However, during those early days where home and work spaces became blurred (Pluut and Wonders 2020), it was challenging to reflect adequately on what was happening. In time though, I came to acknowledge the need for socio-collegial engagement (Davis 2006; Andrew *et al.* 2009), thus becoming more consciously aware of the disruption to my pre-pandemic collegial support structures. Consequently, I began to establish CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) in response to those needs and although this was at first more reactive than intentional, I became far more intentional about establishing these CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) as time passed. In the sections that follow I briefly define the notion of Community of Practice (CoP) (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) in the context of this chapter, before exploring 12 CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) I formed during the 18-month period discussed here. The latter is discussed in relation to four of my professional meta-identities.

Communities of Practice

Wenger (2010: 179) describes a CoP as a social learning system that " *...locates learning, not in the head or outside it, but in the relationship between the person and the world, which for human beings is a social person in a social world.*" This emphasis on the social dimensions of learning is important, as it speaks to my own philosophy about

teaching, the way I believe learning must be made to occur for students, and beliefs about my own learning. Lave's (2001) sentiments about these social dimensions of the learning that occurs through CoP also resonates with my own philosophies and views. As Edwards (2005: 57) explains, Lave's (2001) focus is on "...*the structuring environment and how it produces or allows certain ways of participating and the construction of particular identities.*"

As such, for the purpose of this chapter, the CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) referred to in the sections that follow should be viewed as professional structures with strong social elements. These CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) offer me opportunities to engage and learn with colleagues in professional spaces about a variety of matters, and participate in collaborative research activities, while contributing to the formation and evolution of the personal meta-identities that collectively constitute my professional identity (Davis 2006; Andrew *et al.* 2009).

Meta-identity: PhD student

The first CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) (**CoP 1**) I established during ERTL is linked to *meta-identity: PhD student*. This CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) consists of me and a colleague who, like me, is enrolled for a PhD. Initially, the pandemic and shift to ERTL had an immense impact on my PhD research and progress, especially during the first few months, as all my attention was focused on work commitments. This meant that PhD research and related tasks were often neglected. However, by June 2020 my colleague and I both acknowledged the need to make time for our PhD research and so we established a CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) and agreed to meet weekly for an hour. The purpose of this CoP (Lave 2001;

Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) was to support one another, serve as a mutual yet collegial accountability measure, and encourage more intentional work on our respective PhDs through engagement with someone in the same position (Pilbeam *et al.* 2013; Berry 2017).

Meta-identity: T&L professional

ERTL posed unique and unprecedented challenges for T&L professionals working in the SA HE sector (Corbera *et al.* 2020; Egan and Crotty 2020; Filho *et al.* 2021). I deliberately use the broad descriptor *T&L professionals*, as the work done by myself and others involved in the CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) discussed in relation to *meta-identity: T&L professionals* differ quite significantly. Some are academics, while others are professional support staff. Some work in faculty T&L centres or units, while others are not affiliated with faculties and work for central institutional T&L entities. Some are involved in UG or PG teaching, while others work in academic development roles associated with more holistic staff and/or student development. Regardless, they can all be described as T&L professionals.

I became part of three CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) associated with *meta-identity: T&L professionals* during the 18-month period. The first (**CoP 2**) emerged during the latter part of 2020 and consists of seven individuals (myself included) from four faculties (Dzidic *et al.* 2017). Brought together by the immense challenges posed by ERTL for academics, students, assessment, teaching, and learning, we began meeting monthly. During these meetings we would grapple with the challenges imposed by ERTL on us, the academics we work with, and students. It was also a space to vent about frustrations, provide support to one another about professional and personal matters, and to have stimulating conversations about the future of SA

HE (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005). The second (**CoP 3**) grew from my involvement in the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa (HELTASA), where I am a member of the leadership and part of the Student Learning Scholarly Project (SLSP) team. This CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) was established early in 2021 and is discussed in detail in Chapter 9. In short, it consists of four individuals (myself included) from four different SA universities, brought together by our shared interest in and passion for student learning, success, and support (Dzidic *et al.* 2017). The CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) meets weekly for an hour (depending on members' availability) and provides an inter-institutional space to collaborate, innovate, support one another, and practice care. The final CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) associated with *meta-identity: T&L professionals* (**CoP 4**) is still in its infancy, having only been established recently. It consists of two people (myself and a colleague from the institutional T&L centre) and has its roots in our shared interest in Critical Realism (CR) and Social Realism (SR) (Bhaskar 1975; Archer 1995, 2000, 2005). We meet once a month and during our engagements we check-in about one another's personal lives, discuss our individual research projects, and explore CR and SR in relation to our research and our practice.

Meta-identity: SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning)

I associate five CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) with *meta-identity: SoTL*, all of which has a focus on the scholarship of T&L. The first and fifth CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) associated with this meta-identity (**CoP 5** and **CoP 9** respectively) are linked to my research and work on student success and support (broadly), and academic advising for SA HE contexts. The first **(CoP 5)** is a long-

standing CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) that was dormant prior to the pandemic. Consisting of three individuals (myself included), interactions had ceased in 2018 when one of the members immigrated. However, during the pandemic (and with the normalisation of remote working and virtual meetings) the CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) was revived. During ERTL we met on an ad-hoc basis, while also engaging via the social media platform WhatsApp. This CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) has always been characterised by a mutual interest in academic advising for SA HE contexts, a joint sense of care and support, and research collaborations. The fifth CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) (**CoP 9**) is still quite new, having been established in August 2021, although we (three individuals) have been working together for some time in the academic advising space. Our engagements are rooted in the use of SR and CR (Archer 1995, 2000, 2005; Bhaskar 1975) and Tronto's (2005) work on Ethic of Care to guide, inform, and underpin the work of academic advisors within the SA HE context. The other three CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) (**CoP 6**, **CoP 7**, and **CoP 8**) are all linked to SoTL research projects at the university where I work. Funded through a University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG), each project focuses on investigating elements of T&L within the institution. **CoP 6** consists of three individuals, **CoP 7** of six individuals, and **CoP 8** of three individuals. My involvement in all these CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) stem from the work I do, my professional relationships with the respective project leaders, and the shared interest the members of each CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) and I have in the SoTL topic being investigated.

Meta-identity: Head of CLM T&L Centre

For the purpose of this chapter, I will refer to the three professional networks linked to *meta-identity: Head CLM T&L Centre* as CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010). The CLM T&L Centre has three units: an online and digital T&L unit (**CoP 10**), a student success and support unit (**CoP 11**), and a PG writing unit (**CoP 12**). My discussion here separates the day-to-day operational, governance and other work-related interactions I have with the staff of the various units, from the CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) elements that emerged during ERTL. I meet with the unit heads and members of each unit separately and together on a weekly basis. During the shift to ERTL and subsequently, this has been necessary to stay in touch with everyone, strategise, support, and provide guidance. More importantly though, it has necessitated regular meetings that have bestowed upon these engagements the social and caring elements (see for example Tronto's (2005) work on Ethic of Care) characteristic of the other CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) discussed in this chapter. Each of the meetings with the various unit members are characterised by a shared sense of purpose, collaboration, support, and care. Moreover, numerous research opportunities have arisen from these engagements, which has seen me co-author academic texts (see for example Chapter 5 of this book) and collaborate on conference papers with the various CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010).

Theoretical underpinnings

The morphogenetic framework

Margaret Archer's seminal contributions to the theories of CR and SR are extensively documented (see among many others: Archer 1995, 1996, 2000, 2003, 2005). Closer to home, the theoretical and analytical

opportunities afforded by Archer's theories and tools[3] and the application thereof to the SA HE context, are exemplified by Boughey and McKenna (2021). They utilise these theories and tools to conduct a critical interrogation of the complexities that characterise the SA HE system over a period of three decades, in their book *Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspectives* (Boughey and McKenna 2021). Boughey and McKenna (2021) explain that Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach "*…allows for an analysis of the interplay of structure and agency and culture and agency over time*" (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 25). The morphogenetic cycle consists of four parts, thus allowing for an analysis or interrogation of morphogenesis (change) or morphostasis (where the status quo is maintained) during a particular timeframe. Part one (T_1) denotes the prevailing conditions at the start of a cycle (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 26), parts two and three (T_2 and T_3) the interaction of agents with structures and/or cultures (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 26), and part 4 (T_4) the end of any given cycle, where it is possible to determine whether morphogenesis has occurred or not (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 26). In this chapter, I draw on Archer's morphogenetic framework to analyse my own agential metamorphosis over an 18-month period, by focusing on the temporal interplay of structures (in the form of CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010)) and agency (in the form of my agential metamorphosis).

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[3] These include: i) CR and SR; ii) Archer's work on structure, culture and agency; iii) her expansion of Bhaskar's (1975) theory of stratified layers of social reality; and iv) Archer's morphogenetic framework as an analytical tool with which to temporally examine structural, cultural and/or agential change (morphogenesis) or lack thereof (morphostasis).

Critical reflective analysis and discussion

A morphogenetic cycle exemplified

Prevailing conditions (T_1)

T_1 is described as the prevailing conditions at the start of the morphogenetic cycle (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 26). Prior to the pandemic, I had some established, yet nascent socio-collegial networks on campus. As mentioned, some of these structures may have had the potential to become more than what they were at the time, had the opportunity presented itself. However, they seldom did and in the few instances where these CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) elements may have manifested, circumstances never seemed to allow these structures to be nurtured into the types of CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) I describe in the previous section. Thus, the prevailing conditions (T_1) prior to the pandemic.

Pandemic: The catalyst (T_2 and T_3)

Phase two (T_2 and T_3) of the morphogenetic cycle is described as the space where interactions occur (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 26). I consider the pandemic a catalyst that necessitated me to seek, establish, and participate in new socio-collegial networks in deliberate ways. This agential impulse saw me establish CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) tied to the four aforementioned meta-identities over an 18-month period. The associated agential metamorphosis I experienced during that time is the result of structural and cultural interaction in these socio-collegial support structures (i.e. CoPs) (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010), thus the interactions characteristic of T_2 and T_3.

Morphogenesis: Current reality (T_4)

The final phase of the cycle, T_4, is where either morphogenesis or morphostasis is observed (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 26). My assessment is that morphagenesis has occurred, evidenced by my agential metamorphosis, the evolution of my professional meta-identities, and the established and thriving CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) I remain part of. Consequently, the current reality at the end of the morphogenetic cycle described here, is very different from what it was in T_1; both in terms of my agential awareness and the intentionality with which I search for and participate in new and established CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010).

Agential metamorphosis

Agential awareness can be quite elusive. On the one hand, a person may be acutely aware of their agential potential (or even responsibility) in a particular space, while not being aware of it in another. My own agential metamorphosis, catalysed by the Covid-19 pandemic, was characterised by such an initial absence of awareness. Despite an implicit need for socio-collegial support and interaction shortly after the advent of the pandemic, and even after establishing the first CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) with a colleague also enrolled for a PhD, I was not yet consciously aware of the intentionality with which I could be establishing CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) or their potential in relation to the evolution of my professional identity (Davis 2006; Andrew *et al.* 2009). Only after some time, having reflected on the perceived personal value gain, collegial support, stimulating dialogic interaction, and/or research possibilities offered by the early CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010), did I become more aware of their potential significance. More importantly, this is

when I began establishing CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) with greater intentionality, thus my assertions about agential intentionality and metamorphosis. I posit that without the pandemic as a catalyst, this agential intentionality and metamorphosis would either not have occurred or may have taken months or even years to manifest.

Furthermore, Archer (1995, 2000) explains that structures, cultures and agency are at once autonomous and interconnected. In observing the autonomous agential metamorphosis, I experienced during ERTL, I must also acknowledge the interconnected influence of my agency on the CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) of which I am part, and their influence on my agential metamorphosis in turn. As my agential awareness increased, I became more deliberate in establishing new CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) and the nurturing of existing CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010), which then allowed for further agential awareness and evolution. Similarly, as I became more agentially aware, my actions within these structures became more intentional (e.g. proposing co-authored writing projects or pursuing the submission and presentation of collaborative conference papers). Naturally, these actions influenced the evolution of the CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) itself, thus exemplifying how the interconnection of my agency and the CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) structures mutually influenced one another, while evolving autonomously, ultimately resulting in morphogenesis.

Conclusion

The agential metamorphosis I experienced during ERTL has had a profound and far-reaching effect on my professional identity, agential intentionality, and professional wellbeing and growth. Moreover, I

believe others could find the professional learning elements explored in this chapter useful for their own professional development. The catalytic influence of the pandemic in initiating the cyclical morphogenesis I experienced is hard to refute. Moreover, my conscientisation to the possibilities offered by CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) has seen me enacting agency by seeking opportunities for establishing CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) with relevant individuals in spaces that matter to me. This denotes a valuable lesson that I believe will continue to stand me in good stead in future and may also prove helpful to others who intend to adopt a more intentional approach to realising their professional growth in HE spaces. My hope is that by sharing this critical reflective account of the intentionality with which I sought out CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) as spaces to engage, collaborate, be collegial, do research, and practice care, will encourage other HE professionals to do the same. Similarly, I would encourage readers to practice critical reflection about their own agential potential within professional spaces, both to extract lessons and to explore possible agential shifts that may have occurred since the advent of the pandemic. Gibbs (1988: 9) encourages us to remember that "...it is not sufficient to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting on this experience, it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost."

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CHAPTER 8

I am still here: Lessons learned from incorporating social presence in remote teaching

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Abstract

This chapter shares the reflections of a group of teachers who taught on an enrichment programme for secondary school learners run by a research-intensive higher education institution in South Africa. The aim of the programme is to increase eligibility and access to higher education, through providing meaningful educational inputs to help prepare learners for the university environment (SETMU 2020: 5). The continuation of lockdown learning in 2021 affected the mode of delivery of the enrichment programme, resulting in the programme being presented remotely, using both synchronous and asynchronous inputs. Remote teaching and learning have stripped away many aspects, such

as ease of connection, central to 'brick-and-mortar' teaching that helped both learners and teachers successfully complete their respective activities pre-Covid-19. This has resulted in a sense of disconnection between teachers and learners, as well as among learners. To remedy these feelings of disconnection, the teachers incorporated elements of the Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 1999) in their remote teaching practices. This framework highlights the importance of three presences in developing successful online classes, namely social, cognitive, and teaching presences. This reflection focusses on how creating a stronger social presence can enable the development of dynamic and strong remote learning environments (Darby and Lang 2019: 112), which provide students with the opportunity to construct and confirm meaning. Based on a qualitative textual analysis of personal reflections written by the teachers, three important aspects were identified to facilitate learner interaction: (1) Familiarity (creating spaces where learners feel seen and heard); (2) Being present ('showing up' in the asynchronous space as well as the synchronous); and (3) Online identity (teachers incorporating their unique personalities into the online sessions). Thus, going forward it illustrates the importance of explicitly creating a social presence in remote classes to improve learning.

Keywords: online learning, Community of Inquiry, social presence, teacher reflections

The background

The gap between the schooling system and higher education has been well documented (Van Wyk and Yeld 2013; Van Wyk 2017; Kirby and Dempster 2018). As one avenue to address this gap, the Targeting Talent

Programme (TTP) – an enrichment programme for grade 10 - 12 learners at a research-intensive university in South Africa was established in 2007. The aim of this pre-university programme is to provide equitable and equal access to learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and it focusses on helping learners attain the social, psychological, and academic skills necessary for admission to South African higher education institutions (SETMU 2020). To achieve these goals, the TTP has a residential component where learners stay at the university for two weeks in June/July. During this period, the grade 10 group is exposed to 15 courses, while the grade 11 learners are exposed to 14 courses and the grade 12 group to 10 courses. These courses are grouped into three broad clusters: Science and Engineering (Mathematics, Computer Science, Forensic Science, Engineering), Social and Liberal Sciences (Language, Philosophy, Critical Diversity, Social Research) and physical activity courses (dance, music, yoga).

In March 2020, the pandemic necessitated a move to online learning, as the South African President called on higher education institutions to continue their teaching in online spaces (DHET 2020), affecting the enrichment programme. As with the rest of the country, the TTP had to address the digital divide of the learners as their socio-economic circumstances (van Deursen and van Dijk 2019) played a crucial role in their ability to access to devices and data. The programme addressed this issue by sending tablets and data to each learner; subsequently the material was uploaded onto the Learning Management System (LMS), and the 2020 delivery was completed over an extended period. The learners had access to asynchronous lesson material during the week, which included material to watch and read as well as activities that learners needed to complete individually. Thereafter, each group

would have a 30-minute synchronous contact session with their teacher on either Big Blue Button (BBB) or Microsoft Teams.

The opportunity

One of the language teachers involved in the 2020 online delivery kept a reflective journal of her experiences and observations of the process. Rereading her reflections, she found that in the rush to get everything online, there was a sense of disconnection between the teachers and their learners, as well as among learners in the asynchronous component of the course, while the synchronous spaces were too teacher-centered. Teaching and learning is inherently a social activity (Bibeau 2001). Furthermore, the temporal and spatial isolation of remote learning, in the case of the 2020 delivery, led to a lack of connection for both learners and teachers (Sung and Mayer 2012: 1738). Thus, for the 2021 online delivery it was necessary to rethink, rework, and reimagine both the asynchronous and synchronous modes to counteract isolation in the online learning environment, and build a stronger learning community. This also created an opportunity for us as the 2021 group of Language teachers to engage in critical reflection with the purpose of considering the impact of strategies used here for our own professional learning.

To create a space for successful learning, we drew on the Community of Inquiry framework (CoI) (Garrison *et al.* 1999) which highlights the importance of three different types of presences to create an educational experience; namely cognitive, social, and teaching presence (see Figure 1). Garrison *et al.* (1999: 92) points out that online learning, or asynchronous computer-mediated communication, has the potential to create collaborative learning environments where effective teaching can take place. Additionally, this asynchronous computer-mediated

environment, a 'digital classroom' in the current age of the Covid-19 pandemic, is potentially an effective way to address issues of isolation and create an engaging platform in which critical thinking can take root.

Social Presence

The ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities.
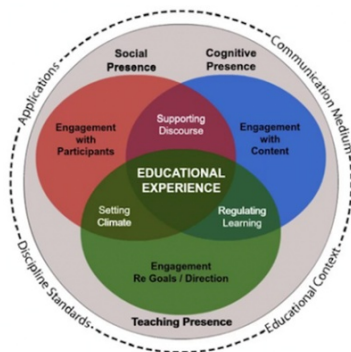
Cognitive Presence

The extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical Community of Inquiry.

Teaching Presence

The design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes.

Figure 1: Elements of an educational experience (Cleveland-Innes, Gauvreau, Richardson, Mishra and Ostashewski 2019)

To create this online platform, it is necessary to draw on all three presences. According to this framework, cognitive presence refers to "the extent to which [learners] are able to construct meaning through sustained communication" (Garrison *et al.* 1999: 89). To construct meaning, learners need to engage with and reflect on the content, drawing connections between different aspects of the content and connect ideas with their own lived experiences, thus engaging with new ideas and ways of thinking. The social presence consists of "the ability [of learners] to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop

interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities" (Garrison 2009: 352). This can be achieved through creating a platform for learners to express themselves openly. Lastly, teaching presence works together with the other two presences to realise the educational outcomes; both the design and facilitation of content falls into this presence (Garrison *et al.* 1999). Even though all three presences are important to create a meaningful educational experience, social presence plays a crucial role in transforming an online learning space from an information repository to a collaborative community (Eyler 2018; Darby and Lang 2019). Social presence can also be seen as the 'mediating variable' that links teaching and cognitive presence (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes and Fung 2010) and is therefore just as important as the other presences. Since social presence can easily be neglected in online spaces, as was the experience in the 2020 TTP delivery, we chose to reflect specifically on this aspect for 2021.

The methodology

To investigate the success of our attempts to address the detachment often experienced through virtual learning spaces, we wrote individual reflections after facilitating our online TTP contact sessions. Three of us taught grade 10 learners, one taught the grade 11 and the remaining teachers taught grade 12. We were responsible for two groups of learners ranging between 25 to 30 learners per group. Our reflections were based on the incorporation of the CoI framework as proposed by Garrison *et al.* (1999: 87), with a specific focus on the social presence created during the four 30-minute synchronous sessions, and in the creation of the asynchronous material and activities. These reflections were combined as a collaborative autoethnographic inquiry, and a qualitative thematic analysis of the texts was conducted.

Autoethnographic inquiry was utilised since this research method can benefit education if its pragmatic value is evident (Starr 2010: 02). Moreover, through this qualitative research method, data about us as teachers, as well as our perspectives and circumstances, are used to understand the 'connectivity between' us and 'others' (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang 2010: 01). Similarly, qualitative approaches, such as thematic analysis, aim to recognise and comprehend certain singularities evident in the perceptions of the sample group (Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas 2013: 398). Thus, the conducting of such research can produce profound and valuable results (Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules 2017: 01) which resonates with the objectives of this study.

During the thematic analysis, the main steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed. This was done in order to identify, analyse "and report patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). The close reading of our own reflections enabled us to familiarise ourselves with the data, and various initial codes were used in the combined reflections. The ensuing analysis of these text chunks facilitated the identification of two main themes relevant to the scope of the study: asynchronous participation and synchronous participation. After cataloguing these themes, each theme was subdivided into 'How the teacher encouraged social presence' and 'How the learners responded.' Thereafter, the sections of the reflective texts that related to the subthemes were tabulated. Finally, a qualitative analysis of the tabulated themes enabled us to extract observations related to teacher social presence and learner participation, and reciprocation of social presence. This led to the identification of three overall areas of focus discussed in the next section, which we could

then link to aspects of professional learning to take forward in our praxis.

The findings

Based on the thematic analysis of our reflections, it became clear that the more the effort from our side to create social presence, both asynchronously and synchronously, the more the learners responded in kind. Overall, we experienced an overwhelmingly positive response and a high rate of participation from large parts of the learner cohort. Throughout the reflections and analysis, three themes or focus areas kept coming to the forefront. We identified these as our most important aspects to keep in mind to facilitate social presence in online learning.

Firstly, there must be some form of familiarity between teachers and learners, even more so during projects with a short lifespan such as the enrichment period of the TTP. As Adams, Roch and Ayman (2005) indicate, it is easier for members of a group to work together and communicate if they know each other, which links to the first theme we identified (familiarity). Secondly, online presence can and should manifest in different ways in order to establish a learning environment that is conducive to learners' academic and personal growth. Since "teaching is often characterized as a humanistic profession" (Sequeira and Dacey 2020: 7), we must find new ways of humanising ourselves online. Also connecting to the aforementioned is the last element, namely, online identity. In revealing certain aspects of our identities to our learners, we can establish "care and care-based practices as the focus, regardless of the learning format" (Sequeira and Dacey 2020).

1 – Familiarity

In each of our narratives, we touched on the importance of ensuring that there is a platform for our learners to interact with us and with

each other, to create a space where learners feel seen and heard. Some of the activities that learners needed to complete were to share a childhood memory linked to reading/storytelling, reflecting on whether their lives are similar to/different from the characters in the texts/films they were introduced to, and constructing personal writing metaphors. The teachers started these conversations in the asynchronous space through their own answers, showing their learners a bit more of who they are, and the learners responded in kind. The teachers would then respond to each comment, with anything from an acknowledging emoji to encouragement to answering a question posed. One teacher commented that these informal forums:

> *[...] helped to create a sense of community and connection between the learners because they could see each other's responses and ideas, but also between the teachers and the learners. Since the teachers were present in the asynchronous space, they [the learners] could see that they were not left alone in those spaces. (Teacher 3)*

Furthermore, through these postings the teachers had the opportunity to get to know the learners:

> *By reading their posts, I gained a sense of their person-hood, and since our course asked them to engage with their memories and encouraged them to share their opinions on social matters and history, I could really develop a notion of who they were and how they saw the world. (Teacher 5)*

In the synchronous space, students rarely unmuted themselves to answer questions verbally; however, teachers rose to the challenge by making use of various functions (annotation tools, polls, and the chat box). The chat box, especially, was constantly abuzz with comments and

questions from the learners. Teachers encouraged and engaged with this in various ways: replying verbally to ideas, awarding each idea with an emoji, and acknowledging each contribution.

I [...] constantly narrated comments from the chat box, working these comments into my explanations to make everyone feel like a part of the class. I also made a point of saying everyone's name when I read their comments. (Teacher 1)

This was done to make the synchronous sessions as interactive as possible, creating a space that reflected a strong social presence while also providing cognitive and teaching presence. The online classrooms also allowed learners the opportunity to connect, however briefly, with other learners who shared similar pandemic schooling experiences, reminding them that they were not alone in their experiences and providing a sense of familiarity. Perhaps one of the strongest indications of the familiarity created by the teachers' social presence in the synchronous classes were the rare but present moments when learners spontaneously interacted with each other and with the teachers in ways not directly related to the lessons. Two of the teachers mentioned in their reflections that at the end of a class, they were asked for book recommendations from the learners, with one learner even recommending her favourite author to the teacher. Learners would also get swept up in the moment during some of the activities; one teacher did a 'mark your location on a map of South Africa' activity as an icebreaker, and some of the learners eventually started joking around by scrawling over large areas or making marks in unlikely locations outside the country. In another activity, a teacher used her non-dominant hand to draw a childhood memory on screen:

Chaos ensued in the chatbox (in a good way) - there were emoji's flying around and guessing games as to what I was trying to draw - and a few students even switched on their mics to comment on my work. It was all great fun, and there was a lot of connection happening - students commenting on each other's comments - agreeing or disagreeing with guesses as to what I was up to. (Teacher 3)

The concept of establishing familiarity through interaction was also captured in Teacher 5's interactions with learners during a poetry session:

A few felt confident enough to use the microphone and speak 'in front' of the class or read their poems to us. I could almost feel the energy change when the learners read or spoke, because it suddenly started to feel like 'home.'

Finally, one teacher reflected on joking with the learners about giving them sweets for answering questions, and a learner was quick to reply to the joke in the chat box by suggesting that the teacher mail them the sweets. Keeping in mind that the classes consisted of only four 30-minute sessions, it is remarkable that the learners participated so freely and familiarly, and it is not too implausible to assume that the teachers' conscious effort at establishing social presence contributed to this. Our conclusion in this regard corresponds with Janssen, Erkens, Kirschner and Kanselaar's (2009: 168) case studies that familiarity "may increase the likelihood that students will engage in critical and exploratory discussions".

2 – Being present

Another lesson taken from the experience was that as teachers we "had

to show up and be there in more than one way" (Teacher 5); we had to be present in the online environment. West's (2021) reflection makes mention of a particular student who felt disconnected in the online environment and could not remember any classmates or most of the professors; however, the student could explicitly remember one professor, the one who was present and reached out in the online space. This reflection echoes what we found in our own narratives with regard to the importance of 'being there' and engaging with learners in the asynchronous space. Two of us reflected on how we made sure that we responded to learners' questions, opinions, and personal stories shared in the asynchronous threads.

The synchronous contact sessions were quite short and did not provide a lot of space for exploring ideas and making sure that learners understand the content and apply it for their final assessment. As a group, we overcame this obstacle in different ways. One teacher encouraged learners to revert to the asynchronous material and post questions that they still had after the synchronous contact sessions in the video threads. She monitored these asynchronous components throughout and responded to each learners' post. Another teacher asked learners to indicate at the end of each lesson whether they needed further help with what was discussed in the synchronous session; she noted all learners' names who indicated that they wanted extra input, and then sent each of them an email to follow up. An important lesson for us, linked to being present, emerged from Teacher 4's narrative:

> *I realised the importance of 'being there.' While a video could be paused, and is perhaps more entertaining than attending a class, the learners still needed someone to rephrase what was said in the*

video, or provide extra examples, or to listen to what they think they have learnt. And this was the greatest turning point for me.

Based on the learners' responses in the synchronous and asynchronous sessions, it seems that they trusted their teachers to be present and to respond to any queries timeously and positively. This contributed to the participants in the programme becoming a learning community and not just a group of individuals logging in to an online space. Because "learning is inherently social" (Culatta cited in West 2021), we need to keep in mind that the online class should serve as a tool to assist us in creating spaces where we can help learners connect to and learn not only from the study material, but also from each other. Therefore, a holistic approach to our online presence is at the heart of creating the social atmosphere that learners need to prosper.

3 – Online identity

The final lesson that we took from our experience during the enrichment programme is how important it is to convey our own identity in the online space. In their reflection on teaching during Covid-19, Sequeira and Dacey (2020: 3) wrote about the importance of identity: "(it's) never neutral but rather negotiated, it affects ways of thinking, influences perceptions of self and others, motivates and predicts behavior and learning outcomes". We, as the teachers, incorporated our unique personalities and approaches into the sessions: Teacher 1 reflected, "I felt comfortable being myself and letting my personality shine through, especially since I got to create my own slides". Another teacher used memes to gauge learners' understanding, which in her opinion created a more relaxed and open atmosphere in the synchronous classroom, allowing students to be unsure and ask for help without 'losing face.'

Teacher 4 used her considerable video editing skills as a starting point to both 'show up' for the learners as well as convey her identity to her learners in the asynchronous material – she aimed to "sound as approachable as possible, and chose themes, music, images, and snippets that I thought Grade 12 learners would find appealing". Her videos were a good representation of who she is as a teacher, and in this way her learners got to know her before they officially met her in the synchronous classroom. Thus, when she entered the synchronous space – using the same music she used in her videos – her learners immediately recognised her. "Upon welcoming them, one learner mentioned in the chat that my voice was so friendly and that they looked forward to my session." (Teacher 4)

At the beginning of the enrichment programme, each teacher wrote a short bio, containing information on who they were – including information on their hobbies and personal goals – accompanied by a photograph. Teacher 3 reflects that she feels that this "resonated with the learners and reminded them that there was a 'real life person' on the other side of the screen." Teacher 1 reflects that she provided a picture of herself again at the beginning of her first synchronous session with further information about herself and her hobbies. Two other teachers mentioned that they switched on their cameras at the beginning of lessons to greet students and remind the learners that there is a 'human' on the other side who cares about them.

We found that we can still show some parts of our authentic selves and in doing so, shorten the distance between us and our learners (West 2021) in order to stimulate the learning process. This conscious effort of allowing our identities and personalities through into an otherwise clinical academic space, encouraged the learners to reciprocate by

'being themselves' as well, leading to a strong social presence and, to a functional Community of Inquiry.

The way forward

Based on this reflective analysis, it can be surmised that an attempt at including all three presences of the CoI framework in online teaching spaces can evoke positive responses and enhanced participation from learners. Social presence, especially, is key in this, as it allows for "collaborative inquiry" (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 2010) that enables learning to take place. The aspects that contributed to our social presence included: creating a relatable online identity, generating and cultivating familiarity, and fostering a sense of being present. Various techniques and tools were used (see Figure 2), and as teachers we experienced high levels of engagement and enthusiasm from the learners.
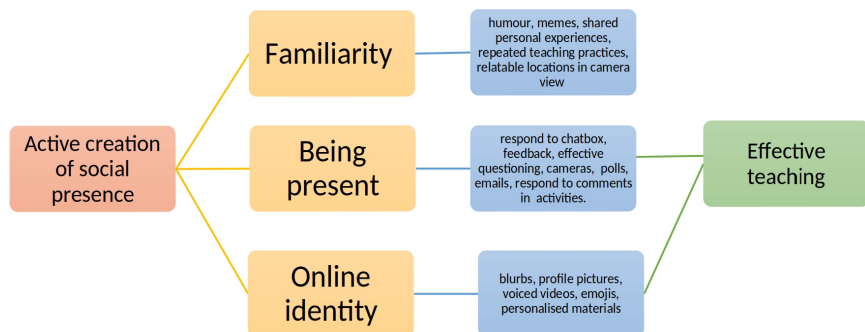

Figure 2: Effective teaching resulting from the teacher's active creation of social presence

We found that the combination of the three themes identified in our narratives, strongly contributed to a more successful delivery and a more effective teaching practice. The three themes – familiarity, being present, and online identity – are intertwined, and all three need to be

present to transform online teaching practice. By actively creating a platform of familiarity we noticed that the learners were more open to engage with us and ask questions. Whether these questions were asked in the synchronous or asynchronous space made no difference as we were present in both spaces on a continual basis; thus, no learner fell through the cracks or was left wondering if they did not understand. Our online identities, we feel, also contributed to this as we reminded learners of our 'humanness' and approachability. We feel that an awareness of the importance of actively cultivating social presence can be useful in the professional development of any individual involved in remote or online teaching. It is a welcome reminder that we should not neglect 'being human' and allow our students and learners to express their humanity and their individual personalities. This not only facilitates a sense of community, but ultimately aids in effective teaching and learning.

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CHAPTER 9

Narrowing the geographical divide: A critical reflection of an affordance of the Covid-19 pandemic for collaborative professional learning and development

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Abstract

Globally, Covid-19 has disrupted practices within higher education forcing us to relook at how we engage, what we do and how we do things. The pandemic has changed how we teach and how our students learn. It has also changed the way we, as professionals working in higher education, do our work including how we interact with each other. While much has been taken away from our lived experiences and daily realities because of the need to live carefully and safely for ourselves and others, there are some very real, innovative, and genuine affordances that Covid-19 has promoted that provide current realities and future possibilities that are quite different from our past experiences. In this critical reflection we explore how we – four individuals from different universities across South Africa working

together on the Student Learning Scholarly Project (SLSP) of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) – are communicating, collaborating, and learning in ways where, among other things, geography no longer matters. In spite of our physical separation, we are able to work together in ways that create and maintain momentum, generate a plethora of new ideas for consideration and action, and in many ways, produce more materials and products to enhance the student experience of higher education in South Africa. We will consider and reflect on what this different way of working means to us, both individually and collectively and what it means for higher education for the now and for the future.

Keywords: professional learning, community of practice, collaborative engagement, geography

Introduction

The many challenges and constraints that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic and concomitant lockdowns in 2020 are well documented. The South African (SA) higher education (HE) sector was not exempted, with the rapid shift to Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL) (Hodges *et al.* 2020) placing the spotlight on the many inequities and inequalities still entrenched in the sector (Czerniewicz *et al.* 2020). Nevertheless, the sudden accompanying shift to remote modes of working resulted in some unique affordances for academics and academic development professionals working at different institutions across the country. In this chapter, we deliberately adopt the model of reflection proposed by Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper (2001), which provides the space for a reflective exploration that integrates theory and practice. According to this model of reflection, when reflecting on practice we are called to consider the following questions: the "what",

the "so what" and the "now what". Our "what" (Rolfe *et al.* 2001) is a personal reflection on our current role(s) in HE at our respective institutions. We explore our journey and experiences as members of the professional organisation, Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA), with a particular focus on our collaborative work as the HELTASA Student Learning Scholarly Project (SLSP) team. By overlaying the experience of living and working through a global pandemic, we offer a "so what" reflection (Rolfe *et al.* 2001) in terms of what this pandemic has meant for HE, in general, and what it has meant (and continues to mean) for our collective and collaborative work as members of the SLSP. Finally, we offer a "now what" reflection (Rolfe at al. 2001) that shares lessons we have learned as friends, colleagues, and collaborators through our work for the SLSP and what these lessons could mean for HE in the future; in terms of what it looks like, how learning and teaching take place, and how collaborations could look and function in a post-pandemic world.

Theoretical elements

This reflective discussion is underpinned by the principles of Ethics of Care (EoC) and Communities of Practice (CoP).

Ethics of Care (EoC)

The theory of EoC starts from the premise that as humans we are inherently relational, responsive beings and the human condition is one of connectedness or interdependence (Gilligan 1993). An EoC directs our attention to the need for responsiveness in relationships, in which everyone has a voice, is listened to carefully (in their own right and on their own terms) and is heard with respect.

Community of Practice (CoP)

A CoP is described by Wenger (2010: 179) as a "social learning system which forms when there is a shared area of interest and members are committed to this community of interest." CoPs allow members to interact and learn together. Through these interactions they develop a shared practice (Wenger 2011). This is an accurate description of our SLSP CoP. Although linked to a professional body and necessitated by our work as members of HELTASA, the social dimensions of our CoP are significant to this chapter. Lave (2001) as cited in Edwards (2005: 57) emphasises how a CoP becomes a "...structuring environment..." that "...produces or allows certain ways of participating...". During ERTL, our SLSP CoP became such a structuring environment for us as individuals and a collective, which allowed us to interact, participate, and learn from one another despite the geographical distance among us.

"What": Personal journeys with HELTASA

In the four vignettes that follow, we present our respective journeys and experiences as members of the professional organisation HELTASA. We are four academics and/or academic development professionals from four different public universities in SA, contributing to HE in SA in different capacities. Our affiliation to HELTASA is voluntary and additional to our daily jobs.

Danie: The Assistant Dean

I am a mid-career academic who works in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (CLM) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), where I hold both the position as CLM Assistant Dean for Teaching and Learning, and Head of the CLM Teaching and Learning Centre. I have for some time been intent on becoming actively involved

in HELTASA by being more than just an organisational member, both to be able to contribute in meaningful ways to SA HE on a national level and for personal development and growth. The opportunity to become part of the HELTASA leadership presented itself in early 2021. At the time, there was a call out for expressions of interest to be submitted to the organisation and a colleague encouraged me to do just that. After some time, I was informed that my submission had been successful and that I would be working as one of four members of the HELTASA SLSP – as the designated Scholarly Researcher. Becoming part of a student-focused scholarly project made sense to me, as my work and research focuses on student learning, success, and support (broadly speaking) within the SA HE context.

HELTASA's recent reshaping meant that there were numerous new individuals who had become part of its leadership. To introduce new members to those who have been part of HELTASA for some time (and *vice versa*), an orientation and induction session was arranged for March 2021. Owing to constraints imposed as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown and following the large-scale shift to remote modes of working, this session was conducted virtually via Zoom on a Saturday morning. It was during this meeting that I was first introduced to some of the members of the SLSP. In time we would come to form an inter-institutional CoP, rooted in our shared passion for student learning, success, and support, and our collective beliefs about EoC principles for our work with students, colleagues, and one another.

By July 2021, our CoP had begun to meet more regularly, necessitated by the work we were doing as the HELTASA SLSP, but driven by a shared sense of support and unity. I found myself looking forward to our arranged weekly check-in meetings, not only because of the exciting

work we were doing and planning as the SLSP, but also because I found the engagements supportive and stimulating. These meetings were productive, usually filled with laughter, and always left me with a sense of motivation and purpose. As a collective, we would check-in with one another during these meetings, but also from time-to-time via our WhatsApp group. Soon I became aware that our engagements were characterised by mutual interest in each other's personal and professional lives, concern for one another, and care. For me it felt natural, as my approach to working in professional spaces has always been informed by care and kindness. However, I became acutely aware of not only practicing this, but of it being reciprocated by the other members of the CoP. In time, we started verbalising our awareness of this element of our weekly engagements and our CoP has quickly evolved to the point where we are co-authoring this chapter.

Nelia: The Senior Tutor Coordinator

I am the Senior Tutor Coordinator within the Centre for Academic Staff Development, at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). My primary focus is to work with tutors and staff to promote integrated tutorial programmes (Clarence 2018). My journey with HELTASA began in 2015 when I became a member. At this point, I did not realise its full potential and was simply happy to attend meetings during the annual conference. As a member, I soon realised that membership afforded me the opportunity to network, collaborate and share practices which were pertinent to my field and context. In 2018, I became the co-convener for the HELTASA Special Interest Group (SIG) on Mentoring and Tutoring. As part of this team, we became very vocal and intentionally created opportunities to promote student peer leadership to support student learning and success.

HELTASA has continuously morphed to ensure that groupings remain relevant and play more significant roles. This resulted in the HELTASA SIG on Mentoring and Tutoring becoming the Collaborative Learning Community (CLC) for Tutoring and Mentoring. The aim was for CLCs within HELTASA to be more representative, and to create opportunities for collaboration and active engagement. My role as co-convener continued within the CLC for Tutoring and Mentoring where a CoP was established that created opportunities for interaction and shared practice. In addition, our interactions were framed by EoC which shaped our relationships and connections. With the advent of the pandemic, all face-to-face meetings were suspended. I was fearful about how our CoP would be able to continue to contribute to HELTASA when we could no longer meet in person. However, throughout 2020, the CLC for Tutoring and Mentoring met online when needing to respond to directives. These interactions were work-driven and outcomes-based. My interactions with the CLC team were engendered by the relationship and connections that had been formed over the number of years that we had been working together. This connection and relationship made it easier to relook at ways of doing and relearning how to use technology to further our cause.

In 2021, just when I was comfortable with the way in which the CLC was operating, HELTASA once again transformed itself. This transformation was to ensure that it was relevant, responsive and resilient (HELTASA 2021). Online meetings were held to orientate members to the new HELTASA structure, to clarify roles, and to introduce new role players. These meetings were very generative. The CLCs were replaced by Scholarly Projects. I was asked to be the Project Manager for the SLSP. The thought of working with colleagues from diverse institutions was exciting as I am always open to learning and to finding new ways of

doing things. This would also potentially allow for the formation of a new CoP.

During our weekly SLSP meetings, I have come to realise that this space is indeed, what Cook-Sather (2016) terms a brave space. A space where one can take risks knowing that they will be acknowledged and supported. This space also provides an opportunity for each team member to temporarily drop their academic identity in order to reveal an exceptional human being with multiple identities. Brave spaces can only exist if interactions are framed within EoC (Gilligan 1993). These meetings are also characterised by care and compassion as each one of us invites the other into their personal space (Searles 2020) - something that did not form part of our pre-Covid experience. Through our interactions we have been able to form a CoP shaped by our common interest around student learning and success. Within this space, each team member continues to contribute towards a collective which promotes student learning and success.

Arthi: The Chemistry Lecturer

I am currently a chemistry lecturer in the Mathematics and Science Education Unit, in the Teaching Learning and Development Centre at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). I started my journey in academic development in 2013, with over 15 years of lecturing experience in the field of Science. Entering academic development was scary, but it brought new experiences and lessons. To help adapt and learn, I quickly enrolled in various teaching and learning workshops, training, and short courses. Some of my duties in the Teaching and Learning Development Centre, in addition to lecturing chemistry, are my involvement in professional development, coordination of various student support interventions such as student consultations, academic

advising, coordinating a peer mentorship programme, and leading the university's first-year experience (FYE) programme. To manage these tasks, I am extremely reliant on technology, and often find ways to use technology to ease how I engage with these tasks. Being a naturally curious person, I often enjoy learning about new technology and educational tools to create another dimension of interest and improve engagement. I find that if used correctly, technology can improve time management, extend reach of involvement, and cross boundaries that are sometimes difficult to navigate otherwise.

I have been part of HELTASA since 2014 as a registered participant and later became a member of the Mentoring and Tutoring Special Interest Group (SIG). In 2019, along with Danny, I was selected as a co-convenor of the First Year Experience (FYE) SIG which was then converted into a Collaborative Learning Community (CLC). In 2021, HELTASA was transformed to highlight focus areas, one of which is the SLSP. The uniqueness of being involved in this project during the time of the pandemic has been felt by our team. It is important to note that for me, being a member of the SLSP team – as the designated Scholarly Practitioner - has been a magnificent learning opportunity. Each of my team members come from a different part of the national grid and has different strengths through their involvement in student development and support at their respective universities.

Building a relationship was our first priority to understand who we are, and what we could bring to our team. Creating a safe space to openly discuss, not just our work tasks, but what we are going through in our individual spaces, was a welcome and much-needed approach to understand, respect, and honour each of our expression of being. Taking the time to check-in and reflect on what we are going

through allows us to be realistic about what we can achieve together and timeously, thus improving the effectiveness of our interactions. In spite of our individual responsibilities and demands at our own universities, our team is able to collaborate through the use of simple technology, such as emails, online meetings, free online cloud-based tools, and communication applications (e.g., WhatsApp).

What stands out for me while working with the SLSP team is that time is taken to recognise and connect with the whole person and not just with one another as HE practitioners. Technology allows us to connect anytime, anywhere, but requires an acknowledgement and respect of all individuals' boundaries. Very often we see a dangerous blurring of lines between personal time and work time. The time that the SLSP team took, initially, to really get to know and understand each other and set boundaries was an important aspect to us working well as a team. Treating each other as people first, with an understanding that technology, although useful, is just a tool that allows us to connect, is a valuable lesson.

Danny: The First-Year Experience Director

I am the Director for the First-Year Experience (FYE) at the University of Cape Town (UCT); a position I have held since October 2014. In brief, my role consists of providing strategic direction and oversight for all programming (curricular and co-curricular) and support for first-year students. I am required to work closely with six teaching faculties as well as the Department of Student Affairs (DSA) to ensure that the FYE is and remains a truly horizontal function of the university and to ensure that all incoming students are adequately and appropriately supported as they transition into both the space of HE and the place of the UCT.

My association with HELTASA began in 2019 when I was asked to be a co-convenor of the FYE Special Interest Group (SIG) along with Arthi. This move into a leadership role in HELTASA was most timely for me because, in addition to my association and work with the South African National Resource Centre for First-Year Students and Students in Transition (SANRC) - a national organisation to support HE practitioners working in the FYE space - I was looking for spaces to grow the national conversation, narrative and work of the FYE with colleagues from across the HE landscape (i.e., not only FYE colleagues). The subsequent transition of the SIG to a Collaborative Learning Community (CLC) strengthened the national reach and profile of the FYE in SA.

HELTASA's subsequent move to transform CLCs into Scholarly Projects in early 2021 happened at a time when the world, and certainly the space of HE, was in rapid and constant flux because of the global pandemic that was forcing individuals and communities to find new and innovative ways to live and work so as to honour the need for safety and social distancing. So, not only were new groupings of individuals within HELTASA being formed, but they were being formed at a time when the modus operandi for work was online interactions. Very quickly, four individuals from across the HE sector in SA (both geographically and professionally) came together to form and work together as the SLSP. I am the designated Scholarly Strategist. From the outset our work as the SLSP has been defined and shaped by online conversations, interactions, and collaborations - a trend that, in many respects, has helped the four of us connect - deeply - as caring friends, colleagues, and co-contributors to a growing understanding of the student experience.

"So What": Distant but (caring) together

These individual reflections highlight the unique (and in some ways, common) experiences of each member of the SLSP team. Being part of the SLSP has afforded us the opportunity to become part of a CoP (Wegner 2011) that is rooted in a shared passion for student learning, success and support. Within this CoP, we are able to collaborate and interact in order to develop a shared practice that, in turn, informs our individual practice. Our CoP is grounded in the EoC (Gilligan 1993) that forefronts the importance of responsibility, concern, and relationship to ensure that our voices are heard, are listened to, and are heard with respect. Our CoP has created a safe space where we can be brave (Cook-Sather 2016), take risks, and be vulnerable whilst contributing to the HE narrative.

There is much to be reflected upon and shared about the timing of the creation of the Scholarly Projects within HELTASA. The timing might have been coincidental with the Covid-19 global pandemic, but the way in which this pandemic has shaped our interactions and collaborations has resulted in different, authentic, genuine, beautiful, and caring connections with one another.

Teaching, learning, and collaborating are inherently social activities; activities that have, traditionally, demanded and depended on face-to-face meetings and interactions. The need to slow the spread of Covid-19 coupled with the need to live safely for ourselves and others, however, necessitated a rapid pivot to online teaching and learning to ensure the academic project continued. Furthermore, there was a parallel rapid shift to online meetings and interactions among staff to ensure the necessary conversations, decisions, and support for the academic project also continued. Carol Gilligan (1993) - the proponent

of "The Ethics of Care" might argue that this move to online spaces in the context of a global pandemic is "the ideal of care...an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone" (p. 62; cited in Branicki 2020).

While the lack of face-to-face interactions has taken its toll on the work (for both staff and students) within any given university, it has broken down geographical and institutional barriers for inter-university collaborations. In short, the geography of the online space (Aoyama 1999) is much less limiting than the geography of our world for collaboration. Moreover, perhaps because of our own lived realities coupled with the daily experiences of a global community living through a public health crisis, there is a level of genuine care and concern for one another that is very evident and real in our interactions and collaborations as the SLSP CoP. Not only have we connected as colleagues working to improve the experience of our students journeying through HE, but we have also genuinely connected as human beings and as friends who have and, in some instances, share, similar interests outside of academia. In short, we are mindful and deliberate about caring for and connecting with one another to collectively support each other through this moment.

Given that our SLSP came into being at a time when meeting face-to-face is not possible, it is difficult to imagine what our interactions might look and sound like if in-person meetings were our reality. However, upon reflection, we think that two things would hold true: 1) we would not be meeting as frequently as we do currently in our online space, and 2) while 'small talk' might be a characteristic at the start of our meetings, it is hard to imagine it being as meaningful, authentic, and

immersive as what we are currently doing and experiencing in our weekly online meetings while living through - both individually and collectively - a global pandemic. Thus, while the interest in one another might have been there, the layering of a global pandemic onto our individual and collective lives has elevated our need to be there for one another, to connect with one another, and to support one another. In short, while we might be physically distant, we are very much together in our care, concern, and support for one another.

"Now what": The why of where

Geographers seek to ask, explore, and understand 'the why of where': Why are cities located where they are? Why are socio-economic disparities so pronounced along racial lines? How and why does the built environment facilitate and/or constrain children's daily access to physical activity? Typically, geographers - depending on their speciality - will ask this fundamental question for spaces and places, and at different scales. As we continue to reflect on our roles in HE in our particular spaces of professionalisation and places of employment – including our individual and collective brave spaces - it is abundantly clear that the scale at which we can (and must) collaborate has been forever altered by HE moving into online spaces. While the pandemic forced universities online, with a bit of hindsight we can now see that a lot of what has happened in HE in SA over the past 18 months has been successful. Sure, there have been some failures and important lessons learned, but on the whole, the 'why' of 'where' is moving into a space where the answer is no longer simply 'because of the pandemic.' In other words, the answer to this question of 'why are we _____ online?' (pick your verb: teaching, learning, collaborating, interacting) is and will continue to become more nuanced; it will include such

responses as: 1) it can and does foster and promote more frequent interactions and connections; 2) it can and does foster and promote deeper shared connections; 3) it is a means of opening up opportunities for collaborations in HE and beyond that are geographically independent of a particular location; 4) it is a tool for every university to fully maximise its teaching and research potential while minimising the time spent on travel, and, in turn, reducing carbon footprints; 5) while the world might be very large, geographically, when it comes to collaboration it is actually very small, and honouring the inherent value of the online geography of collaboration helps us (humanity) show care and concern for others and, in turn, help prevent the spread of future epidemics.

In conclusion, if nothing else, the pandemic has shown us and affirmed for us (particularly those of us working in HE) that we can: move the academic project and its associated support activities online. We can work alongside one another online. We can collaborate with one another online. We can bring our full, authentic selves online, and we can care for and support one another online.

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CHAPTER 10

Exploring the interplay of confidence, authenticity and risk through professional learning

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Abstract

As an academic literacies specialist working in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town, I critically reflect on how my aim of building students' confidence in their academic writing led me on a journey of authentic professional learning. On my journey, I encountered a values-based form of Action Research that aligned with my ideological positioning, and which motivated me to consciously focus on my own learning and development. But, with the advent of the pandemic and remote teaching, I experienced an acute sense of loss - a loss of connection to students, and a loss of my own identity within the teaching space. As I grappled with the concepts of 'connection' and 'self-representation', I discovered that I had a very superficial view of these notions. In contemplating how to connect more deeply and represent myself more fully, I realised that the value underpinning these challenges was authenticity; I wanted to foster authentic connections with students and bring an authentic representation of myself into my teaching. Seeking to learn more, I watched an insightful TED Talk by Eduardo Briceno entitled, 'How to get better at the things you care about', in which he describes an often-overlooked affordance of leading by example. I came to see that this simple and powerful practice could not only help me to connect with students and represent myself more authentically, but also create an enabling environment

within which students could increase their sense of confidence. As I have begun to actively practice authenticity, I have had to constantly challenging myself to speak truthfully and to interrogate my own sense of power. While acknowledging the limitations of my practice and context, I have begun to witness some poignant responses from students that validates this approach and motivates me to continue learning about ways to live the value of authenticity through my practice.

Keywords: authenticity, confidence, risk, identity, professional learning

Introduction

Authentic professional learning (Webster-Wright 2009) can be understood as the ongoing, self-directed, contextually, and socially situated learning practice of professionals, which foregrounds the role of lived experience in the learning process. Professional learning can occur through a variety of formal and informal activities and, where the goal of the learning is to enable change, reflection has been identified as a particularly valuable resource (Webster-Wright 2009). In this chapter I describe and critically reflect (Hatton and Smith 1995) on my own journey of authentic professional learning which started in 2019 when I first began exploring the notions of authorial identity development and authorial confidence, and methods to improve my teaching practices such as values-based Action Research (McNiff and Whitehead 2010). I thus begin with a review and discussion of this literature, highlighting how it informed my initial thinking. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit South Africa in 2020, the landscape of higher education shifted dramatically, and I experienced an extended period of disorientation and loss of identity. It was during this time, when I was desperately seeking ways to concretise my blurry virtual identity

within the digital space, that I returned to the concept of authorial confidence and began to see its associated ideas and practices in a new light. Most especially, the notion of practicing authentic self-representation and how this can be used to both define one's own identity and build confidence in others. I thus devote the latter half of this chapter to reflecting critically on how I applied this thinking to my practice, the impact it had on my own sense of professional identity, the response from students, and areas for further learning.

Contextualised review of the role of confidence in academic writing

Given the dominance of reading and writing within teaching, learning, and assessment in higher education, writing centres' play an important role in supporting and enabling student engagement with disciplinary discourses, literacy practices, and knowledge production (Avery and Bryan 2001; Daniels and Richards 2011; Graves 2016). At the University of Cape Town's Faculty of Health Sciences Writing Lab, which I coordinate, we are guided by a transformative ideology; firstly by recognising that literacies are contextually situated and socially negotiated (Lillis and Scott 2007), secondly by positioning diversity as a valuable resource, and thirdly by aiming to empower student writers (Pemberton 1994) to use their diverse knowledges and literacies to contest normative traditions, and contribute to new forms of thinking and representation in the academy (Muna, Goolam Hoosen, Moxley and Van Pletzen 2019). This contestation is particularly important in the South African context, where normative traditions, largely derived from a colonial system, continue to reproduce educational and social inequalities (Luckett and Shay 2020; Thesen 2013).

From this perspective, I have come to understand that I do not teach *writing*, because there are many ways to write. Instead, I teach *about*

writing; *about* the tools and practices available to writers, *about* the various considerations a writer may make, and *about* how these choices influence the meaning that is communicated. In this way, the autonomy of each writer is validated as writers are empowered to make thoughtful choices about literacy practices that enable them to write their 'truth' in a meaningful way. Prioritising writer development requires an understanding of the conceptual domains of authorial identity (Cheung, Elander, Strupple and Flay 2018; Ivanič and Camps 2001), and a pedagogical approach that explicitly considers each of these domains to enable authorial identity development.

While I was cognisant of authorial identity, it was only in 2019 that I began to explore the concept in earnest, primarily thinking (at that time) about how understanding thereof could be applied to shape the nature and focus of consultant training. One domain of authorial identity that I became especially interested in was authorial confidence, reasoning that the relational and supportive nature of writing centre consultations provided a fertile space within which to place concerted emphasis on building confidence. Across the literature, confidence has been found to influence embodying the role of 'author' (Pittam, Elander, Lusher, Fox and Payne 2009), critical thinking (Cheung, Stupple and Elander 2017), making rhetorical decisions (Pemberton 1994), avoiding plagiarism (Schuetze 2004), and becoming a more engaged learner (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune 2008). While I have yet to find a single substantive definition for authorial confidence, it can broadly be understood as having some level of faith/trust (confidence) in yourself as a writer and in the writing you produce. Research shows that both students (Cheung *et al.* 2017) and academics (Cheung *et al.* 2018) recognise confidence as an important factor in authorial

development, and my sense is that this is primarily because academic writing is a risk (Christie *et al.* 2008; Thesen 2013).

There are two major forms of risk in academic writing. Firstly, academic writing occurs within contexts that are governed by conventions, rules, and expectations (Christie *et al.* 2008; Gee 1989; Thesen 2013), and so there is risk in challenging these boundaries. Secondly, because meaning is contextually situated, while the form of our writing retains integrity as it travels into other contexts, we cannot control how our meaning will be interpreted (Blommaert 2005 in Thesen 2013), and so there is risk in being misunderstood. It is also important to acknowledge that this risk is not experienced equally. The greater the differences between the writer's Discourses[1] (Gee 1989) and the Discourse they are attempting to master, the greater the risks. In terms of academic writing, each disciplinary Discourse (E.g., medicine, engineering, physics, or law) shapes both *what* there is to write about and *how* it should be written. As such, the greater the differences between the literacy practices a writer has already acquired and those of the discipline they are attempting to master, the more challenging the process of acquisition becomes. In the South African context, this means that for the majority of students, who come from disadvantaged or resource-constrained contexts, the risks are greater than for the minority of (predominantly white) students who come from privileged contexts, which have been more heavily influenced by academic Discourses (Gee 1989), and which provide a robust social and economic safety-net in the event of failure.

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1 Gee (1989: 6) explains the idea of a Discourse (distinguished from 'discourse' (a connected length of language) by use of an uppercase 'D') as "ways of being in the world…which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities…".

Avoiding the risks of academic writing, however, also poses a serious risk: students may disregard their own life experiences and literacies in favour of replicating 'normative' practices and genres (Thesen 2013), thus essentially silencing aspects of their authentic identity. And, if we as educators explicitly or implicitly reinforce this type of risk avoidance among the collective majority through our teaching and assessment practices, we are undermining our diverse student potential before it can ever be realised.

As I have come to understand the cross-cutting influence of authorial confidence, most especially in overcoming the risks of academic writing, I have come to think of confidence with far more gravitas – as something fundamental to the process of authorial identity development and possibly the most important thing I need to enable through my practice. Increasing confidence has been found to enable other domains of authorial identity, such as authorial thinking (Cheung *et al.* 2018), and to promote a deeper approach to learning (Maguire, Reynolds, and Delahunt 2013). In other words, confidence can be thought of as the 'active ingredient', much like baking powder in a cake; all the other delicious and nutritious ingredients may be brought together, but without baking powder, the cake will not rise. Similarly with students, I can give them information, teach a variety of tools and approaches, and validate their ownership and voices, but unless students also have sufficient confidence to take the risks inherent in embodying the role of author, this leaning will hold limited value (Lundberg 2008). Furthermore, because there are many factors that influence confidence (Christie *et al.* 2008), it is not a static state of being, but rather something that fluctuates over the course of a students' academic career (Christie *et al.* 2008; Pittam *et al.* 2009; Thesen 2013). So, if we accept that confidence is always important, and

we recognise that confidence gained in one area may be lost, or may not transfer to other areas, then enabling confidence must be a value that always imbues our practice.

Action Research as a method for authentic professional learning

Initially, I was uncertain about how to approach developing student confidence. Given that I (like many others) play multiple roles with different groups of students, I wondered how I could enable development for all of my students? And, as my engagements with students are usually *ad hoc* or transitory (often the case for writing centre staff), how could I make the most of each opportunity? I began to feel overwhelmed by the array of spaces and activities across which I wanted to see improvement. And it was in seeking a way to initiate a research project in the Writing Lab, that I encountered the values-based form of Action Research (AR) championed by McNiff and Whitehead (2010), and where I found my answer. I would consolidate my focus on the one element common across these spaces and activities: me. I have found that this type of AR provides an aligned ideological perspective, an ongoing, active, contextualised, critically reflective, and authentic approach through which to enable professional learning, and a framework for theorising practice.

In its most basic form, AR is learning about what we do (action) and why we do it (research), in relation to the values we want to live through our practice. In alignment with the concept of authentic professional learning (Webster-Wright 2009), AR centralises the autonomy of individuals to take responsibility for their own development by explicitly recognising that, "...You cannot 'improve' someone, or 'educate' them, because people improve and educate themselves." (McNiff and Whitehead 2010: 36). In this way, AR is

transformative because it disrupts traditional hierarchies, such as between teacher and student, and challenges practitioners to focus on their own learning and development, rather than trying to exert their power over others, whose learning and development is in fact a function of how they choose to *respond* to us, and not what we do to them (Blackie, Case and Jawitz 2010; McNiff and Whitehead 2010; Webster-Wright 2009). As such, AR also recognises that learning is socially negotiated, and that we learn and develop in response to those around us. Therefore, as educators if we want to improve the response to our teaching, we need to focus on improving ourselves.

To enable authentic learning, AR employs a critically reflective cycle that begins with identifying specific areas for improvement, and actively developing relevant knowledge to better inform your practice. Next, you evaluate your new practices by critically reflecting on how well you are living your values through your practice and collecting evidence to this effect. Based on this evidence, you are then able to make valid knowledge claims and link new knowledge to existing knowledge. Through cyclically applying this process, in time, you may come to move beyond professional learning into the realm of knowledge production, as you generate living theory that explains and legitimises your practice, and which may hold value for others doing similar work (McNiff and Whitehead 2010).

Using a values-based, or conceptual approach to learning and development elevates our efforts by shifting our focus from individual practices to the factors that inform the variable application of *all* our practices across multiple contexts, roles, and engagements. However, it was not until the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, that the need to adopt a values-based approach and turn my focus inward became acutely apparent to me.

Critical reflections on my experiences of living the value of authenticity through my practice

Before the pandemic, the places and spaces I worked in remained 'fixed', and I physically moved between them, consciously switching my roles accordingly as I engaged directly with those around me. But during the pandemic, the requirement to physically isolate stripped away many of the contextual and social structures I had unconsciously come to depend on. I began to experience a severe sense of the loss of connection with students, and a loss of my own identity. Now I remained fixed, and the places and spaces I shifted between became virtual and blurred - I was no longer a teacher in a classroom, an academic presenting at a conference, or a Chair in a meeting room. I could no longer rely on being able to make eye contact or smile at someone, compliment an outfit, or even show off an outfit that felt like an expression of 'me'. I felt reduced to a set of slides and a disembodied voice, easily replaceable by someone else's disembodied voice. As my sense of loss grew, I kept asking myself, what can you bring to this engagement that is uniquely you? In time, I came to recognise that I was searching for authenticity, for a way to authentically represent myself and connect with students, though my disembodied voice.

Against this backdrop, in my ongoing journey of finding ways to enable students' authorial confidence, I watched a TED Talk by Eduardo Briceno, a speaker, developer, and trainer in the areas of growth mindsets, leadership, and innovation. In his talk, 'How to get better at the things you care about' (Briceno 2016) he describes the distinction between the 'performance zone' and 'the learning zone'. He explains that if we want to get better in the performance zone, we must spend

focused time in the learning zone. Yet, confoundingly, our systems are structured such that most of our schooling, especially in tertiary education, takes place in the performance zone; almost everything is assessed and graded in a continuous or summative manner, there are no 'do-overs', and the risks are extremely high. How then, he asks, can we "...create 'low stakes islands', in an otherwise 'high stakes sea'"?

One strategy he proposed really resonated with me: the notion of lowering the stakes for others, by leading through example. Briceno (2016) explains that "By sharing what we want to get better at, by asking questions about what we don't know, by soliciting feedback, and by sharing our mistakes and what we've learned from them, ...others can feel safe to do the same. Real confidence is about modelling ongoing learning." In other words, by giving students the opportunity to vicariously experience the challenges you have faced and to witness how you have overcome these, you give them an opportunity to gain confidence in themselves (Lundberg 2008).

At a time when I myself was experiencing a crisis of confidence in who I was and what I had to offer, this simple and elegant notion was something of a life raft. While acknowledging that I cannot build a student's confidence, I saw that I *could* lower the stakes and 'tip the odds in their favour', simply by bringing an *authentic* representation of myself to accompany the content I teach. As such, the focus of my professional learning has become how to live my value of authenticity through my practice to enable students to gain confidence.

Simple? Yes. Easy? No.

To bring an authentic representation of yourself to your teaching requires you to take risks which makes you vulnerable. You must be

willing to climb off your pedestal and dismantle power structures, and to be truthful about your own challenges and mistakes. You must be willing to be seen as just another student who happens to be further along in their journey. You must be willing to be humble, because it is not about giving your advice to students or presenting yourself as a model to follow, it is about normalising the often difficult and challenging process of 'becoming' in all its glorious, messy detail.

Sharing personal stories offers a powerful tool for practicing authenticity. Stories about ourselves allow us to express our identify and, in the telling of these stories, we can unpack our past experiences and explicate how these inform our current practice (Kadenge, Dison, Namakula and Kimani 2019). Although I was accustomed to occasionally sharing stories in the classroom, I had done so to encourage students or to simply to inject some humour into the room, but never to intentionally represent myself in an authentic way. When you put the goal of authenticity at the heart of the story however, the nature of the story changes as you challenge yourself to share aspects of your own learning that would have often remained hidden. Along with this, authentic stories also challenge you to take responsibility for validating yourself as someone with expert knowledge, rather than expecting students to simply accept this 'fact', as you relegated it to them to make assumptions about how you know what you know, in the hope that they can trust you.

While I primarily function as the coordinator of the FHS Writing, another of my roles is the convener of the Department of Health Science Education's MPhil programme. This has provided a fruitful space within which to practice authenticity through my engagement with students in this programme. In June 2021, I started an ongoing

email thread and challenged myself to write to the students weekly to establish and maintain a better connection with them. In my first email I wrote, "*I would like to establish this email thread as a line of open, ongoing, and collaborative engagement - a place where we can share resources with one another, ask questions, and discuss challenging issues or concerns.*" While this is still true, the way I am approaching this has changed. Here, I present some critical reflections on my actions in this space as evidence for the effect my changing practice is having on both me and the students I engage with. I cannot, for ethical reasons, share quotes from the students directly, however I can speak of their reactions to me in a general way.

In one of my first emails I wrote, "*As **you** will come to understand, research integrity is about more than just ethical considerations, and relates to **our** approach to research, and a commitment to conducting **ourselves** with integrity at all times.*" I have added the bolding to highlight my positionality as a teacher talking to her students, at best using words like 'our' and 'we' in these early exchanges to imply that what I was saying applied to both them and me. I also see now that I chose to start by addressing issues of conventions, rules, and expectations. And even though it was not until my 6th or 7th email that I became confident enough to talk about my own learning more specifically, students began responding to me directly (not to the whole group), telling me how much they needed this space and sense of community that I was establishing.

However, when all you are is a disembodied voice, the words you use become increasingly important as does what you chose to talk about. I realised that I had yet to truly turn the spotlight on myself and what I was learning, by explaining *why* I needed this learning (where I was

struggling, confused, or afraid), and how I have applied this learning to my own practice. I pushed myself to "own" these challenges and lessons more authentically as *my own* lessons, rather than those I was teaching to students. Later I wrote,

*A few weeks ago, I mentioned I was feeling frustrated with **myself** by how little progress I have made on my research recently...Because I have experienced 'slumps' or periods of poor progress before, I was feeling really frustrated to find **myself** back here again...what is wrong with **me**? Why do I keep running into this problem? Why can't I maintain momentum? These questions circled in **my** mind until I came to a very simple realisation...This realisation was powerful because it freed **me** from **my own** 'deficit perspective' and helped **me** to stop self-flagellating for long enough to think constructively about principles and practices **I** can employ to get **myself** back on track, not just right now, but for any time **I** face this again in the future. Instead of floundering, I am now actively building **my** toolkit... One important principal **I** have identified for **myself** is to honour and respect the resources I have available.*

Again, the words in bold highlight how I was changing the way I presented myself, no longer as a teacher, but as another student, navigating my own ongoing learning journey. I started addressing issues of authorial development more directly and became more explicit about framing ideas and work that apply to all of us, positioning us as peers. For example, after the period of unrest and looting that erupted around South Africa in July 2021, I wrote,

Initially last week, I was overcome with feelings of helplessness and frustration, as I witnessed violence I couldn't stop, fear I couldn't allay, and hunger I couldn't feed...At times like these, I find it helpful

to step back and remember what it is that I do, and the role that my work plays within our society. **And I want to invite you to do the same.**

Upon reflection, I recognise that I was shifting away from a didactic approach, towards a more student-centred approach of open sharing and an invitation to discuss ideas in a way that truly allows us to learn from one another. I also started to share more private emotions around feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure. For example, after hearing a senior academic make a derisive comment about someone who had not published from their PhD, I wrote,

*…**I felt ashamed**. It took me two years to publish from my PhD, and I only published one paper, when in truth there are two or three, more I could write…I felt as though he'd just pointed out that my Ferrari was actually a jalopy…I got to **thinking about how hard I found it to write my first paper** – no one to hold my hand, or show me the process, alert me to the hidden pitfalls – **I really was unprepared**.*

However, although I was improving my own practice of authentic self-representation, I remained ineffectual at motivating students to participate in the group context more actively. Eventually, I shared my frustration and sought the feedback of my own MPhil student, who is also a member of the group. They pointed out to me that although most of us had met in person, and we had all engaged together online, we did not really know one another, and so it was intimidating to share with a group of virtual (pun intended) strangers. I was really chastened by this feedback; in striving to be an excellent academic who represents themselves authentically, I had not even thought to properly introduce myself.

I immediately invested time in writing the long and personal story of my own postgraduate journey, sharing my experiences as a new mother, wife, part-time writing centre consultant, and PhD student. In this excerpt from my story, I wrote openly about something that it took me years to even admit to myself.

> *I won't lie – it was a tough year. I was often alone as [my husband] travelled frequently for work, the sleep deprivation, the complete change in lifestyle, the isolation (none of my friends had babies yet), the pressure to produce a proposal, the NEVER-ENDING LAUNDRY...it took its toll and I now recognise that I was probably suffering from post-partum depression.*

When I wrote that story I felt as if I was jumping off a cliff into the unknown - taking a real risk. I pressed send and held my breath. And as the students caught me, with their words of support and their willingness to share their own raw, difficult, triumphant, and complicated stories, I finally started to see how my changing practice was changing the space, and how others were changing their practices in response to what I was doing.

Despite these successes, there are still students who have yet to use their voices in the space, and engagement is still erratic. In reflecting on why this is so, I find I must acknowledge that I have shared here about practicing authenticity with students in a programme that I convened. Because I am in a position of relative power and experience, I cannot deny that I derive security from my achievements, making this a fairly low risk space for me. I am far less confident about practicing authenticity in those spaces I perceive to be high-risk. And indeed, what is low risk for me, may be high-risk for students. So, as much as I work to dismantle power structures, I acknowledge that a power differential

will always exist. But I also recognise that I can hold this power lightly, by consciously positioning myself as further along in the journey, rather than the authority, and by validating students' agency and inviting participation, rather than giving directives. And, as I continue my journey of developing authentic practices that enable students' confidence, I accept, with trepidation, that to really grow in this area, I will need to practice authenticity in those spaces that I find intimidating, so I may learn more about the things that enable me to do so.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic and its effects have proved to be a discomforting catalyst for my own learning and development. Indeed, as Webster-Wright (2009) points out, it is not so much change itself, but rather the uncertainty and complexity that accompanies change, which necessitates ongoing learning. My experiences of professional learning during the pandemic are a testament to that. Had I not felt stripped of all my social and structural crutches, I may never have taken the necessary and deep dive inwards. Committing to living my values through authentic self-representation has been influential in my practice, as I have become increasingly thoughtful about what I choose to say and how I choose to say it, and more sensitive to issues of positionality and power. I have challenged myself to take risks and seen those efforts rewarded by the responses from those who felt empowered by my example to take similar risks themselves. However, the most striking impact I have experienced is in terms of my own sense of identity. As I have continued to exercise authenticity, I have gained a renewed sense of self, and self-confidence as the framework of authentic self-representation has empowered me to reshape and

represent my identity, making whole and distinct what had previously felt reduced. Thus, through adopting an active and critically reflective disposition towards my ongoing learning, situated within the context of my practice, and shaped by my lived experiences, and in aligning my approach and practices to a transformative ideology, I myself am being transformed. My learning journey is of course ongoing and the notion of risk and reflecting on my own experiences of overcoming risk, remains a prominent focus area for me, as I continue to seek ways to empower students to gain confidence and overcome the academic risks that they face.

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CHAPTER 11

Reflecting on the online teaching space as a 'boundary object' in pandemic times: Making the invisible visible in an academic literacy course

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Abstract

The havoc wreaked by the Covid-19 pandemic compelled drastic reconfigurations of teaching and learning. Before Covid we used blended modes of course delivery successfully for our academic literacy course. The shift to a fully online mode in 2020 led to streamlining teaching content that would cater for the lowest denominator, while *not* compromising on quality and course objectives. Despite institutional provisions to equalise technological access, the playing field remained uneven. That said, for the first time, our pedagogy was largely visible online, available beyond the class time through our designated online learning management system (LMS), called Vula. Across various contexts, Vula connected students, staff, and the university, who found themselves participating in emergency remote teaching mode. The Vula site became a doorway for us to reclaim our agency in the academic project, in attempts at making the invisible visible. Despite Vula's distinct identity, it was amorphous enough to be

recruited in various ways by academic literacy practitioners. Beyond its conventional function as a notice board, the Vula chat room became a place where they could gauge students' understanding of content and assignments, and a 'chalkboard' to emphasise theoretical concepts. Considering Vula's heterogeneous uses, we started to see Vula as a 'boundary object,' described by Star and Griesemer (1989) as objects that have a high degree of interpretive flexibility, and which are used by different people across different contexts. The multiple ways in which we harnessed Vula as a 'boundary object' allowed us to interrogate our emerging sense of becoming and revealed our multiple roles as academic literacy practitioners. A principle known as the 'looping back mechanism' created some form of coherence across these uses. Looking ahead, the symbiosis between Vula and its participants, and its affordances in terms of our academic literacy pedagogy, invite us to critically reflect on how we harness this boundary object in physical and blended teaching modes in future.

Keywords: boundary object, online, LMS design principles, academic literacy pedagogy, looping back mechanism, critical reflexivity, becoming, teacher identity, blended learning

Introduction

In 2020, the turmoil triggered by Covid-19 urged abrupt reconfigurations of teaching and learning in South African higher education (HE) from face-to-face and blended learning models, to fully online. Within this context, "students and staff are being asked to do extraordinary things" (Hodges *et al.* 2020: 18). As an entire university shifted to an Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) mode, and rapidly re-orchestrated its core educational activities on its official learning management system (LMS) Vula, academics from various disciplines began to

interpret and appropriate the online site in heterogeneous ways across disciplines. In terms of its purpose and function, we realised the central role Vula played in transforming our thinking about teaching and learning. Vula became not just a substitute for our in-person classroom interactions, but it came with its own affordances, such as acting as a chalkboard, a slide projector, a blog space for reflective learning, a noticeboard, a gradebook, a workbook, and an assessment tool, amongst others. These multiple affordances, located in the same space, heightened its role in mediating and facilitating teaching and learning experiences across academic and home spaces. Our exploration into theorising the role of Vula on our course, led us to consider it as a 'boundary object.' Star and Griesemer (1989: 388) and Bowker and Star (2000: 297) refer to objects that have a high degree of interpretive flexibility and which are used by heterogeneous actors across a range of contexts, as boundary objects.

In this chapter, we as academic literacy practitioners, reflect on how we acted upon the Vula site and how it acted upon us through our evolving design principles and pedagogy. The processes of acting upon the boundary object and it acting upon us are mutually constitutive and have also contributed to our sense of becoming as academic literacy practitioners.

Academic literacy practitioners in the university

We are located in the Academic Development Programme (ADP) at a historically white university in South Africa (SA). The ADP has a clear redress and social justice function in this setting, that of equipping academically under-prepared historically disadvantaged students with the means to succeed at university (Academic Development Programme 2021; Pym and Paxton 2013). We teach academic literacy at the

reception-year and consider ourselves seasoned academics, who have over the years, developed sophisticated, innovative and evolving curricula, responsive to the increasingly diverse needs of students entering the politicised HE landscape in SA. Before Covid-19, we were already using blended teaching modes quite successfully in our teaching. We were becoming familiar with the possibilities of blended learning, which we were eager to explore from within the comfort of our computer-based teaching laboratories. Then Covid-19 struck, abruptly ushering us to a remote online environment.

As academic literacy practitioners, our transformative mission as described above, had to remain an integral part of our shift to teaching online. Initially, this shift ushered in a crisis mode that necessitated a streamlining of our teaching content that would cater for *all* students without compromising on quality, which meant continuing to utilise an ethics of care approach in our teaching, creating a conducive learning environment and recognising and acknowledging the multiplicity of our students (and also our own) voices in this new space. This was a tough ask in an online context, where the majority of lecturers and students were entering fully remote online learning for the first time.

In attempts at sustaining the university's core business, over 20,000 students migrated to Vula. Institutional surveys reassured the university that about 90% of the respondents were technologically equipped in terms of data and devices, though course statistics revealed that 30% of our students alone would fall behind if the university did not intervene to equalise access. While the university tried its best to level the playing field, new challenges came to the fore, reminding us of Spivak's (2014) words that "statistics are useful but existentially impoverished" and seldom reflect the magnitude of various experiences.

Bearing in mind the need to offer a course that remained inclusive, especially in the face of socio-economic disparities and a likely digital divide, our roles as academic literacy practitioners during ERT, reminded us of two things: (a) that "Learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world. Not just the result of cognition, learning involves the integrated functioning of the total person - thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving" (Kolb & Kolb 2005: 194); and (b) that "Transformative learning... is a cyclical process of being and becoming" (Natanasabapathy and Maathuis-Smith 2019: 373). The adaptation to fully online engagement signalled a drastic shift in our thinking about *how* our roles as responsible, innovative and caring practitioners could be translated in the online environment so that learning could continue meaningfully and holistically.

The Vula site as a boundary object

Bowker and Star (2000: 297) argue that boundary objects are "both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites". To emphasise their trans-contextual nature, Bowker and Star (2000: 297) argue that boundary objects are "weakly structured" trans-contextually, but "strongly structured" in local use. Therefore, actors who handle boundary objects in local use where they are strongly structured are 'near-sighted' and consequently understand the object better in its local use than its function trans-contextually (Gomart and Hennion 1999: 238). Our understanding of the boundary object and its trans-contextual nature can be extended by seeing it as a 'fractal' - a line in mathematics located in more than one dimension. Law (1999: 11-12) describes the fractal as "[...] always *more than one and less than many* [s]omewhere in between" contexts. This

reference to a 'fractal,' allowed us to interrogate more in depth, the complexities of purpose and meaning taking place in multiple contexts joined by the same online platform.

In keeping with the 'fractal' nature of the boundary object alluded to above, Brown and Capdevilla (1999: 40) refer to an object's high degree of interpretive flexibility as an inherent "functional blankness". They argue that it is the object's "*lack of meaning*, or to be more precise, what the object fails to say" (1999: 40), that could be a source of incoherence for those recruiting it in a particular context. They suggest that the identity of an object, such as Vula, "must be formally indexed" (1999: 41) or imbued with meaning and function to account for its functional blankness and its "in between-ness" (Law 1999: 11-12). Bearing this in mind, the design principles informing the course's pedagogy, such as teaching writing in context-specific ways, offering multiple drafting opportunities, eliciting students' life histories through their engagement with core concepts, and being inclusive, were all examples of the local use of Vula on the course, all of which served to negate its plasticity and functional blankness trans-contextually in the university. These design principles underpinned our common pedagogical interests and sought to bring a degree of stability and coherence to the Vula site. This, in turn, had consequences on our sense of becoming in our roles as academic literacy practitioners.

We now look retrospectively at how we 'formally indexed' the Vula site during our transition from a blended model course to a fully online model of delivery, to account for Vula's functional blankness. We consider how Vula, as a boundary object with particular affordances, shaped and affected our academic literacy pedagogy. In addition, we problematise how the Vula site served as another mirror, alongside the

face-to-face classroom, to reflect our pedagogy back to us - a pedagogy that we have come to theorise over the last few years since the course's digital turn.

Acting upon and being acted upon by the Vula site as a boundary object

Acting upon the Vula site, in other words, formally indexing it during the pandemic, required us to pay attention to our existing design principles since the digital turn in 2014 and to furthermore consider the affordances of the 'boundary object' itself. With the digital turn in 2014, we had harnessed Vula to favour a blended model that would foster the 'analytical mode' in students' interactions with concepts and academic literacy on our course (Arend *et al.* 2017). Since then, the blended model underwent cycles of redesign requiring a refinement of design principles, such as teaching writing in context-specific ways, offering multiple drafting opportunities, eliciting students' life histories through their engagement with core concepts, and being inclusive. Such refinement allowed the course to leverage on Vula's affordances and to be continually aligned with course objectives on one hand, and students' habitus (Bourdieu 1977) and evolving needs on the other.

The move to full online mode created new design considerations and principles, but also new dilemmas. At the institutional level, before the pandemic, Vula had conventionally served as a resource portal, where students would access readings, announcements and submit assignments. However, during the pandemic, rather than complementing or extending classroom interaction, Vula became the main site for synchronous and asynchronous teaching through online lessons and live classes.

With the inequality of access in mind, it became clear that we needed to factor in students' socio-economic backgrounds and design our online course to promote *innovative* teaching and *inclusive* education, to cater for *all* students, as alluded to earlier. Initially, this created discomfort among staff around whether the use of basic technology might hamper the quality of our offerings and reflect negatively on us. While the concern was legitimate, it was soon superseded by an ethics of care prerogative (see Samson *et al.* 2018), where *what* was being taught became as critical as *who* was being taught.

Additionally, as academic literacy practitioners cum-course-designers, we needed to acknowledge what Vula afforded, rather than seeking to replicate the face-to-face classroom online. That said, the Vula site also morphed based on how participants interacted with it, its artefact, and other participants. It thus reflected the three characteristics of space that Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith (1991) depict as follows (translated): 'perceived space' (the infrastructure), 'conceived space' (the imagined space) and 'lived space' (the performative space). The boundary object as the 'lived space' was a dynamic response to the momentary confluence of minds and actions of participants across spaces and had 'interpretive flexibility' that enabled it to remain relevant to diverse but intersecting experiences.

As a point of intersection between the academic and home spaces and their varied experiences, Vula blurred the boundaries of what constituted the university, making it as amorphous as the online space that was now its double. The intersection led to novel ways of harnessing the online space to further the educational project, rather than merely serving as a resource portal. It also reconfigured the teacher-students rapport by flattening hierarchies generally enforced through the classroom's physical arrangement.

The "in between-ness" of the Vula site became apparent in the way it was recruited on our course and therefore raised questions about how we could create coherence using the site. Law (1999: 11-12) argues that the heterogeneous ways of using boundary objects require "drawing things together without centering them" in order to create coherence between users and contexts (author's emphasis). Our attempts at 'drawing things together' involved building on and merging the ideas of academic literacy practitioners and learners in a developmental and dynamic way in the online space, so that learning was not linear but rather, as stated earlier, holistic and cyclical. By studying the ways in which Vula is recruited to teach academic literacy, we have noticed two salient features. The first was that new academic articles were often reworked by academic literacy practitioners into a "guided reading" with annotated notes aimed to interactively involve students with the new knowledge. This required practitioners and students to draw on their autobiographies and past conceptual knowledge gained on the course. Secondly, new knowledge was then connected to previous autobiographical and conceptual knowledge through writing activities in the chat room between students and practitioners; and the writing of blogs and essays.

The affordance of the Vula site made these two salient features more visible and allowed us to question our attempts to create coherence between our heterogeneous ways of recruiting Vula; between us and students' prior and new knowledge; and between various spatial contexts. We have come to call the principle that underpins these two salient features the 'Looping Back Mechanism' (LBM) of the course. As the LBM allows us to "draw things together without centering them" (Law, 1999: 11-12), it allows for various possibilities of becoming

amongst us. The LBM, as a subset of our design principles and academic literacy pedagogy, therefore gained more visibility online.

Additionally, in many instances, with the move to a fully online mode, Vula *acted upon us* as designers and ushered the need for re-design and innovation in conjunction with online teaching practices themselves. The impetus for re-design could be seen as an affordance of the functionally blank boundary object. Since we were trialling aspects of online design while teaching, adaptations to the design often occurred within the same semester that we were teaching, thus we witnessed teaching and design in a dynamic relationship. At times, students' experiences turned into learning moments for us, such that our design and teaching became responses to their diverse contributions and locations. A case in point were the blogs where students recruited their identities and experiences to grasp theory and make it theirs. The act of writing became a way of formally indexing the boundary object by (re)writing oneself into being (Hunma *et al.* 2019), especially in the online space where teacher and student identities would otherwise be reduced to a name or number. The blogs allowed us to acquaint ourselves with students' identities, their habitus, how they grappled with new concepts, how they revisited their positions through the lens of theory, which in turn became entry points for forthcoming live classes.

Another innovative practice was the use of the Vula chatroom for live sessions and as a 'chalkboard' for notes that anchored emerging or critical ideas on the course, and students' responses to those. Interestingly, since writing was the main mode of communication in the Vula chatroom, students expressed their evolving understandings of concepts in the written mode right from the start. For a writing course,

the written mode of interaction in the chatroom now became a beneficial way of gauging not only students' grasp of concepts but also their ability to articulate these in prose, and our ability to use these instances as teaching moments.

The blog and chatroom affordances here were stretched beyond what may have been originally anticipated by the Vula LMS developers, though for our purposes, it was aligned with our course objectives. These examples underscore how, due to its 'functional blankness,' the boundary object was largely capable of taking on new roles, sometimes undergoing trial by fire to accomplish the new challenges assigned to it. In fact, the design-teaching dynamic ensured a continual attempt at relevancy, becoming a way for academic literacy practitioners to imbue the boundary object with particular meanings and purposes within a particular context and time. This dynamic dispels the myth that the online mode would lead to automation and the redundancy of academic literacy practitioners, but rather, it makes visible their role in harnessing the online space for particular pedagogical ends. In the past, we only had glimpses of each other's interactions with students through marking each other's essays and our weekly staff meetings. With a shift to a fully online teaching mode, after formally indexing Vula with design principles which in part were informed by our pedagogy, we realised that this process now also meant that Vula acted upon us by shaping our interactions and impelling us to revisit our design on the platform. In the next section, we discuss how Vula acted upon us as academic literacy practitioners in terms of our sense of becoming.

Sense of becoming

The online pedagogy, particularly the LBM, became important for reflecting on our individual and collective online teaching experiences

sparked by Covid-19. Through it, we traced the highly emotive threads of initial shock, dread, isolation, discomfort, heightened caution, experimentation, frustration, growing awareness, recognition, innovation, optimism, acceptance and reconciliation, which comprised our journeys to online design and pedagogy. These *affective attributes* extensively formed part of our reflective engagements. For professional growth, it became important to consider how "an attunement to the affective forces circulating in pedagogical practices" (Bayat and Mitchell 2020: 57) could enhance our understanding and realisation of Kolb & Kolb's (2005) earlier claim, that "learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world".

We realised that amidst our isolation, the "affective forces'' at play were vital to our continued growth as caring academic literacy practitioners. We were forced to reflect critically on our discomfort of operating within a space where we were not physically present *but* where we were expected, nonetheless, to make our presence, authority and leadership felt by managing and facilitating the learning process. These reflections, borne out of necessity, were insightful, and became an important lens through which to (re)view our own processes of "being and becoming" (see Nomdo, Hunma and Samson 2021). Our holistic teaching framework represented a dynamic entity, something in process that created possibilities within us, for shifting from one state of realisation to another. This interplay between our sense of being and becoming is aptly captured in the claim that "being itself signifies a particular ontological presence at a particular point in time, whereas becoming is a continuous moving presence of the ontological... self" (Natanasabapathy and Maathuis-Smith 2019: 371). The LBM we were using, became a means to trace the nature and extent of our professional and personal growth. It allowed us to adopt a particular

reflective gaze on our past experiences and knowledge, while simultaneously enabling us to act on, reinterpret, and develop new ways of knowing about that same event. Utilising Vula as a "boundary object" therefore means that the knowledge we gain from our present online interactions, can be used to revisit and rewrite past knowledges which in turn became lenses for imagining newer and more creative future possibilities. The interplay between the LBM and Vula as "boundary object," therefore, allowed us to connect with *both* the temporal and spatial locations of our experiences.

Vula's connective capacity symbolised the substitute, the alternative to the full-contact university that was being denied its normal functions and operations. Vula became our *quarantine* space. It symbolised *the* emergency assembly area; a necessary place of safe seclusion for faculty and student evacuees in reaction to the state-imposed restriction of physical movement brought on by Covid. Vula represented *a virtual space of waiting* until the tangible outside world became inhabitable. But as a virtual space, we realised that Vula's boundary-ness worked differently. While it functioned to keep us 'inside' for core business, it simultaneously connected *all* of our separate physical locations, mediating access into, around, and outside of its virtual confines in multifaceted ways. Thus, as a "boundary object," Vula's role is reified here as that which has a high degree of interpretive flexibility that could be used by different people across a range of contexts. It was a gateway to much more than we had imagined. While acknowledging Vula's gateway capacity, we also realised the heterogeneous nature of student experiences which gained access through it. These experiences, not unlike our own, were tinged with caution and fear of the unknown. However, there were also elements of optimism, curiosity, and excitement about the *new* that unfolded in this

unfamiliar space. We learned the hard way that the merging of our teaching content and online 'voices' with what students decided to offer of themselves here, was not a seamless process, despite students' familiarity with social media platforms. We discovered quite vividly that the merging of content with various 'voices,' was tainted with discomfort and veiled promise. We realised that the online teaching space is where students and academic literacy practitioners grapple with their online presence, with each trying to develop a relational 'voice' that can be heard and made visible through the medium of writing, to enable us to 'see' each other *beyond* the surface.

As we reflected on these struggles to make our 'invisible' selves 'visible' through the act of writing, we were struck by the importance of social interaction and how we had taken it for granted pre-Covid. We could attest to, via the LBM, how social interactions in the physical classroom facilitated the mobilisation and realisation of our and our students' sense of agency in relation to each other. This relational component in the construction of identities (Woodward 2004) is *part* of the content we use to teach academic literacy. We were, therefore, aware of how such physical interaction led to growth and development and made possible the realisation of *other* possibilities of 'Being,' in the Heideggarian sense (see Nomdo 2015; Nomdo, Hunma and Samson 2021). Dealing with such complexities in a writing course that uses identity theory as teaching content, necessitated critical introspection of the design and implementation of our pedagogy online and on how we could try to create meaningful learning in digital spaces where students could discover, question, explore and interrogate their identities in relation to others.

Viewing Vula as a 'boundary object', enabled self-interrogation of the form and function of our pedagogy, and shifted our understanding of

Vula as a flat space to one that was multidimensional and which embraced the crossing-over between worlds, increasing visibility. This allowed the similarities, differences, and discomfort we discovered, to become generative. It enabled us to view Vula as a space which possessed its own agency (Bayat and Mitchell 2020: 62-63), because as we acted upon it, it reciprocated and acted upon us. As a "boundary object" Vula possessed "agentic" qualities (Bayat and Mitchell 2020) that were realised through its interaction with humans. Our encounter with Vula has therefore allowed us to embark on a journey of self-discovery where we meet up with and realise *other* versions of ourselves as practitioners and care-givers, but also as receivers of care (Tronto 2010). Our sense of professional development thus grew out of our vulnerabilities and is aptly captured within the "cyclical process of being and becoming" (Natanasabapathy and Maathuis-Smith 2019: 373). This reinforced our realisation that, "[c]ooperation does not always follow from a pre-existing consensus but can be achieved with objects flowing through various....social worlds" (Timmermans 2015: 4). In this way, the affordances offered by Vula as a 'boundary object' are organic and remain in a dynamic state that constitutes an iterative process in which the horizons of multiple participants and spaces are merged and realised in ways that are never complete, and always in the process of *becoming*.

Way forward

Having employed a "boundary object" lens to critically reflect upon our abrupt shift to online remote teaching, we ask: How do we harness the affordances of the "boundary object" for developing and assessing future pedagogies? How does this impact the future of classroom practice? Our thinking now is that a post-pandemic world might well

result in a return to physical spaces. That said, the recruitment of the online space as part of the resources supporting our pedagogy is here to stay, and encourages a blended teaching approach. This is in line with our institution's 2030 vision (Swingler 2020) where digitally enabled (blended) education has been given prominence. Our online teaching experience has made us more receptive to the flexibility of the design-teaching dynamic. This entails appreciating the resources developed during ERT, and the ways these can evolve to respond to students' participation from diverse locations. This would better prepare us for the future challenges that awaits the world of HE. By viewing context and content as folded together, we hope to fulfil the academic project in socio-economically relevant ways.

Vula and other spaces

What has been invisible in the face-to-face is becoming visible in the online space. We foresee employing more innovative and multi-pronged approaches to using the boundary object as a visible record of teaching practices and its effects. This visibility may enable a broader scope of critical reflection and introspection for academic literacy practitioners and students in terms of how they engage with blended curricula and how this fosters holistic growth. Such student-centred design-teaching structures will set in motion spirals of (re)thinking, (re)imagining, and (re)designing that are highly responsive to the evolving HE contexts.

As academic literacy practitioners, we have come to realise that the "boundary object's" reliance on writing as the main mode of classroom interaction, has left students with no alternative but to *produce texts* in order to communicate their thoughts. This is a welcomed spin-off of the reflective blogs on Vula where students revisit their experiences in light

of theory. This establishes a particular method of inquiry that could be continued in the blended teaching mode to give academic literacy its due place in the academy. The LBM allows us to view students as producers of knowledge (Nomdo *et al.* 2021), a premise that allows us to move away from assimilatory approaches to valuing students' voices through various writing genres, thereby facilitating a process of negotiation in meaning making. This challenges the structures of formal assessment to incentivise more reflexivity in students' writing and to view tasks as part of ongoing portfolios, rather than as discrete units. The online space has allowed for such flexibility, impacting how we view deadlines as learning milestones *rather* than instruments of compliance.

More broadly, flexibility influences our approach towards the student cohort. In fact, a core building block of our practices rests on constructing an ethics of care into our interactions with students. While care was always part of our pedagogy, the pandemic has highlighted stark socio-economic disparities that require a more human approach to the execution of educational activities. Our pedagogy of care *must* continue to promote the fight for social justice. Here, discomfort is viewed as an aspect of care. Essentially, innovation and inclusivity are two ends of a scale, where the appeal of innovation needs to be balanced with the reality of unequal access. Inclusivity requires deliberate efforts to leverage online spaces for transformative purposes. Here, transformation relates to social, epistemic, digital, and existential access. While the online space may have had some constraints in this aspect, blended teaching in future could compensate for this shortcoming.

Taking a step back, Vula, as a boundary object, does facilitate the university's capacity to view students more holistically. We see how the

university's reach is continually expanding beyond its physical context, creating new spaces for cross-institutional collaboration regionally and globally. This again reinforces the boundary object as scattering and "bringing together objects without centering them," making visible how the globally dispersed fractals of the university start to cohere through trans-contextual pedagogical principles and situated practices.

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Theme 3: Transforming online pedagogies

CHAPTER 12

Reflecting on Pivoting to Emergency Remote Online Teaching and Learning during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown: Feedback from three English Second Language (ESL) teachers

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Abstract

This small-scale reflective study provides an analysis of the reflections made by three English Second Language (ESL) teachers teaching in the Intensive English Programme (IEP) offered by Stellenbosch University's Language Centre as they navigated the changing context from face-to-face instruction to online teaching, during a pandemic lockdown. Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Feedback Cycle was used to analyse the three ESL teacher reflections over an eight-week teaching block in order to provide an in-depth understanding of the strategies, adjustments and decisions made as the teachers navigated the changes that had to be made to the IEP during the initial Covid-19 lockdown. The ultimate aim of this reflective study is to gain insight into how ESL teaching staff understand and conceptualise this situation that resulted in pivoting an ESL Programme from in-class to fully online teaching. It is hoped that the results of this study could offer practical suggestions of how to continue to support ESL teachers and their professional development in future emergency remote online environments and could assist in providing recommendations to motivate ESL programme coordinators and managers to continue to successfully navigate future online, blended and augmented learning environments as a result of changes to traditional teaching.

Keywords: English Second Language (ESL), teacher reflection, Intensive English Programme (IEP), online teaching and learning, Covid-19, lockdown.

Background

The Stellenbosch University (SU) Language Centre offers international students the opportunity to study English in South Africa through the Intensive English Programme (IEP), a comprehensive English language course delivered in 8-week blocks from Beginner to Advanced English levels. The first 8-week block of 2020's IEP was in its eighth (assessment) week when South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, announced the initial 21-day, nation-wide lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic to begin at midnight on Thursday, 26th March 2020. Seven international IEP-registered students opted to stay in South Africa and continue their English language classes delivered by three English Second Language (ESL) teachers, despite the uncertainty of a global pandemic affecting their personal and academic lives.

As the IEP Coordinator at Stellenbosch University's Language Centre, I am responsible for the management and delivery of the English Portfolio which includes the IEP. This chapter reports on an element of the case study data collection of my PhD titled: A study of teachers' emotions in a unique online learning environment due to a pandemic lockdown. It provides an analysis of the reflections made by three English Second Language (ESL) teachers teaching in the IEP, as they navigated the changing context from face-to-face instruction to online teaching during the pandemic lockdown.

Why ESL teacher feedback?

English Second Language (ESL) teachers play an indispensable role in language teaching (Sadeghi and Khezrlou 2016) as they are dynamically

involved in the process of decision-making in classroom teaching and simultaneously challenged to provide English language tuition to ESL students from diverse backgrounds and with a variety of needs (Czerniewicz *et al.* 2020). The disruption to education brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020) added an additional challenge to ESL teachers who were suddenly thrust into an emergency online teaching and learning situation (Hodges *et al.* 2020). According to Simpson (2002), students studying online require two types of support: academic support, which includes the knowledge relating to the specific course and general academic skills, and non-academic support which includes the affective and organisational side. However, our knowledge of the support needed for language teachers as they pivot from contact to online learning is limited. This study uses the feedback from ESL teacher reflections to identify the specific challenges faced by these teachers as they navigated the changing context from face-to-face instruction to online teaching during the education disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns.

As the lines between traditional and online language learning contexts become increasingly blurred (Goodfellow and Lamy 2009; Carrillo and Flores 2020), using teacher reflections as a tool to inform online curriculum design and assessment practices in the ESL classroom seems more important than ever (Willis 2001; Hubbard and Levy 2006; Pegrum 2009; Strydom *et al.* 2020). According to Farrel (2015a: 123) reflective ESL practice is "a cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice, and, while engaging in dialogue with others, use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom". Wärnsby, Kauppinen and Finnegan (2021) suggest that teachers who carry out continuous reflective writing practice are better

able to construct and reconstruct their own beliefs and practices and are more equipped and able to offer optimal learning conditions for their ESL students. Regular reflection from ESL teachers is essential in assessing and understanding not only their perception of their ESL students' online learning experience, but also in informing their own online teaching experience (MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer 2020: 5). ESL programme coordinators and managers providing teachers with opportunities for continuous reflection is a way to enhance ESL teaching practice, allow ESL teachers to rethink philosophies to remain relevant to today's ever-growing ESL student population and to be better prepared for future education disruptions (Moayeri and Rahimiy 2019).

Research design and methodology

As I manage the ad hoc teachers teaching these ESL programmes, I was particularly interested in analysing and reporting on what strategies and subsequent adjustments the teachers in this study implemented (MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer 2020) when contact classes moved to emergency remote teaching (Hodges *et al.* 2020) due to the pandemic lockdown (Strydom *et al.* 2020). A descriptive qualitative study design was used (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). The participants are three ESL teachers who work at Stellenbosch University's Language Centre and teach international ESL students in the IEP. Qualitative data was derived from the weekly reflective writings of these participants (ESL teachers N = 3) during an 8-week IEP course that pivoted online as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. I asked the three ESL teachers to provide me with regular feedback (Ghaye 2011) by posting weekly reflective posts on our shared online MS Teams platform. The three questions the participants answered each week were:

1. What do you feel went well when teaching online this week?

2. What do you feel was a challenge when teaching online this week?

3. What suggestions would you like to share with your colleagues about teaching online?

With the verbal and written consent from the three ESL teachers, I collected and recorded this data along with the adjustments they made in their planning, preparation and delivery as we pivoted our teaching delivery towards an audience that was now learning English solely online (Khoo and Cowie 2010: 48; Bozkurt and Sharma 2020: 3).

The Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle model was specifically chosen as it is a circular six-step critical reflection process which lends itself to learning from experiences over time. The Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle includes the following steps: Step 1: Description, Step 2: Feelings, Step 3: Evaluation, Step 4: Analysis, Step 5: Conclusion, Step 6: Action Plan. As this was a reflective study with the intent of informing future practice, the unit of analysis was a sentence or paragraph from the teacher reflections. The teacher reflections were first read through several times (Graneheim and Lundman 2004) then inductive content analysis was used for coding in which each unit of analysis was categorised under one of the six steps of the Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle identified from the deductive phase (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

Results and discussion

A summary of the data analysed is represented below under the six steps of the Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle, accompanied by examples of selected teacher reflections as they appeared on the shared Microsoft

Teams platform. The three ESL teachers are represented as Teacher A, Teacher B and Teacher C.

Step 1: Description

As Stellenbosch University uses Microsoft Teams as its online platform, the three ESL teachers were encouraged to use the platform as a communication tool to minimise the number of emails being sent and to have one shared space for resources as there were still many uncertainties regarding how we would administer the Intensive English Programme online (Li 2013: 218) as we moved to an emergency remote teaching environment (Hodges *et al.* 2020).

The shared MS Teams platform quickly became an administrative space, housing templates, rubrics, level descriptors and observation feedback (van der Spoel *et al.* 2020: 625). This became crucial to the programme as a central, shared space where all administrative essentials could be found, downloaded and used without the need to contact me or each other.

> *[2020/04/16 2:08 PM] Teacher B: I feel for the next block we might need to consider doing only one unit per week and doing it more slowly and more thoroughly, adding lots of extra practice from the workbook and lots of extra exercises, videos, games, etc. from our online resources.*

Step 2: Feelings

Generally, teachers reflected that their main concern when teaching online was feeling isolated from their students due to the remote nature of the online teaching and learning environment, especially during the lockdowns.

[2020/05/11 1:35 PM] Teacher A: Isolation is taking its toll, psychologically, as well as in [Student 2] and [Student 3's] cases due to the lack of exposure to an English Environment and English conversations. Progress is therefore slower than in the contact classes and I have opted for quality over quantity, also in review exercises and homework.

Teachers found the sudden move from face-to-face to online teaching jarring and missed the nuances of an in-person classroom setting.

[2020/04/17 3:47 PM] Teacher A: Mine prefer to keep their video picture switched off, which makes it more difficult to engage with them and keep their attention.

Teachers were concerned that students were not performing optimally as the IEP is already challenging to lower-level ESL students in person. By shifting the teaching and learning environment online, many adjustments had to be made to the content delivery and teaching approach (MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer 2020).

[2020/04/16 2:08 PM] Teacher B: Challenges this week: The amount of work we need to get through. Lower-level students, combined with a student that has a low motivation and is often absent and almost always late, as well as online teaching.

Teachers expressed their concern about managing academic expectations as a result of the physical distance between them and their students, as well as the differences between in-person and online assessment (Li, 2013).

[2020/05/15 1:21 PM] Teacher C: [Student 7] rewrote his first language assessment yesterday and failed again (crying emoji). This concerns

and worries me a lot and is the only bad thing about my week. Did I fail in teaching him? Did I do enough? What more could I have done? He blames Lockdown which I understand - not the best environment to study in.

Teachers also struggled with managing their own and their students' changing emotions (Badia, Garcia and Meneses 2019; Chen 2019), often brought on by the uncertainty of their daily situation, in addition to personal concerns regarding mental and physical health.

[2020/05/15 1:21 PM] Teacher C: I set up a whole new assessment and all the questions came from his Workbook...if he practised like I suggested he could have gotten easy marks...So I'm lost and disappointed - I know he is too, which breaks my heart.

Despite these concerns, all three ESL teachers expressed that they had experienced both personal and professional growth (Alves, Lopes and Precioso 2020).

[2020/05/22 8:28 AM] Teacher B: You're doing great, don't worry! This is uncharted territory for our specific programme and I think we should be proud of what we've managed to do with the students! That "teaching yourself the grammar first" is not a bad thing at all! Even if you know the grammar rules well, it's a whole different ball game teaching them online and especially teaching them at the right level (you can't overwhelm lower-level students with all the uses of certain tenses at once, for example).

In addition, the teachers were willing to constantly upskill themselves using online professional development sites or sharing best practices with each other.

[2020/05/22 5:36 PM] Teacher C: The videos are great! I've incorporated them into my listening assessments. They are very interesting and informative and I've gotten positive responses from my students when we use them. It will make them more tech-savvy - crucial to have these skills nowadays.

Step 3: Evaluation

Teachers expressed that being allowed the opportunity to learn 'on the job' and at their own and their students' pace, through trial and error, made a significant improvement in their technology skills as well as their understanding of the additional applications and tools available on the shared platform. As a result, teachers became more aware of their limitations and strengths regarding online teaching (Fuchs and Akbar 2013) and were quick to point out in teacher meetings and check-ins what they felt confident with and what they felt they still needed to practise (Chen 2019).

[2020/05/15 4:11 PM] Teacher A: I feel that continuing at the students' pace is sensible as well as keeping up the conversations during lessons. We are in an environment that we cannot control. My aim remains quality over quantity and they are quick to tell me when they need more practice, which is a positive thing!

Having a digital bank of resources that was constantly being updated by teachers meant that they were able to download the resources they needed daily, and check that they had the appropriate level of skill and the correct understanding of the technology to use the specific resource effectively (Phelps and Vlachopoulos, 2020). The ESL teachers and I would regularly upload links of new or effective resources we discovered to the shared platform.

[2020/05/29 4:09 PM] Teacher A: The big positive is that I now have a much better idea of how to plan the block and which aspects of the unit are must-haves vs. nice-to-haves. I will most definitely have to work hard during this coming week to get my ducks in a row regarding better utilisation of technology.

Teachers spent a significant amount of time moving assessments to a digital format, however, once all the paper-based quizzes, tests, assignments and assessments were moved to this format, the resultant marking time was significantly reduced. Teachers initially used Google forms and then Microsoft forms as templates to create these digital assessments. The settings allow teachers to choose the best format (multiple choice/short answer/long answer) for each question and to include a marking memorandum. Teachers could also choose whether the results were made available immediately to students or later with teacher feedback.

Step 4: Analysis

Moving classes online immediately brought with it several assumptions (Jansem 2019: 62). One was that teachers would need less time to prepare as everything was now digital. Teachers, however, reported the opposite, that they felt they needed even more planning and preparation time as they were simultaneously learning to use a new digital platform, adapting existing resources to digital formats and creating interactive and engaging lessons (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020: 3).

[2020/04/17 3:47 PM] Teacher A: Students need more clarification and guidance with tasks and exercises, which eats time. I think the reason is because it is more difficult for them to concentrate online.

In order to better manage their teaching time, teachers often divided the usual 4-hour, in-person IEP classes into smaller, more manageable chunks of time to assist with both students' and teacher concentration. Most reading, listening and writing exercises were presented as self-paced, asynchronous activities to be done in preparation of the online classes, while the synchronous sessions had a strong focus on communicative activities and vocabulary acquisition.

> *[2020/04/16 1:56 PM] Teacher B: I've started using screen sharing this week and it's been working really well. I use it to show the students pictures, to let them read parts of articles on the web, project the student book content on the screen so that they can follow without having to open their own documents on their computer, and to even play short videos that we watch together. It is also a very useful tool to show them around Teams and help them to understand how the app works.*

Another assumption was that teachers would begin to work more and more in isolation. However, the posting of feedback on a shared platform allowed teachers to not only communicate with each other, but to share best practices, advice, teacher resources and provide each other with assistance (Finlay 2008: 5; Picton 2019: 2).

> *[202/05/22 8;49 AM] Teacher C: Zoom has great annotations that you can use with a PowerPoint presentation or whiteboard. I should actually show you guys what I've learned. I'm definitely going to look into this as an option.*

A third assumption was that international students would be well-resourced and have access to digital equipment. The reality was that most ESL students had access to at least a smartphone, so keeping the

content in a digital format seemed the most effective and efficient way to deliver lessons. It was also easier to update digital content in order to stay relevant. The teachers agreed that PowerPoint presentations accompanying the coursebook and digital components of the coursebook such as audio and video files would be the best way to present content going forward, either projecting videos onto a screen or audio through a microphone.

> *[2020/04/16 2:09 PM] Teacher B: Another positive: Using the chat box along with the video chat to write down examples, or type something if a student can't hear properly, etc. also works very well. I also use it when we're discussing vocab and to give info on, for example, test dates.*

Step 5: Conclusion

The ESL teachers' responses provided me with an opportunity to research and include relevant professional development in our teacher meetings and to better assist me to guide the teachers (Pratt 2015: 20; Tull *et al.* 2017: 64) with difficulties they were experiencing each week due to the sudden move to emergency remote teaching (Hodges *et al.* 2020). Teachers quickly realised that planning online classes takes longer as teachers need to make the content 'come alive' on screen (van der Spoel *et al.* 2020).

> *[202/05/22 5:11AM] Teacher B: It is so hard to monitor students' understanding in the current format that we're teaching in - online. Interactive, online grammar and vocab exercises where we can see the results will definitely be the next step! As we know, "Do you understand?" and "Do you have any questions?" are not really effective in an ESL class and this is something I've been struggling*

with as well since we went online, even though I'm good at eliciting, and identifying and targeting students' weak spots in a normal class setup.

Finally, the weekly teacher reflections were essential to me as the programme coordinator as it gave me a way to understand where my teachers were on a personal level (Moayeri and Rahimiy 2019: 131) and allowed me to know when and how to approach my teachers in any given week.

Step 6: Action plan

In future, the IEP will continue to use the digital resource bank attached to the MS Teams platform as a shared space for administration, a resource hub, and as our main form of online communication (Picton 2019), almost entirely replacing the need for email. The platform will remain a place to store all our programme templates, rubrics, observation guides, level descriptors, assessments, assignments, quizzes, presentations and anything that we as a group need to access for the programme. Additionally, the shared online space will continue to house professional development and teacher resources, as well as provide a space for teachers to post examples of technological tools and applications that worked for their lessons (Phelps and Vlachopoulos 2020: 1514).

Whether future content delivery is contact, online or blended, the IEP will continue to create digital assessments and assignments to keep the printing low, the marking time reduced, and to provide students with more timeous responses and feedback (Murphy 2020a: 497). ESL teachers will continue to intermittently use digital tools and applications for individual and small group student activities and

games, for warmers and as interactive tools for students, in order to engage with the content and with each other (Badia 2019: 458-459). As an additional resource, should there be technology disruptions (Tull *et al.* 2017), we will order a reduced number of paper-based course books that teachers and students will have access to.

Conclusion

The feedback in this study collected over 8 weeks, informed my own and the three ESL teachers' planning, preparation, curriculum creation and design, as well as the future presentation of the IEP as it entered the 'new normal' of online delivery as a result of the initial Covid-19 lockdown. Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle proved to be a helpful aid for the programme coordinator when analysing the participants' reflections of their feelings, emotions, thoughts, and resultant actions related to the challenging situation of moving from in-contact lessons to fully online teaching and learning. The participants' weekly feedback was integral to understanding the challenging situation of a lockdown from the teachers' perspective, navigating their own personal challenges while adapting to online teaching. The participants' reflections further contributed to programming decisions made in the English programme and provided additional opportunities to review their professional practice (Moayeri and Rahimiy 2019). This study further highlights, for programme coordinators and managers, the need for regular teacher reflection, especially during an education disruption such as the Covid-19 pandemic (MacIntyre, Gregersen and Mercer 2020), as an effective tool to manage and develop ESL teachers holistically.

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CHAPTER 13

Higher Education versus Covid-19 Impact: Toward an Inclusive Higher Education
Reflections on UCT's Emergency Remote Learning and Teaching from a student perspective

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Abstract

This paper aimed to explore and understand the University of Cape Town student perceptions and lived experiences of Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL) during Covid-19. Covid-19 is a communicable disease instigated by a novel virus (SARS CoV-2 virus). After the inevitable subsequent national lockdown of South Africa, the university implemented ERTL measures for the second quarter of the first semester to curb the impact of the virus on its students while also enabling learning and teaching activities to continue remotely. This paper reports on the 707 students who responded to an online survey while engaged in their online courses. The Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, and Redefinition (SAMR) and Andersons' Online Learning Model were used to engage with students on the use of technology that enabled their interaction with lecturers, each other, learning and teaching activities, and other remote learning resources. Understanding the student experiences was achieved through a mixed-method paper approach that involved undergraduate and postgraduate students. The Google form online surveys, with both open and closed ended questions with some using the 5-point Likert scale ratings, were distributed using social media platforms and university email system to students in order to collect the data. MAXQDA and Excel software were

later utilised to analyse and code the data. Findings of this paper indicate that the ERTL experience of the participants during the Covid-19 pandemic presented both opportunities and barriers. Some of the perceived opportunities by students were flexibility and convenience, pedagogical improvements, time saving, self-directed learning (working anytime they want and creating and managing their working schedule), and spending time with family. Interestingly, some of these benefits turned out to be challenges for some of the students. Hence, some of the barriers students perceived were distractions, internet connectivity and technical issues, inequitable living and environment conditions, lack of hands-on experience and how this made their degree feel incomplete and difficult, mental health issues, and many other barriers. The disciplinary faculties that experienced most of the obstacles and difficulties associated with ERTL were those whose academic experience depended on practical work in labs and studios or needed software that can only be accessed through labs and would need a specific operating system. The carrying out of this research will help ensure the effectiveness, investment, and continual integration of technology in future programs that involve learning and teaching.

Keywords: Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning, Covid-19, online learning, higher education

Introduction and context

It is over two years now since significant disruptions to education took place because of Covid-19. Covid-19 is a communicable disease instigated by a novel virus called SARS CoV-2 virus (World Health Organization 2021). The devastation caused by the virus also included loss of human life and lack of access of education from physical schools (Cilliers *et al.* 2020; Koninckx, Fatondji and Burgos 2021; World

Health Organization 2021; Donnelly, Patrinos and Gresham 2021). Businesses, social activities, and other essential activities and services in South Africa and the world at large were affected. As a result, this chapter aims to capture the experiences of the University of Cape Town (UCT) students who underwent Emergency Remote Learning and Teaching (ERTL) after Covid-19 affected Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in South Africa. Consequently, South African public and private universities, colleges, and schools were all affected, and a central focus for this research was the UCT, in the Western Cape of South Africa. After the inevitable subsequent national lockdown of South Africa, the university placed ERTL measures in place for the second quarter of the first semester to curb the impact of the virus on its students while also enabling learning and teaching activities to continue remotely. ERTL meant that learning and teaching activities were 'rapidly' shifted from face-to-face learning to remote learning. Hence, the objective of the study was to understand students' experiences to improve ERTL for students at different levels of their learning. To achieve this objective, the study primarily focussed on student concerns, perceptions, and expectations regarding remote learning during the pandemic. It is therefore worth noting that UCT, as the first best African university (Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2022; Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings 2022; U.S. News & World Report Best Global Universities Rankings 2022) has over 28 000 students and 707 of these students participated in the research study. This number included undergraduate (first to third year) and postgraduate (honours to doctorate) students. The study used two models, Anderson's online learning model and the Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, and Redefinition (SAMR) model to investigate further the online learning and teaching experiences and to

understand the levels technology was integrated during ERTL. This chapter further evaluates and analyses the results using the data collected from students. This analysis includes ERTL benefits and disadvantages using both quantitative and qualitative methods. It was hoped that the results would divulge pertinent weaknesses, threats, strengths, and opportunities and better ways in which the university can intervene to help the most disadvantaged and adversely affected students.

Theoretical perspective

In order to understand student experiences and fully capture them through the academic writing process, the Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, and Redefinition (SAMR) and Andersons' Online Learning Model were used to engage with students on the use of technology that enabled their interaction with lecturers, other students, learning and teaching activities, and other remote learning resources. The two models are shown below and Puentedura (2013) communicates that the SAMR model, shown in Figure 1, helps in evaluating the activities taking place between the three agents from Anderson model, i.e., student-content, student-teacher, student-student, by looking at the level in which technology is induced in the learning and teaching environment to enable the successful expressions of these agents. The shift from enhancement to transformation means that technology is used to impact the learning and teaching processes and resources in a more complex manner as we move from enhancement to transformation. Transformation is assumed to be better in the SAMR model because of how it better influences the experience of learning and teaching, and how it appeals to more styles of learning, which may affect the perception that students have on the education they consume. The

SAMR model helps categorise the different levels of technology integration, and the study used this model to classify how students perceived the use of technology during ERTL. Hence, survey questions were also categorised according to these different levels, and so was the coding of data when analysing student responses.
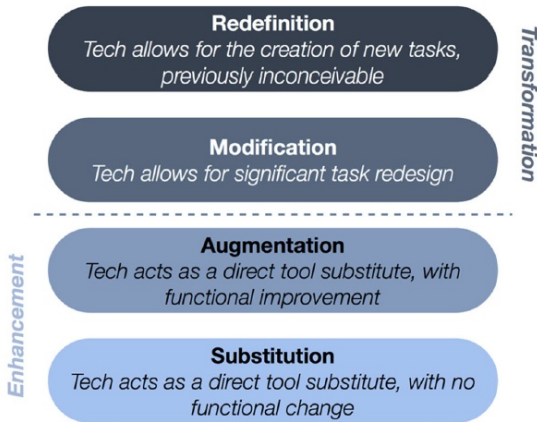

Figure 1: The SAMR Model (Puentedura 2013)

With regards to the online learning model in Figure 2, the teaching experience or presence provided by the technological environment and academic lecturer and the cognitive network of students creates a Community of Inquiry (CoI). As a result, the CoI enables learning and teaching – educational exchange. It follows that, the student, in this case, interacts with content as well as the academic lecturer. Given the above, the student, teacher, and content interaction bring about the sustainable process of creating knowledge. However, Anderson and Elloumi (2004) argue that it is enabled by these agents and the technological environment and activities carried out within that environment.
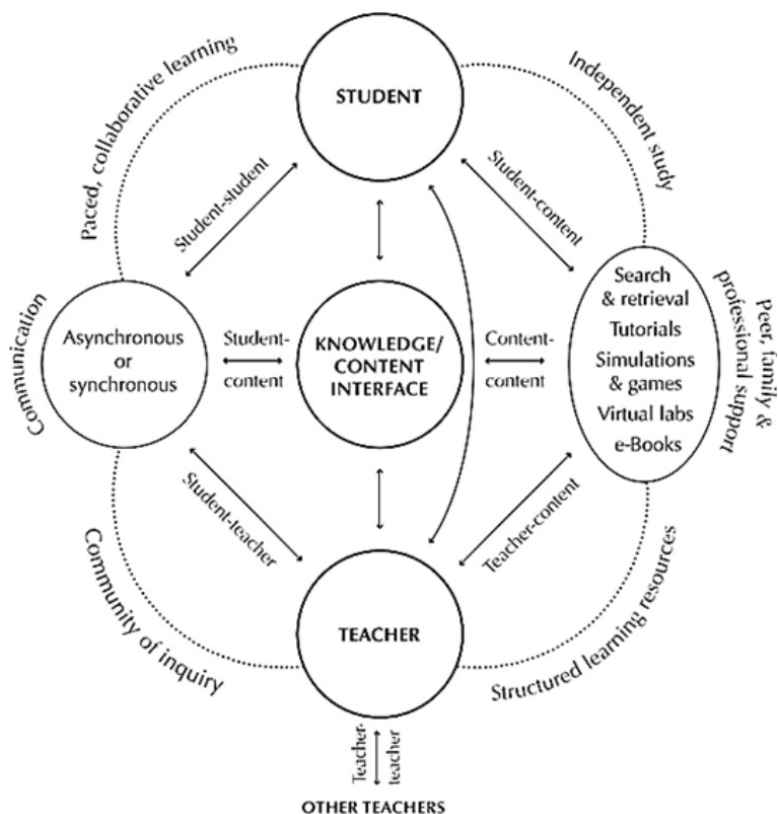
Figure 2: Anderson's Online Learning Model (Anderson 2011)

These two models were chosen because they provide a sound and meaningful conceptual and theoretical framing for the research study. Hence, the basis of this research, together with its questions and sub-questions, is paradigmatically and philosophically linked with the above-mentioned theoretical models and this also provides a linkage between reviewed existing literature as well as the real-world experiences of the students during ERTL. This suggests that, to best

answer the research question adequately and find a plausible solution to the problem mentioned, these two models must accommodate the evaluation of the student, teacher, and content dynamics within an online learning environment where technology is integrated into the learning experience at different varying levels as seen in the SAMR model in Figure 1. This also means the use of these two models provided an opportunity to explain why existing literature in this field of research needs to be extended and shows why the results of this research matter in the real-world. In summary, the next part of the chapter shows the impact of the pandemic and describes the research methods used to obtain the data from the students.

Higher education vs Covid-19 impact: University of Cape Town perspective

As the impact of Covid-19 continued, the university committed to press on efforts to support its affected students, this partly meant enhancing the student-student, student-content, and student-teacher relationship to enhance the learning and teaching experience. Obi and Ticha (2021), in their study, mentioned that both the lecturers and university did not put in place strategies allocated by learning designers and technologists. An example of these strategies included being able to execute strategies that included learning experiences appropriately designed and facilitated for differently abled students, using a variety of large groups, small groups, and specific individual work experiences to create a suitable supportive and conducive online course community that would have enhanced the remote teaching and learning experience during the pandemic. This places a great deal of importance on the relationship between the university staff, learning designers and university management. It is worth noting, that before collecting data,

confidentiality and informed consent of the participants were kept as priority of the research and because the study involved human participants. Confidentiality was maintained and informed consent was received from participants before commencing with the survey.

The first few weeks of data collection using non-contact methods (google form) was an interesting learning experience since I was emotionally and academically connected to the impact of the pandemic on students and the university. To respond to the pandemic, UCT and other universities around the globe transitioned their learning and teaching to emergency remote learning and teaching (ERTL). Africa could only have 29% of its higher education institutions set-up with ERTL environments with Europe managing 85% of its institutions (Koninckx, Fatondji and Burgos 2021). Hence, this research paper has an in-depth focus on ERTL because the pandemic has shown that the education and preparation of leaders, innovative entrepreneurs, and effective workforce is a key priority for all countries around the globe and Covid-19 challenged how education was offered. Hence, this study is significant as it offers a particular interest in the student concerns, perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding remote learning during a pandemic. 'Why is this important?' This was important because students are an important stakeholder in Higher Education Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Thus, it is essential to satisfy their needs and interests by understanding their learning experiences and the teaching methods. To collect data from students, a google-form survey was used since physical contact and group gatherings were not permitted during the lockdown. The online survey provided a necessary and viable platform to get different insights and more in-depth information in an economical and valuable manner during Covid-19. The challenge with this option was internet access and student availability.

Regardless of the challenges, the survey investigated students' experience with regards to working and learning remotely and measured this using the preference and perception scales. The preference scale evaluated the degree of the students' preference for remote learning over face-to-face learning. For the quantitative questions, the survey used close-ended items (CEIs) using 5-point Likert scale ratings from 'strongly disagree' SD = 1 to 'strongly agree' SA = 5. This was deemed as a suitable scale to determine respondents' attitudes and perceptions by asking them to choose to place themselves on a scale regarding a given statement.

Consequently, data indicated that the research presented a valuable learning opportunity for the students. Although there were frustrating and overwhelming emotions induced by the writing process, many students, especially those who came from devastated homes and those who did not have a suitable environment for their mental health, participated and became vulnerable during data collection. It was concerning that first-year students got a tough and unexpected start to their academic and university life experience. The students engaged with their professional learning under extreme conditions induced by the pandemic. Below, the chapter evaluates and analyses the results of the study as well as qualitatively and quantitively shows the prevailing benefits and challenges faced by the student during ERTL.

Evaluation and analysis

Participant demographics

As explained above, the data was collected from different faculties and the data was separated according to the different faculties and locations students came from. This was helpful for the qualitative data analysis. The student qualitative data is coded according to Participant

faculty (Law = Law, Health Science = Hea, Engineering the Built Environment = EBE, Science = Sci, Commerce = Com, Humanities = Hum, location (Rural = R, Township = T, Suburb = S), and the participant number (1 – 707). For example, this would result in a participant's reflection or contribution with a number ComR234, representing participant 234 who was under the Commerce faculty living in a rural community. A large number of participants, from a total of 707, came from suburb (city) locations as seen in Figure 3:
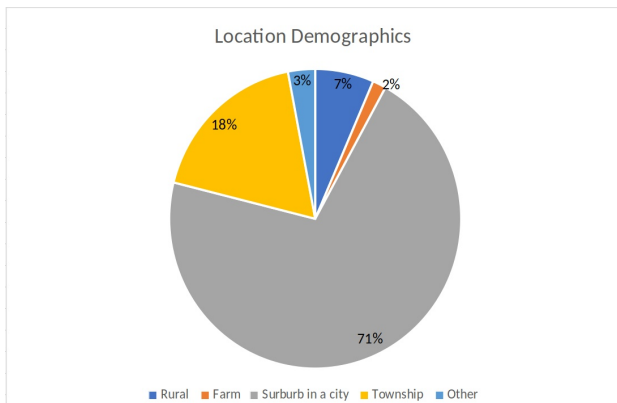
Figure 3: Location demographics

Participants were asked about their preferred mode of leaning as indicated in Figure 4:
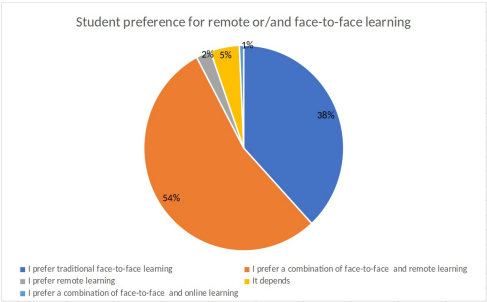
Figure 4: Student preference for remote or/and face-to-face learning

It was expected that a large number of the student body would prefer face-to-face learning since their experiences have been more aligned to this way of learning. Instead, majority of the students preferred a blend of remote and face-to-face learning. Hence, when given the statement 'I prefer remote learning over face-to-face learning', the students responded as depicted in Figure 5:

Figure 5: Student preference for remote or/and face-to-face learning

This further confirmed that students prefer a blended approach of learning and teaching. To summarise, below are the prevailing themes

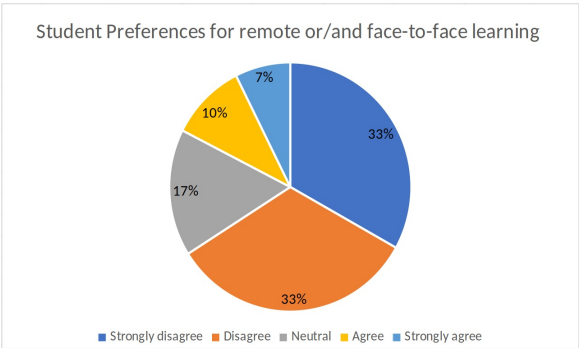that underpinned the students' experiences. To qualitatively show the extent of the impact of ERTL, some student reflections and feedback on the survey are in quotations.

Distractions

A prominent theme in the study was the challenges experienced with environmental, social, and cognitive distractions in their working environments. Students shared both constructive and undesirable experiences of being home with family and it would have been interesting to study further which students or student grouping experienced these paradoxically varying experiences. For many students, access to campus resources, i.e., lecturers, Wi-Fi, etc., was a critical aspect of their learning. The notion, as Czerniewicz *et al.* (2020) mentions, of learning anywhere and anytime, was critically challenged during ERTL as students in this study complained about working at home. In many other studies, this was a paradoxical finding. In the study, some students enjoyed working at home as they claim this gave them a sense of freedom, more time to work and focus, and more family time to build relationships. For some students, which was a majority, working in home environments was a struggle because of the environmental, social, and cognitive distractions they experienced. These distractions came from their working environments with their family space being too cramped, noisy, having many responsibilities, or chores, etc. For many students, this tested their cognitive and organisational agility (Wu *et al.* 2020). Hodges *et al.* (2020) also share how universities need to plan for such distractions experienced by students in order to improve their academic offering. In this research study, as explained above, students strongly agreed that remote learning has many distractions and that most students suffer from

being distracted in the remote learning environment, and this same environment manages to test students' ability to manage both learning and non-learning events online. Some of the comments collected from the surveys are detailed below.

Many students commented on the disadvantage of distractions they experienced at home. A total of 512 commented (18,6% - second highest total) and below, they share external and internal distractions they experienced at home when asked what the challenges of ERTL are:

At home there are many distractions. It is a depressing time for everyone. (Participant EBER231)

...distraction from family members (do not understand the work demands from school. (Participant EBER231)

Distraction, exhaustion, stress, anxiety, too much to do, lack of support, too high expectations etc. (Participant HumR10)

Family distractions, discipline, retaining information, motivation, lack of human interaction, less support. (Participant HumS157)

With an actual person in front of me, I pay attention. At home, I am always on my phone or browsing the internet. (Participant HumS56)

Distractions at home and also no one keeping me accountable (i.e., how a tutor would in tutorials). (Participant Law S59)

Mental health challenges

This theme was one of the most dominant (third largest) themes in the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. Findings show that mental health and well-being was a common concern from the student perspective. The ERTL experience revealed that many students

struggled and were distracted by mental health and well-being issues induced or perpetuated by their experience with remote learning. Reading through the existing literature and research findings, the mental health and well-being issues seemed to have mostly been connected to living in a cramped and poverty-stricken home environment, induced family distractions, lack of discipline, lack of human interaction, and less support (Cao *et al.* 2020; Hussein *et al.* 2020); Trung *et al.* 2020). A total of 487 (17,7%) students commented on having experienced mental health problems that ranged from distress to anxiety and depression. Some of the participants mentioned:

Face to face we can communicate, distress, and gain support from other students when complaining about the workload and that seems to have a psychological benefit to many students. However online. It is difficult to communicate and interact. It's very difficult to explain to your colleague when they have a problem or vice versa as you are not able to fully illustrate. (Participant HumR124)

...my anxiety levels are high, and my insomnia is worse so that doesn't help. (Participant ComR234)

.... living in emotionally abusive households, depression creeping in. (Participant HumT464)

ERTL perceived advantages and disadvantages

Figure 6 depicts the qualitative analysis of the student perspectives on the disadvantages they experienced.
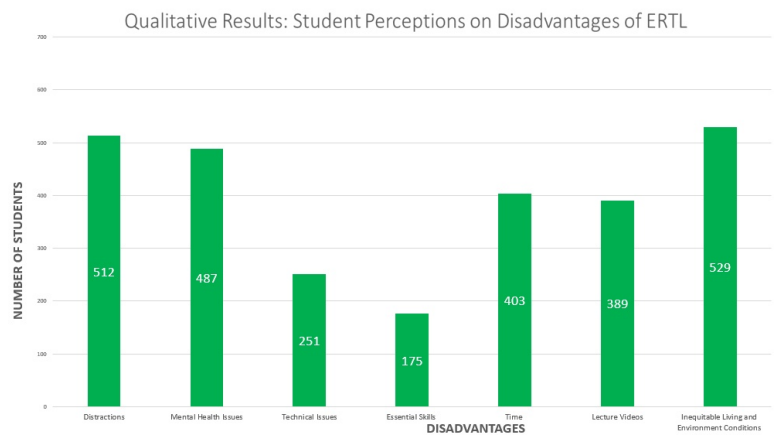
Figure 6: Student perspectives on disadvantages of ERTL

Figure 7 is an expression of the compartmentalisation of benefits of ERL experienced by students.
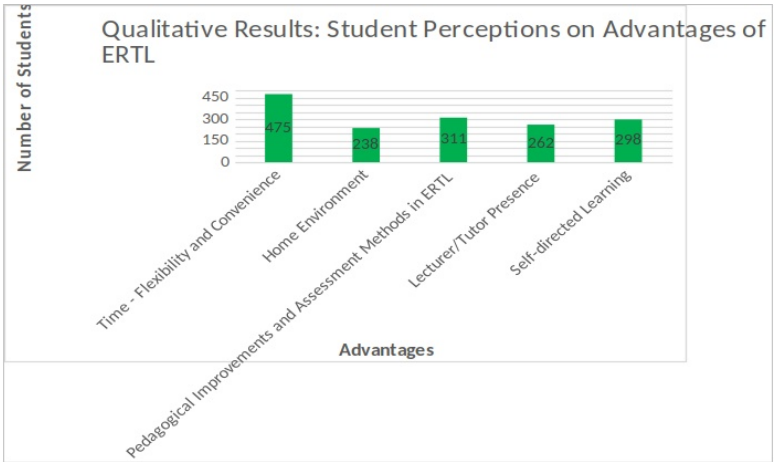

Figure 7: Student perspectives on advantages of ERTL

A total of 298 (18,8%) students commented on the advantage of self-directed learning. Some of the students said they experienced more self-directed learning, which enhanced their confidence in using multiple external sources of data and learning and teaching:

I use multiple sources such as YouTube to explain things I don't understand. (Participant SciS589)

Taking better notes, watching lecture, & YouTube videos. (Participant HumT65)

I have the time, readings and other multimedia resources to enable me to engage with the topic at a deeper level of understanding than would be the case in a contact class session. (Participant HumS19)

In summary, students showed more interest in blended learning and teaching, and their second option was a face-to-face learning and teaching environment, and they shared their views on why they currently appreciate learning remotely. In cases where some were displeased with not receiving sufficient practical experience and personal interaction, they noticed new skills like using computers, communicating with peers and teachers, and time management were less difficult because of ERTL. Some of the comments students shared regarding these new skills included, but are not limited to the following:

Lots of content but practical experience also essential …. Yes, online learning isn't as personal, but it is easier to pace online learning. (Participant SciS23)

I have lecture recordings/videos/notes that are available to use given to us by the lecturer. wouldn't have these if it was face to face learning. (Participant HeaR542)

Other writers mentioned similar experiences from students regarding mental health and well-being issues (Cao *et al.* 2020, Hussein *et al.* 2020; Trung *et al.* 2020) and these experiences seemed to have mostly been connected to living in a cramped and poverty-stricken home environment, induced family distractions, lack of discipline, lack of human interaction and support. What is also noticeable, regarding understanding student perceptions through the online learning design model, is that students felt lonely and detached from each other, the content provided, and their lecturer. This feeling refers specifically to the student-content, student-student, and student-teacher agencies that Anderson and Elloumi (2004) mentioned in the online learning model (Nzala 2021).

Internet connectivity and technical challenges

The faculties that experienced most of the obstacles and difficulties associated with ERTL were those whose academic experience depended on practical work in labs and studios or needed software that can only be accessed through labs and would need a specific operating system (Nzala 2021). Some students commented on a complete lack of access where even data bundles could not work:

No network in the villages. (Participant HumR464)

MTN being not zero rated and getting little to no support from ICTS and lecturers about this. The worst part is the 4 weeks of going back and forth with UCT support structure and no assistance. (Participant HumT4)

Online it is challenging, especially once the provides data bundles deplete. (Participant HumR238)

Data struggles, once the provided data depletes, one is subject to 6 hours of night data of which can barely keep awake. (Participant HumT187)

Many students don't have data/Wi-Fi, so you aren't able to effectively communicate with them until they manage to get more data or access to the internet. It makes it extremely difficult. To engage with other students. (Participant HeaS84)

Connectivity, WIFI is slow. (Participant LawS537)

I do not have access to Wi-Fi. The data UCT provides helped but the network coverage is sometimes very badly. (Participant EBER231)

Inequitable living and environment conditions

Students' living and environmental conditions contributed to their perception of ERTL, which is related to what distracts students during their learning and teaching. Some of the students experienced a challenge with video media delivery, among other problems. A total of 529 (19,3% - highest total) students commented on the disadvantage of inequitable living and environmental conditions. Some students commented on the complex environments they lived in:

I am learning how to adapt to working in a difficult environment. (Participant SciT23)

Living in a cramped and poverty-stricken home environment. (Participant SciR21)

I live with a family of 23 people in a 4-bedroom house. I do not have space to study. It always noisy and the people in the house are not considerate at all. I have a 4-year-old kid that I have to take care of

and do the house chores. I only get one proper meal a day and always tired. (Participant SciR219)

It's not a comment on online learning but at this point I honestly need to go back to res to continue with online learning because I actually prefer it. My environment isn't just working out for me, I feel like I'd do better if I had a healthy environment. (Participant HumR404)

None really because day to day activities that come with the responsibility you end up taking on when being home and having to reason with people who don't understand what being a student entails end sup interfering with any sort of schedule you set for yourself. (Participant HumR228)

Spontaneous activities at home. Family noises, kids playing, no electricity at times, babysitting, errands, chores. (Participant ComT55)

No personal space. (Participant EBER231)

Lack of space at home led to some students experiencing mental health challenges:

Making time in the circumstance I live in and also requiring working space when I have none at home ... I've never been stressed in my life; I am having a hellish time. (Participant HumT241)

No network in the villages, living in emotionally abusive households, depression creeping in. (Participant HumT464)

I generally have low concentration span but now it's worse. I don't have a study room or a formal place to study I have to cook or do

something in the house which may take a lot of time. The network sometimes sucks, my anxiety levels are high, and my insomnia is worse so that doesn't help. (Participant ComR234)

At home there are many distractions. It is a depressing time for everyone. Getting up to date with my workload has been one of the biggest problems I have come to deal with. (Participant EBER231)

Before the corona virus kills us most of us would have died from the stress that comes from being expected to learn in the type of environments we come from. (Participant HumR102)

As much as students struggled with living environments, they also struggled with the lack of practical experience in their courses, and this is detailed below.

Lack of hands-on experience

The lack of practical experience for particular disciplines such as medicine, filmmaking, etc, led to students perceiving ERTL as an incomplete and difficult degree experience. This was especially true for first year students whose introduction to university, and HE was ERTL. Students alleged that they experienced distress and great trouble getting to learn a subject area that depends on personal practical experience. Additionally, they claim that they had to succumb to being satisfied with seeing the lecturer's practical experimentation only through video or watching it via YouTube or other websites. Many students complained about not having sufficient internet connection or data, thereby not being able to learn from other sources in an attempt to make up for the gap of knowledge from hands-on experience. What was surprising was how students intensely complained about this and expressed their painful experiences. Students claimed that the

knowledge they acquire in their current year under ERTL affects their progression to the next year. Students usually use their practical sessions and face-to-face learning to engage and learn. Their prerogative is that remote learning prevents them from engaging on the topics further with lecturers, which amounts to cognitive, lecturer, and student presence deficiency. The lack of practical experience students experienced contributed to their perception of ERTL, and this included seeing the lecturer face-to-face. The feedback from students when asked what their difficulty was with ERTL is presented below to further affirm the need for practical experience in the courses:

It is difficult in the sense that my science courses have practical's that greatly help engage with course work and gain understanding from practical examples and visuals. I grasp things better when I hear it first and see someone talking about it (lecturing) then I go over it in my own time. Now with remote learning I am all by myself which needs me to find some efficient way of grasping new course content such as maybe YouTube. With Sociology we have class discussions that help bring different point of perspectives that help fully tackle topics but now I am limited to my own views. (Participant HumT402)

I'm doing medicine and I'm 3rd year. I feel like I really needed the patient interactions to keep me motivated and right now my motivation levels are dangerous low. Interaction with other students is at bare minimum. I interact with one group because we have a project to finish but that's about it. (Participant HeaT88)

It is okay when it comes to the theory only but the practical aspect where experiments must be conducted in labs is affected. And even though measures to record lab procedures and send them through

to students are being put in place, it is not the same because lab experiments require personal interaction with the equipment, i.e. some reactions may give off a particular smell which could be key in the experiment or give off heat of which the temperature changes of the equipment can be felt, of which all the latter, among other reasons makes online learning a bit tricky. (Participant SciS563)

I am a clinical year medical student and it's impossible to teach certain procedures we are meant to learn online. (Participant HeaS2)

In engineering there is a lot of theory that we would are able to study form home, however there are problems that arise when things like practical's, tuts, and tests need to occur. (Participant EBES412)

Statistics is easy as you just need to watch videos on the concepts and then practice the concepts. Information systems is a little trickier as all the work is group project work and some students don't have access to Wi-Fi/internet so you continuously having to carry 3-4 other group members and do way too much work. You feel for the students who don't have any access to resources as learning must be extremely tough but it's also difficult to try and to work meant for 4 people by yourself. (Participant ComS16)

Most will say that within the humanities facility online learning is easier, however I don't seem to agree. I personally prefer contact learning due to it being more engaging. (Participant HumR4)

Doing a PhD in medicine means I need face time with my supervisor, I need practical work to become better, so it's frustrating. (Participant HeaS317)

Summary

The findings show that ERTL enabled flexibility and convenience, pedagogical improvements, time saving, self-directed learning (working at times convenient to them and creating and managing their working schedule), and spending time with family. These, of course, are some of the well-known advantages of online learning and teaching hence, these were the key benefits and opportunities experienced by students. Interestingly, benefits for some, turned out to be challenges for other students. Hence, some of the barriers students experienced were distractions, internet connectivity and technical issues, inequitable living and environment conditions, lack of hands-on experience and how this contributed to the difficulty of their degree, mental health issues, and many other barriers.

A wide range of literature displayed that lack of access to computers, internet connection, technical support, and personal expertise can be equated to inequity (Tienken 2020; Rahiem 2020; Dunbar-Smalley, Lukman and Hawkins 2021). Skills essential for remote learning success, emotional and mental health challenges, including internet access and technical challenges were one of the ills linked with inequity in the study and universal literature. It is notable that these findings confirm studies from India, Pakistan, Nigeria, etc. For example, Affouneh, Salha and Khlaif (2020) mentioned how some of the distractions and challenges students experienced were due to lack of internet access. This research also exposes that inequitable living conditions caused by poverty were a big challenge for many university students coming from rural and township homes. When one reflects, the university campus provided an environment of financial, emotional, social, and academic support for many students and being at home exacerbated their mental

and emotional health as some were exposed to inequitable living conditions. These living conditions contributed to many students being distracted and not being able to do well academically. In conclusion, a question that the study proposes is: *should ERTL, as temporary adjustment of learning and teaching, become a long-term solution, that would potentially prolong the struggles that many students face?*

Action plan

Universities in South Africa need to invest more in developing emergency preparedness plans and resources in place for unexpected challenges such as pandemics. According to Andersons Model and the findings of this research, it is recommended that lecturers develop relationships with students, teaching assistants, educational technologist, and tutors. Academic and student assistants should be involved in engaging with students and assisting where lecturers cannot continue alone. Furthermore, educational technologist who are responsible for introducing the necessary technology into the teaching and learning environment should also form relationships with academics. This can be done during the training lecturers receive for the remote teaching (Nzala 2021). Their involvement in training is pivotal. To ensure that the UCT and other universities around the world respond better to emergency situations or pandemics, a helpful way forward would be to invest in digital infrastructure to decrease the digital divide that exists as well as ensure that there are reinforced practices to support the mental health of students through enhanced student-student, student-content, and student-teacher mechanisms. This includes the accelerated digitisation of learning and teaching for as many universities as possible. This also means providing additional online learning and technological support and opportunities for

students who come from poor households. The struggle most students faced was due to living in inequitable environments, distractions, and mental health. Another challenge was not having access to internet, and this can be an opportunity to, as mentioned by Koninckx, Fatondji and Burgos (2021), follow the example of Scaling Solar in the energy infrastructure sector which could be utilised to improve and scale the digital infrastructure improvement in South Africa and the rest of the continent. Since students experienced distractions, Hodges *et al.* (2020) also shared how universities, working with households and government, need to plan for such distractions that students experience in order to improve their academic offering. Another issue is that of confidence and motivation, as pointed out by Schlesselman (2020) as it refers to how pandemics that are still to come will require ERTL to operate with high student motivation and confidence.

Koninckx, Fatondji and Burgos (2021) replicate this research recommendations when they mention that impact at scale would need government, private and international institutions, non-governmental orgaisations (NGOs), and donors to be united in their efforts to uplift the country and continent from the impact of Covid-19. It is my thinking that governments have a great part to play in recognising the importance and indispensability of digital literacy and consistent access to the internet for all students.

Conclusion

Other writers like Pillay et.al (2021) affirm that Covid-19 exposed the lived realities of students' lives and this included their home contexts, which were ultimately made more difficult as the pandemic continued. Their study added that students adapted to learning during the pandemic with varying and numerous physical, emotional, and psycho-

social conditions. I learnt that the students were both satisfied and aggrieved with the lecturers and tutors' availability, commitment, and resourcefulness. In general, students felt that they did not have much interaction with their peers during ERTL and missed the interaction they previously had with them on campus. To ensure that the students received all the help they could get, tutors and lecturers went the extra-mile to ensure that students appreciated and enjoyed the content and interaction with each other (Nzala 2021). As Kift, Zacharias and Brett (2021) mention in their writing, tertiary education institutions could, through funding arrangements and social impact (outreach), optimise the learning and teaching performance of HEIs.

The research focussed on students and their interaction with content and teachers. In hindsight, this limited the study to only those of students and excluded perspectives of the teachers, other academic staff, and instructional technologists who were responsible for the technology, learning materials, and activities induced in the learning and teaching environment. Overall, student perspectives foregrounded barriers regarding ERTL in the first semester at the UCT. The students regarded ERTL as unaccommodating and ineffective as a replacement for face-to-face teaching and learning. Some of the challenges and barriers students experienced ranged from insufficient digital skills and computer resources, internet and network connectivity, lack of hands-on experience leading to an incomplete and difficult degree experience, and finally, distractions. Paradoxically, students perceived some of the challenges as opportunities and advantages. This study showed that students regarded ERTL as an opportunity for reduced procrastination, self-directed learning, and growing relationships with family members because of being home.

The main research question for this study was: *How do university students perceive working and learning remotely during a pandemic?* The data provided in both qualitative and quantitative forms show that most students experienced more disadvantages than advantages. This is seen from a total of 2746 recorded complaints ranging from distractions to inequitable living and working environments from qualitative data analysis. This is compared to a total of 1584 recorded advantages ranging from flexibility to self-directed learning. Students shared their perceptions of student, lecturer, and content interaction. Most students (182) from 680 participants strongly disagreed that it was easy to interact with lecturers, with (166) disagreeing. The rest of the students agreed and strongly agreed to the same. An interesting part of the study was students detailing how the SAMR framework was not utilised or realised to its full extent as Substitution was the dominating technology integration level with limited to no Augmentation. This was a possibility due to the temporary nature of ERTL and the swiftness of its implementation. A high number of students commented on the impact of ERTL on their mental health. Some of the students commented on the disadvantage of having technical difficulties in their academic activities. Inequitable living environments were a major challenge for many students. The disadvantages and challenges students experience, highlights that universities need to prioritise providing psychological, psychosocial, and emotional support to students, especially students who reside in unequal and inequitable environments.

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CHAPTER 14

Getting the balance right: Reflecting on the 'study pack' as a pedagogic tool for self-directed learning in an Extended Curriculum Programme during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Reflective practice has gained considerable momentum as discourse central to meaningful pedagogy and professional development. Critical reflection, as an arm of reflective practice, illuminates the importance of interrogating one's practice with the view to contributing to transformative teaching and learning. Since transitioning to remote teaching and learning in 2020, I have been forced to step outside my comfort zone of almost three decades of in-person, student-teacher interaction. The time had arrived for a shift in pedagogy and the need to address the "disorientating dilemma" (Mezirow, 1991) of getting the balance right between providing enough pedagogic tools for students to succeed, but also to ensure student self-directedness is fostered for the same purpose. After recurriculation of my subject in a Foundation Year programme in 2018, with more in-person contact time having been built in, I find myself only two years later after implementation of the new programme, having to 'recurriculate' yet again. This chapter shares a critical reflection, based on Mezirow's (1978) Transformative Learning Theory, of my experience when examining one of the pedagogic tools, namely the use of study packs, adopted over twelve months of remote teaching and learning brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown in South Africa. This reflective journey has impacted my

practice positively, specifically in the realisation that self-directedness is a pedagogical imperative, forming part of the pedagogic toolkit for transformative teaching and learning.

Keywords: critical reflection, extended curriculum programmes, study pack, Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted our familiar ways of being and doing and impelled us to review, re-evaluate and reconceptualise our educational practices. My journey was no different. Many facets of my educational practice were agitated and invigorated to varying degrees. For example, I had not fully embraced online teaching and learning. Having previously relied mostly on in-person interaction with students, I found the transition uncomfortable. I had also set up materials suited to in-person pedagogy. Remote teaching and learning necessitated a reorientation of my practice.

Reflective practice cements the foundation for quality teaching and learning. Recent decades have seen reflective practice evolve as a movement towards the negation of a technicist approach, still prevalent in educational settings today. Reflection, as a construct, dates back to Greek philosophy, to Socrates' meaningful questioning on ethics, knowledge and understanding (History.com 2019), and Plato's quests for social justice (Sanni and Momoh 2019). Copious formal definitions and models of reflective practice abound to date. These include, inter alia, Dewey's (1933) three attributes of open-mindedness, intellectual responsibility and wholeheartedness essential for successful reflection, Schön's (1983) practice-based reflection in, on and for action for better decision-making, Kolb's (1984) model

incorporating experience, reflection, conceptualisation and application, Mezirow's (1978) 10-phase process towards transformation, Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper's (2001) three-question model and Russell's (2005) problematisation of the generalisation of meanings around reflection and reflective practice.

Even though the terms reflection and reflective practice are still used interchangeably, there is a notable difference to consider. According to Bolton (2006: 203-218), reflection essentially refers to thinking about issues without the execution of thoughts, whereas reflective practice refers to thinking about, questioning and challenging a status quo, and the implementation of these for growth and change. The more recent theorists in adult education, for example Habermas in the 1970s, and Brookfield and Mezirow in the 90s, suggest that critical reflection should be an essential component of reflective practice. Mezirow (1990: 13) states that critical reflection encompasses a redress of one's perception of a problem, one's beliefs of a problem, one's knowledge of a problem, as well as one's feelings and actions. Critical reflection is a cornerstone of transformation theory, which advocates the process of undoing assumptive ideologies of thinking, feeling and doing with the aim of cultivating "autonomy, self-development and self-governance" (Mezirow 2000: 28).

This chapter shares a personal reflection of my "disorientating dilemma" of getting the balance right between providing sufficient meaningful pedagogic tools for student success and fostering student self-directedness. I apply Mezirow's (1978) ten-phase transformative process outlined in his Transformative Learning Theory to illuminate this progression and highlight its merit for my professional learning journey during the Covid-19 lockdown in South Africa from the start of 2020 to date.

Context

My journey on the extended programmes began in 2015, teaching Communication in English across departments at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). The same prescribed curriculum was presented to both Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) students and first-year mainstream students within an Extended Model. Prior to the pandemic, our lessons were presented in-person on campus, three times per week. In 2016, the Department of Public Administration and Governance (PAG) undertook a revisioning of the then Extended Model in the department to better suit the needs of the PAG students transitioning into university. Together with the Head of Department, the Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development and the other two ECP lecturers, we embarked on an empowering curriculum design and development journey. The Fundani ECP Unit assists with academic staff development and facilitates workshops with PAG lecturers focusing on ECP curriculum design, theory, responsiveness and delivery. The rationale for the process was that the Extended Model previously used by the department was not adequately addressing the needs of students, that is, students needed a responsive curriculum that offered significant support in transitioning into tertiary education as well as foundations in literacy and numeracy. ECP students are typically presented as previously educationally disadvantaged students who spend additional time, and receive additional support, in a designated Higher Education (HE) programme (South Africa 1997; South Africa 2012). A detailed student profiling exercise, lecturers' reflections on student progress, several workshops and National Benchmark Tests[1] (NBTs)

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[1] The National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) determine academic readiness for South African universities. Some universities use the NBTs together with the National Senior Certificate (NSC) for access. Others use the NBTs to gauge the level of support students may require during their academic careers (National Benchmark Tests Project 2016).

undertaken in 2017, confirmed this premise and presented evidence that over 80% of students completing business-related ECP courses in the institution needed extensive foundation support. The Extended Model was revamped into a Foundation Model. The Extended Model (currently still functioning in other departments) comprised a two-year ECP path, with the same curriculum offered to both ECP and mainstream students, whereafter students would progress into the second-year mainstream programme. This did not align with the vision of meeting ECP students' needs and, therefore, the recurriculation was initiated. The Foundation Year, implemented in 2018, is a one-year path, whereafter students progress into the first-year mainstream programme. The Foundation Year offers a tailor-made PAG curriculum with eight in-person periods for specific content, outcomes and themes intended for public servants, as well as a blended learning and an integrated approach, a timetabled computer lab period, course readers and consideration of PAG trends locally and abroad. This reflection focuses on my practice with one of the Communication groups in the Extended Curriculum Programme at CPUT during 2020.

A new curriculum and transitioning into remote teaching and learning

I embraced the recurriculation of the Communication component of the Foundation Year (FY) programme as the privileged opportunity to meaningfully contribute to social justice in our country through educational redress with the intention of widening access and success for students (South Africa 1997; South Africa 2001; South Africa 2012). Very often, lecturers perpetuate dominant technicist or skills discourses that encourage correct usage of grammar, adherence to formats, reproduction of accurate concepts and structures in assessment, and adherence to predetermined curricula (Lea and Street 1998; Ivanic

2004). According to Gee (2012), we need to not only be aware of Discourses we employ in teaching and learning but should also be committed to reflecting on these Discourses. Gee's (2015: 2) theory of discourses puts forward discourse with a little 'd' as a more general linguistic approach to language usage and meaning, whereas Discourse with a capital 'D' incorporates multiple considerations like language usage, value systems, emotions, behaviour, thought and any other tools that recognise and acknowledge varied social and historical identities. As part of my endeavour to continuously reflect on my practice, particularly in my commitment to the new programme, my first critically reflective undertaking in 2017 involved reviewing my pedagogic approach to fostering greater student participation in the classroom. This was a formal start to meaningfully thinking about and implementing pedagogic changes that would mitigate the problematisation of ECP students as deficient in dominant discourses (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 59-61) and the "basalization" of lecturers' roles and curricula (Sivasubramaniam 2011; Day and Edwards 1993: 5-7). With the rapid switch to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL), I have now had to rethink a relatively new curriculum yet again. Not only did I have to revisit my approach, but I also had to think about how to teach my students to self-direct.

After careful consideration of the eight in-person periods assigned to the new FY programme, ERTL has made me question the extent to which I may have made students rely on me for their learning. The tools deployed during in-person interaction included, inter alia, a hard and electronic copy course reader with content and assessments, predominantly individual work, handouts, weekly formative assessments, six in-person teaching lessons, two computer lab periods for research and assignment preparation, and prepared hard copy

readings. Even though self-study is stipulated in the subject guide and framing of the programme, the students did not really need to do anything on their own or in their own time, since all work was accounted for in the eight in-person periods. Therefore, with the emergency shift to remote and online teaching, I needed to revisit some of the pedagogic tools to enable student self-directedness.

Self-direct or self-regulate?

Self-directed learning (SDL) and self-regulated learning (SRL) are often used synonymously (Mahlaba 2020). The distinction between the two was important for my point of departure. According to Knowles (1975), self-directed learning encompasses individuals' proactive attempts to map out their learning paths, goals, resources and strategies after which they will themselves reflect on their success. Self-regulated learning denotes students' responses to teacher-designed activities (Gandomkar and Sandars 2018; Saks and Leijen 2014) where students only react to those activities for a limited period of time. SRL, important in its own right, should form part of SDL (Mahlaba 2020). How could I encourage self-directedness and not merely self-regulation? My aim is to contribute to a student cohort that can carve out their own trajectories for learning, reflect on their learning, apply content, develop a desire for their own development and growth, feel part of the curriculum, be independent and interdependent, be open to diversity, evaluate their learning and become active citizens. Perhaps FY students initially need self-regulation before developing self-directedness?

A focus on pedagogic tools

The rapid switch to remote and online teaching and learning has necessitated many pedagogic changes which, for me, included the introduction of (1) a study pack emailed to students per term with a

weekly calendar, content, readings and assessments, (2) weekly emails with reminders, (3) Blackboard Collaborate sessions, (4) feedback on assignments using Track Changes and (5) how-to visuals (for example, create a PPT, use Track Changes, access Blackboard (BB) recordings). For this chapter, I will only share my journey regarding the study packs as a pedagogic tool since its use sparked my initial reflection around students' self-directed learning – whether or not I was encouraging self-directedness. I apply Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning in an attempt to critically unpack the journey I undertook to tweak my study packs in order to foster SDL during ERTL. As with my first critical reflection in 2017, I have developed the habit of keeping a reflective journal or notes before during and/or after interacting with students. I have extracted relevant verbatim reflections regarding the study pack from my journal, added them to a table outlining Mezirow's 10 phases of transformative learning and then linked these to my experiences on this journey (Table 1).

Applying Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning

Transformative learning, according to The Transformative Learning Centre (2004), is "…a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions". Although this forms the essence of transformative learning, it is undoubtedly complex (Kitchenham 2008). Mezirow's theory of transformative learning itself has undergone transformation spanning more than two decades. His first study in 1978 identified ten phases that could be progressed through before attaining personal transformation. Further developments included critical self-reflection or premise reflection in 1995, acknowledgement of the importance of the affective and social aspects of transformative learning in 2000 and a likening of transformative learning theory to

constructivism in 2006. Mezirow's theory has met with notable arguments both for and against his approach to transformative learning. Some of the criticisms against Mezirow's theory include the notion that his theory is essentially a cognitive process (Taylor 2008; Illeris 2014), the question of what exactly evokes transformation (Kegan 2000), how understanding oneself better develops (Taylor 2008; Illeris 2014) and achieving clarity around how transformative learning can effectively be implemented (Newman 2010). Despite the criticisms mentioned by these authors, very little is offered by them towards how transformative learning can take shape in educational settings or in the workplace. The table and discussion below represent my interpretation and application of Mezirow's ten-phase approach in my attempt to critically reflect on the use of my pedagogic tool, the study pack, to foster student self-directedness.

Table 1: A reflection on the use of study packs using Mezirow's ten phases of transformative practice outlined in 1978

Mezirow's phases	My thinking, feelings and experiences	A peephole into my journal notes
1. A disorientating dilemma	Are my study packs as a pedagogic tool during the Covid-19 pandemic encouraging self-directedness? - What is the difference between self-direction and self-regulation? - How do I get the balance right for developing both SDL and SRL for FY students?	*...do some homework on SDL and SRL before reviewing study packs for 2022...are my study packs making my students dependent on me?*
2. A self-examination – with feelings of guilt, anger, shame	Greater clarity on SDL and SRL. - I recognised an over-compensation of 'support' provided through the study packs, which defeats the purpose of developing students who can manage their own time, learning pace, content and assessments. - Disappointed but also noting the emergency reaction to teaching and learning needed during the pandemic.	*Move away from doing everything for students ...* *SRL being fostered instead of SDL? Add more formatives and student input into planning, structure, topics etc.* ☹

3. A critical assessment of assumptions	Making my assumptions explicit. My assumptions about the learning habits of FY students are based on: - FY thrive in in-person conditions with a significant number of timetabled lessons and teacher-led support and, therefore, need the equivalent teacher-induced support in remote teaching and learning. - FY students do not know how to self-direct.	*Students too dependent on the study packs provided...regurgitating summarised notes, not finding their own sources.* *...facilitating a teacher-centred approach.* ☹ *Review study packs to create space for student-centredness and SDL.* *I KNOW that everybody has something to offer but I am frustrated by how long this takes for me to instil in my practice during the pandemic.*
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared	Engagement with other ECP lecturers - Who can I collaborate with? - Reach out to others who have previously expressed discomfort with a similar situation in ECP. - Solace found in colleagues who share their practices and dispositions.	*Speaking to other ECP colleagues about frustrations* ☺ *I am not alone...* *Speak to X about forming CoPs for ECP* *Speak to X about developing student-centred activities.*
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions	Moving towards new roles as mediator, facilitator, reflective practitioner, lifelong learner, collaborator, social justice advocate.	*So, what is my role actually now...teacher as spoonfeeder?* ☹ *Get back to facilitating, mediating, empowering students* ☺
6. Planning a course of action	Re-evaluate study pack Physically create space in the study pack for: - Weekly planning: students to design their own road map - Content: suggestions put forward + space for students' input - Assessments: suggestions put forward + space for students' input - Readings: suggestions put forward + space for learning how to find own reliable resources	*...greater student input in the study pack* *Get input from students re content and assessments – current PAG issues for comprehension activities, topics for essays, types of assignments, what reinforcement in language are needed...* *More reflective activities for students* *Students to draw up own weekly planner*
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing the plan	Improve my practice. - Development in course design - BB webinars attended on course design principles and assessment - Explore what courses or training or development ECP lecturers are attending. - What are ECP lecturers doing, thinking, feeling? - Take care of my wellbeing	*Check out:* - *BB courses/training* - *Academic literacies webinars* - *Inclusion through Connection* - *Course design* - *SDL and SRL sources/workshops/presentations* *(These are webinars/training sessions that I targeted.)*

	- Take care of my wellbeing	targeted.)
8. Provisional trying of new roles	Try out my plan: - Changes to assessments – giving students option to work independently or collaboratively; choices in content offered - Two personal reflection assessments - Do research on SDL and SRL	*Can't change entire study pack right now, but can alter assessments, then plan for 2022.* *Save sources for SDL and SRL.*
9. Building self-confidence and competence in new roles and relationships	Critical reflection builds my confidence and competence. - I view myself as a lifelong learner seeking improvement in my practice for the benefit of all. - I need to sustain this thinking.	*...feeling motivated, more confident, clearer about SDL and SRL, making progress towards better alignment between pedagogic tools and SDL* *Will attend more seminars/webinars...present again...*
10. A reintegration of one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspectives	My reflective journey assists with changing my perspectives and approaches. - Continuous critical reflection is crucial – form the habit	*Moving closer to more meaningful pedagogic tools to implement in 2022* *Wear the hat of mediator, facilitator, reflective practitioner, lifelong learner, collaborator, social justice advocate* ☺

The subsequent sections present discussions, extended from Table 1, of my reflection linked to Mezirow's phases of transformative learning.

A disorientating dilemma, a self-examination and a critical assessment of assumptions

(Phases 1, 2 and 3)

After receiving students' contributions (formative and summative), indicating regurgitation of content, poor application of knowledge and minimal inclination to find their own sources, the manifestations left me with feelings of disappointment and discomfort. In my attempts to ensure comprehensive, sufficient teaching, I have inadvertently been bypassing my intention to foster active learning in students. Therefore, it is important for me to critically reflect – to constantly agitate the journey of moving away from teacher-centredness. When teaching staff consciously acknowledge areas of their professionalism that need development and shift towards becoming agents of transformation,

they will seek to effect the same for their students (Sivasubramaniam 2011: 7). With a clear perspective of SRL, SDL and a reminder of my pedagogic intentions, I assessed the assumptions I defaulted to, namely that ECP students require significant teacher-led support. A recalibration of this perspective steered me back to my goal – to provide meaningful learning opportunities for my students so that they can learn to self-direct.

Recognition of discontent transformation, exploration of new roles and action

(Phases 4 and 5)

The isolation of the lockdown caused by the pandemic saw staff reaching out to each other more than usual. This entailed many Microsoft Teams discussions, emails and telephone calls, which proved particularly helpful for me as I learnt that several other ECP lecturers were experiencing similar dilemmas and discontentment with the hastiness that leads to traditional, technicist teaching approaches in emergency remote scenarios ((Sivasubramaniam 2011: 6-7). Shared experiences have led to, inter alia, increased collegiality, greater confidence, and an appreciation of differences in opinion. Furthermore, collaborative learning is another characteristic of SDL (Knowles 1975) and Taylor (2017) reminds us that transformative learning and therefore, critical reflection, is not a fragmented practice but flourishes in the formation of relationships with others. This social aspect of transformative practice is particularly important for growth in times of crises (Mälkki 2012). As a mediator, facilitator or collaborator, I therefore need to move towards greater inclusion of student voice in my practice. The plan of action involved re-evaluation of my study packs and teaching approach through critical self-reflection, collaboration with

colleagues, and attending workshops or webinars aimed at inclusivity of students through course design and assessment practices.

Acquiring knowledge and skills, trying out new roles, building competence and reintegration of new perspectives

(Phases 6–10)

In addition to engagement with colleagues, and reading literature on SDL and SRL, I attended a series of Blackboard Webinar Office Hours[2] presentations focusing on course design, assessment and inclusive classrooms, Jackie Tuck and Theresa Lillis' webinar on evaluative regimes in academia, and a presentation titled 'Self-care in a time of radical flux' offered by the CPUT ECP Unit in the Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development. With renewed vigour and motivation, I started adapting my study pack incrementally – since it was close to the end of the students' first year and sudden great expectations of SDL imposed on students would be overwhelming. I included two reflective activities (one on students' own journeys over the twelve months and one that required input into the programme), an outline for students' own planning, and space for discussion around content and assessment topics. As seen from the first critical reflection in 2017, this required more effort and time (Alexander 2018). However, students' contributions were reaffirming of the importance of instilling SDL and creating an educational environment that acknowledges different discourses, thus making this a valuable and worthwhile exercise). Amongst the future considerations for me, lies the dilemma of strategically planning and balancing teaching and learning activities for SDL with SRL as one of the components that will enable this. These reflections and actions have propelled me further on my transformation journey. I consider the

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[2] https://go.blackboard.com/Instructor-webinar-series

process of critical reflection emancipatory and integral to my professional learning (Mezirow 1994; Morrow 2009; Mann *et al.* 2007; Mezirow 1997; Phair 2009).

Conclusion

Mezirow's (1978) ten phases of transformative practice and a critically reflective stance provided valuable lenses through which I could reflect on my disorienting dilemma of whether I was encouraging SDL through meaningful pedagogic practice or not during ERTL. Critical reflection of my practice reminded me that it is easy to default to a teacher-led pedagogy and, therefore, I undertook the continued journey to improve my practice. A critical reflection of one of the pedagogic tools used, provided the opportunity to clarify SDL and SRL, include students in my planning, collaborate with colleagues and seek professional development courses that would assist me in realising my aim. This approach strengthened my desire for and implementation of a practice that embraces collaboration, meaningful content and assessment, and the need to contribute to transformative learning to produce active agents in our country.

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CHAPTER 15

Using a transformative learning pedagogy remotely: Reflections of early career academics in the context of Covid-19

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Abstract

Over the past year, higher education institutions have been compelled to adjust to the 'new normal' as the world navigates the Covid-19 pandemic. Teaching and learning functions at universities have been required to innovate, influencing different cohorts of academics quite differently. Considering this context, early career academics have had to balance this new norm with mastering the module content and acclimatising to their institutional culture. In this reflective piece, the authors, who are early career academics, describe their experiences of launching their academic careers at a time when universities internationally were switching to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) in the attempt to 'save the academic year'. The authors draw on their experiences of teaching a compulsory institutional module, which uses a transformative learning pedagogy and aims to produce socially and culturally aware graduates who are reflective and critical thinkers. During the shift to ERT in their institution, the authors were tasked with content development for this module, in moving the module from face-to-face delivery to the online environment. They had to consider the implications of online delivery of various socially relevant, critical

topics while keeping to the transformative learning pedagogy. Many challenges were faced in the shifting of module content that was initially designed for contact delivery to the online platform. The authors found that while some students adjusted well during the move to ERT, others struggled to meet the intended course learning outcomes. In some cases, the authors experienced the move to ERT as resulting in students' urgency to complete assessment tasks rather than critically engaging and reflecting with module content, thus compromising the intended transformative learning pedagogy. It will be argued that careful consideration and intensive preparation of early career academics is required to improve the delivery of the module content, in the context of a transformative pedagogy that is student-centered.

Keywords: early career academics, emergency remote teaching, general education, transformative learning pedagogy

Introduction

In this chapter, the authors reflect on their experiences as early career academics – teaching a first-year compulsory, institutional general education module (using a transformative pedagogy) during the time when universities were switching to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). Schön (1999: 60) suggests that reflective practice for professionals is a continuous learning process that involves practitioners' coming into the awareness of their knowledge and learning from their experiences. A distinction is made between 'reflection-in-action' (reflecting during the process) and 'reflection-on-action' (reflecting after the process). This chapter uses the latter form of reflection by looking at how the module was designed and is run in retrospect (Schön 1999: 60).

The authors' reflections are grounded in Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper's (2001: 1) framework of reflective writing. Rolfe *et al.* (2001: 1) propose a three-step model which can be used to aid in the process of reflective writing. This framework is based on three questions, namely: What? So what? Now what? This chapter is centred around trying to answer these three questions. The first step of the reflective framework (the 'What'?) sets the scene through providing an overall description of the context. The second step (the 'So what'?) draws on the experiences of the authors, detailing what happened when they were involved in the teaching of a first-year compulsory, institutional general education module. It also involves taking a deeper look into this process, analysing what was relevant and interesting and providing explanations with the use of supporting evidence. During this step, there is an exploration of the challenges that the authors experienced and how these impacted the attainment of the module's learning outcomes. The third and final step of the reflective framework (the 'Now what'?) involves detailing the authors' key learnings, linking practice to theory. During this step, the authors also propose recommendations and provide information on how these can be practically applied. The authors look at the reflection-on-action that can be taken beyond the reflection process. A diagram of this reflective framework is depicted in Figure 1:
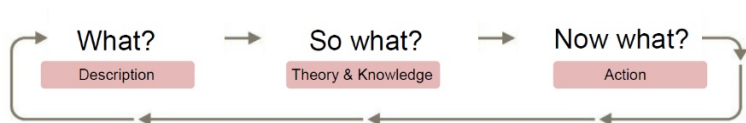

Figure 1: Reflective Framework (Rolfe *et al.* 2001: 1)

Having explored Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper's (2001: 1) reflective framework in which the authors' reflections will be grounded, the

authors now move on to explore the 'What'?, 'So what'? and conclude the chapter by answering the 'Now what'?

Context

General education is a collection of experiences that institutions craft, that aims to provide students with a broad knowledge base and a breadth of experiences (Bourke, Bray and Horton 2009: 219). It strives for the development of well-rounded students, therefore reaching beyond the classroom and looking at students' experiences holistically (Bourke, Bray and Horton 2009: 219). At the Durban University of Technology (DUT), general education is primarily defined as being grounded in people's daily lives, with its goals being to develop students who are critical thinkers and can successfully navigate diverse social contexts and interactions (General Education Task Team 2012: 2). Having been introduced in 2012 as part of the curriculum renewal process (Ramsuroop 2020: 1), general education takes on a humanistic perspective; incorporating issues of social justice (General Education Task Team 2012: 1). The 3 main aims of general education at DUT are:

1. to build a student-centred educational experience embedded in the local context;

2. to prepare students for an increasingly diverse and complex globalised work environment; and

3. to cultivate an engaged and critical citizenry in the context of an emerging and fragile democracy in an ever-changing world order (General Education Task Team 2012: 2).

There are currently 44 general education modules, which are offered institution-wide. Cornerstone 101 (CSTN101) is one of these 44 modules

and is a compulsory module offered to all first-year students for the duration of one semester. The module is offered in both semesters, to a different cohort of first-year students in each semester. As CSTN101 is offered to all first-year students, it is regarded as a 'big' module, compared to other modules at DUT, as it attracts a high number of students. For example, in the first semester of 2021, over 5800 students were enrolled for this module. The high number of students necessitates that this module is taught by a team of eight permanent staff, with about 40 part-time staff being recruited at the beginning of the first semester, each year, to provide additional support. The number of students enrolled in this module is projected to grow over the years as new qualifications are introduced at DUT (Ramsuroop 2020: 2).

CSTN101 is strongly rooted in transformative learning pedagogy (Ramsuroop 2020: 4). Transformative learning is defined as a unique form of metacognitive reasoning for adult learners. It is a type of learning that alters pre-existing frames of reference, such as fixed assumptions, making these assumptions more inclusive and reflective (Mezirow 2003: 58). For transformative learning to occur, students need to be able to critically reflect on their assumptions, which may emerge independently or through group interactions (Mezirow 2003: 58). The module purposely uses a transformative learning pedagogy to provide students with an opportunity to critically engage with contemporary issues and debates, and to reflect on issues of citizenship and social justice. Therefore, the goals of CSTN101 include helping students to develop critical thinking and values, understand traditions, respect diverse cultures and opinions and, most importantly, put that knowledge to use (Ramsuroop 2020: 2).

Reflections

The authors of this chapter are early career academics who both joined DUT during a time of turmoil worldwide, when universities were required to innovate and move to ERT due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020: i). They joined a newly established (established in 2012) Centre for General Education and a newly formed academic team, as part of the first permanent academic staff team in July of 2020. They joined at a time when the centre was introducing ERT, having started with teaching and learning activities online in June in a bid to 'save the academic year' (Bozkurt and Sharma 2020: ii). Part of the work that the authors were required to do was to redevelop module content for CSTN101, in line with the ERT context. This redevelopment process included looking at the current offering to determine whether the content needed updating and adapting for the ERT context.

During this content redevelopment process, three challenges emerged. Firstly, the authors had limited experience of curriculum development. Additionally, this was their first interaction with the CSTN101 module content and thus had limited knowledge of the aims of CSTN101 and how these fit into the aims of general education at DUT. Secondly, during this time, the centre's staff were all working remotely, with each staff member being tasked with working on sections of the module. While the distribution of the workload had good intentions, this inadvertently contributed to there being gaps within the module – each section of the module seemingly being a standalone topic with limited integration with other topics in the module. As the authors were both new to teaching the module, it is difficult to firmly ascertain whether the distribution only contributed to there being gaps in the module or whether it highlighted the gaps within the module. Thirdly, the authors

had no experience with content development for the ERT environment and this may have led to content simply being imported from what would have happened in a face-to-face class setting and reproduced on the learning management systems (Moodle and Microsoft Teams).

The authors are of the view that these three challenges led to there being limited constructive alignment in the module. Constructive alignment refers to teaching and assessing in alignment with what one wants students to learn from the module (Biggs 1996: 347). Upon reflection, the authors realised that the learning outcomes of the module were, at times, not aligned with the learning activities and the assessments. Additionally, there seemed to be no 'golden thread' in the module, linking the different topics and assessments in the module in a meaningful way for the students. The module is a continuous assessment module and therefore makes use of formative assessment also known as 'assessment for learning' (Sadler 1998: 77). There are four main formative assessments for this module in the current ERT context. Firstly, students are required to submit responses to tutorial questions that are posed each week and are also encouraged to respond to their peers' responses to the questions. Secondly, each week students are required to submit reflections. The aim of this reflection exercise is to facilitate personal insight (Guthrie and McCracken 2010: 156) and open up opportunities for deeper, critical thinking (Gasper-Hulvat 2018: 401). Critical reflection is essential for transformative learning (Şahin and Dogantay 2018: 106) and enables students to gain insight, including becoming aware of and correcting any distorted beliefs they may hold (Karlovic 1992: 87). Thirdly, students are required to submit an individual written, research assignment. This assignment is an introduction to research, which aims to develop critical reading skills and the application of the research process. Fourthly, the students are required

to complete a group presentation that requires them to integrate their key learnings from the module and reflect on these.

For the first assessment, students engage with their tutors and peers in the online environment as they respond to the tutorial questions. Additionally, students are given constructive and prompt (that is, 1 week turn-around time) feedback for the second assessment. The aim of this feedback is for students to improve on their future weekly reflection submissions. For the third and fourth assessments, students who do not pass (that is, receive a mark less than 50%) are given an opportunity to re-submit their work, using the feedback they have received to improve.

The authors of this chapter are of the view that formative assessment (assessment FOR learning) no longer serves its purpose in the current climate. This is because the authors have experienced the students as not fully engaging with feedback given, which is aimed at improving their learning. This has been evidenced through the authors witnessing students who had not passed the third assessment and simply resubmitted the assessment, without considering the feedback received for their first attempt. Additionally, the authors have found that students do not always dedicate time to their weekly tutorial discussions and reflections. Anecdotal evidence that the authors have witnessed suggests that students seem to be 'chasing deadlines', moving from one assessment to the next with the main aim of the assessment submission being awarded marks, not recognising that the assessment opportunity is also designed and intended for learning. This also contributes to misalignment between the learning opportunities provided in the module and the learning outcomes of the module. This is evidenced by students not fully engaging in learning

opportunities provided, but rather rushing to submit work that is due. For transformative learning to occur, students need to engage in critical reflection. Once this process of critical reflection is compromised, then there is a danger of students not achieving the intended learning outcomes of the module, thus undermining the aims of the module. Therefore, the authors of this chapter are of the view that it is important to revisit the learning outcomes of the module and to critically evaluate how the learning opportunities and assessment methods contribute to these being met. Practical ways on how to address this are discussed in the section below.

Recommendations

The authors make suggestions to tackle the identified current challenges in the module. These challenges being limited curriculum development experience of the authors, staff working remotely on different sections of the module, and a lack of experience with content development for the ERT environment that all led to limited constructive alignment in the module. In trying to address these problems of constructive alignment and the golden thread, the authors propose a review of the module, to ensure that there is constructive alignment, and that links are created for the themes explored in the module. Suggestions made to achieve this are firstly, to introduce the scaffolding of learning activities (Maybin, Mercer and Stierer 1992: 21) for students. This approach proposes that more support be provided to students by making the links in the various themes in the module more explicit. This is especially important during a time when key concepts are explored in the module. Secondly, the authors suggest that permanent staff critically look at the learning outcomes, learning activities and assessments for the module to ensure that there is

alignment. This exercise may also be important in ensuring that everyone on the teaching team has a clear understanding of what the module fully entails and how the module contributes to realising the aims of general education at DUT. Having this understanding may also ensure that there is a standardised approach to the delivery of the module to different groups of students.

In addressing constructive alignment in the module, the authors are of the view that it is important to review the assessments that are currently in place for the module. Firstly, the authors suggest that the questions 'Why do we assess?' and 'What is the purpose of formative assessment?' need to be revisited. The authors are of the view that should these two questions be critically interrogated by the permanent teaching staff team of CSTN101, two things might happen. First, as formative assessment is assessment FOR learning, students can be introduced to the importance of feedback and how this feedback should be taken into consideration when resubmitting work and when submitting future assessments. Second, the 'overassessment' that was inadvertently introduced in the module during the move to ERT may be addressed.

Secondly, the authors of this chapter are of the view that to strengthen the quality of weekly reflections that students are required to submit, a section on the importance of reflection and how to reflect should be incorporated into the module. The importance of reflection in a module that uses a transformative learning pedagogy has been dealt with elsewhere in the chapter. Including a section that looks at the importance of reflection may encourage students to give sufficient time and value to their reflections and capacitate them with important skills on how to reflect effectively (Guthrie and McCracken 2010: 156).

Thirdly, to achieve the abovementioned proposed suggestions (that is, assessing the current limited constructive alignment of the module and looking at the current assessment methods), it is envisioned that the Carpe Diem learning design approach be used. This would be particularly relevant in the authors' context, as Carpe Diem is a team approach. This approach uses six steps, namely: writing a blueprint, building a storyboard, building a prototype, having a reality check, reviewing and adjusting and the planning of next steps (Salmon 2020: 2). The authors of this chapter have started engaging with the Carpe Diem approach and have jointly put together a blueprint and a storyboard for the module. However, they are of the view that this process would be much more beneficial if it were undertaken by the entire CSTN101 permanent staff teaching team to ensure that there is a shared understanding.

Fourthly, the authors are of the view that there is a need to capacitate early career academics with the skills and knowledge that they will need to successfully navigate the higher education environment. Examples of such support include, but are not limited to, mentoring provided by established academics and professional learning programmes organised through the institution's teaching and learning support team. The authors are also of the view that this type of support needs to be provided timeously and, ideally, prior to early career academics engaging in activities such as curriculum development. Fortunately, the authors have since started attending a formal induction session facilitated by the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CELT), where they have had the opportunity to be capacitated with tools to assist them in their teaching and learning endeavours going forward. The induction has also served as an opportunity to reflect not only on the authors' teaching, learning and

assessment practices, but also on the CSTN101 module. This reflection was done using the guidelines and influence of Rolfe *et al* (2001: 1) framework on reflection-on-action.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a unique, reflective perspective on the importance of using teaching and learning methods, and assessment tools, in a way that ensures that the intended learning outcomes of a module can be met. The authors have done this through using a compulsory first-year module at DUT as a case study, focusing on how this module has been reimagined in the ERT context. This chapter also provides recommendations on how to approach similar challenges, faced by the authors, in future. Furthermore, the chapter demonstrated the authors' professional learning, using Rolfe *et al's* (2001: 1) framework. Rolfe *et al* (2001:1) have provided a useful framework for the authors to critically reflect on their practice, and it is hoped that the experiences and reflections of the authors will be of benefit to future early career academics, especially during the current context of ERT.

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Theme 4: Reimagining alternative ways of teaching in higher education

CHAPTER 16

Developing learning partnerships in the Postgraduate classroom

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Abstract

The Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (PG Dip: HE) was rolled out for the first time at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) amidst the novel Covid-19 pandemic. The course was designed for face-to-face delivery but due to the global pandemic the programme had to be offered remotely. The authors are from the Academic Development Unit and Writing Centre and it was our first time teaching online so we had to quickly learn how to navigate the online teaching and learning space. We were faced with a paradoxical situation in our class as Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z students with varying digital competencies and teaching experiences all belonging to the same cohort. We had to take these factors into consideration as we purposefully redesigned the delivery of the module and developed innovative ways of teaching and assessing remotely. The theory of Connectivism (Siemens 2004); Healey, Flint and Harrington's model (2014) of engaging students as partners in higher education; and Prensky's 'pedagogy of partnering' (Prensky 2010) underpinned our work and influenced the design and delivery of the curriculum. In an attempt to foster collaborative learning, we provided students with the

tools, scenarios and leading questions that enabled the fostering of ownership in their learning. We offered opportunities for students to actively construct knowledge by evaluating, analysing, synthesising and applying new knowledge in relevant contexts. As students became partners in the learning process, we found shifts in their 'knowing and being' (Barnett 2009) which was evident in their written tasks, group activities and discussion boards. Particular dispositions and qualities that foregrounded identity development and collaborative learning were developed during the course of the module. This chapter foregrounds that online teaching and learning should be designed to enable a partnership between the facilitator and student as this allows for particular dispositions and qualities to be developed in students. Learning activities must be adaptable and robust to encourage sustained, active participation. As facilitators of learning we must reflect on our practice and make pedagogical shifts in our professional learning as we design teaching and learning in multimodal learning environments.

Keywords: partnerships, connectivism, collaborative learning, reflection, curriculum design and delivery

Introduction

The Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (PG Dip: HE) was rolled out for the first time at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic. The qualification is housed in the School of Education, Faculty of Arts and Design at DUT. It was designed for a blended learning approach with contact sessions supported by online interaction, however, due to the global pandemic, it had to be offered remotely. The programme is offered part-time, online over two years and has a prior qualification requirement and a minimum of two

years teaching or related experience in higher education. It was developed by a working group comprising of members from the School of Education and the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at DUT. The aim of the programme is to enhance the knowledge and competencies of lecturers, academic developers and quality promotion specialists in teaching and learning centres whose role is to contribute to the transformation of higher education. The PG Dip: HE which consists of eight modules, aims to develop in participants, high levels of theoretical engagement, intellectual independence and the ability to relate knowledge to a range of contexts in order to undertake specialist work in higher education.

The authors of this chapter are from the Academic Development Unit and Writing Centre and facilitated one of the modules on teaching and learning. We were faced with a complex situation in our postgraduate class with Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z students with varying digital competencies and teaching experiences all belonging to the same cohort. It was also our first time teaching remotely, and this meant that we had to quickly learn how to navigate the online teaching and learning space. We purposefully redesigned the delivery of the 8-week module and developed innovative ways of teaching and assessing remotely with the aim of deepening theoretical understanding of learning, teaching and assessment in higher education and equipping students with knowledge in innovative strategies in higher education.

As we engaged in learning partnerships through active learning we also embarked on our own journey of professional learning. Viewing students as partners in the classroom was both challenging and exciting. Developing partnerships with our students meant that we had

to let go of the reins and trust in the process that was unfolding. It involved hours of preparation as we had to engage in reading and research to design well-structured activities for both synchronous and asynchronous engagement. In the selection of the module content, we were mindful of fostering a shared knowledge base of theories, concepts and principles from which participants could draw to inform their practice as academics. We spent countless hours reading students' responses to the discussion threads or reflective responses to the readings we recommended for the module. Students also shared resources which we engaged with. It was a fulfilling learning experience as we gained new and invaluable insights into various aspects of the learning and teaching in higher education. Learning was reciprocal as we assumed new roles and identities as partners in the learning.

Learning partnerships

Biggs (2012) highlights the importance of good dialogue and how it shapes and deepens understanding of learning activities. A significant part of our teaching was underpinned by Lea and Street's (1998) Academic Literacies approach which supports dialoguing in preparation for writing tasks or activities. During our post-lecture reflections, we discussed what worked, what did not work, how we felt about the students' engagement, were they engaged productively, what needed to be built on in the next session and so forth. We also used the weekly feedback from the students to improve our practice. These regular reflections and feedback enabled us to critique our facilitation styles, the resource materials and the level of partnership with our students. It also helped us to understand the value of developing adaptable and robust learning activities to encourage sustained, active participation.

Student engagement was supported through online platforms; we used Moodle which is the official Learning Management System at our institution for asynchronous teaching and for uploading the assessments and we used Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) for synchronous teaching. We encouraged online engagements through regular formative tasks, discussions and the submission of module assignments on which participants received developmental feedback. This synchronous and asynchronous engagement with students enabled a partnership between us and the students.

Theoretical focus

In this section we discuss some of the theories that framed our understanding of developing learning partnerships with our students. This discussion includes the concept of connectivism with a focus on learning in hybrid settings; Healey, Flint and Harrington's model (2014) that underpins ways of engaging students as partners in higher education; high impact practices particularly the flipped classroom (Gerstein 2012); and Prensky's pedagogy of partnering (Prensky 2010).

Connectivism

The theory of Connectivism underpinned the way we structured and facilitated the module. Connectivism is "the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories" (Siemens 2004). Siemens further expands the tenets of the theory (2004: 1-2),

> Connectivism is driven by the understanding that decisions are based on rapidly altering foundations. New information is continually being acquired. The ability to draw distinctions between

important and unimportant information is vital. The ability to recognise when new information alters the landscape based on decisions made yesterday is also critical.

Pivotal to connectivism is the understanding that learning takes place across information technologies and networked communities (Dunaway 2011). The preliminary focus of connectivism is the "individual where personal knowledge comprises of a network, which feeds into organisations and institutions, back into the network, then continues to provide learning to the individual" (Govender and Rajkoomar 2021: 62). Connectivism highlights the significance of the capacity to be able to "recognise connections, patterns and similarities and the ability to synthesise ideas and information" (Dunaway 2011: 676). Connectivism highlights how learning takes place within physical classrooms and within hybrid settings. In our postgraduate class, students were accessing knowledge from various online sources and sharing their learnings and experiences with the rest of the class. The classroom was not teacher dominated but student centred and this led to deep learning. This was evident in the students' reflective pieces and their final assignment.

Model on how to engage students as partners in higher education

We further found the conceptual model by Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014: 24) on ways of engaging students as partners in higher education, valuable as we began to contemplate how to engage our students as partners in the online classroom.
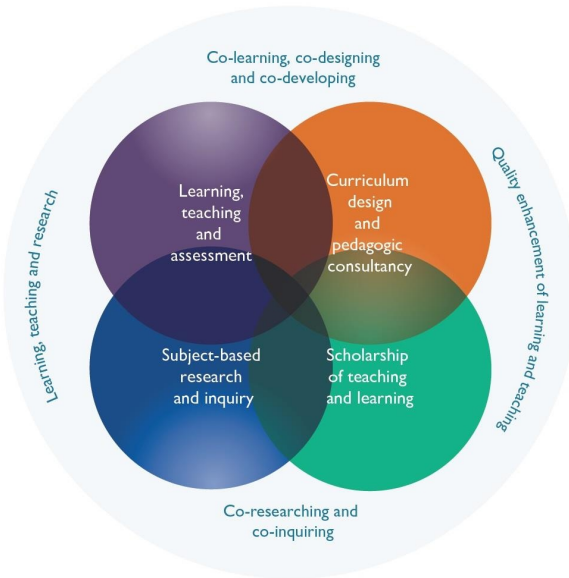
Figure 1: Ways of engaging students as partners in higher education (Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014: 24)

Healey, Flint and Harrington's (2014) model distinguishes four broad areas in which students can act as partners in learning and teaching - learning, teaching and assessment; subject-based research and inquiry; scholarship of teaching and learning; and curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy. All four areas as illustrated in Figure 1 are imperative for engaging with students as partners. However, for the purpose of this chapter, we focus on one area which is learning, teaching and assessment. In order to develop partnerships in the post graduate classroom we had to prepare adequately for out of class and in- class learning so that students were active participants in their own learning. When engaging students in active learning (Kuh 2009) it is

important to create spaces for reflection. The spaces that we used in our postgraduate class were online platforms such as Moodle and Microsoft Teams. Students were also expected to submit written reflections as well as oral in-class reflections. As facilitators we had to consider the different learning styles of our students and their contexts when structuring, sequencing and pacing the curriculum (Kolb 1984).

Particular dispositions and qualities (Barnett 2009) that foregrounded identity development and collaborative learning were developed during the module and we emphasised the significance of reflection and transformative learning. Mezirow (1991) talks about critical reflection and teachers' role in creating 'safe' spaces to nurture students' reflective expressions. We encouraged participants to engage in reflective activities throughout the module by getting them to understand the value of engaging in small written tasks in preparation for online sessions (Schön 1983). The practice of reflection is supported by DHET (2018: 4) as it maintains that "Teaching development and teaching quality is more strongly enabled through reflection and collaborative interaction than through external prescription." Based on this, those of us in the academic project need to find meaningful, sustained ways through critical reflection to reposition our practices to build a transformed higher education system.

The flipped classroom

High impact practices including the flipped classroom (Gerstein 2012) were used to engage students in active learning and prepare them for the partnership journey. We recommended that students engage in specific readings and asynchronous activities on Moodle before every online lecture. We provided a variety of activities such as online threaded discussions, critical response to an article, responses to a

leading question which had to be supported by theory and debates. We found that these high impact practices led to rich, deep and insightful in-class discussions and students were also able to link the theory with practice. It was evident that students were steadily moving towards being active participants in their learning.

In an attempt to be inclusive and cater for the varied type of students in our class, we drew on Prensky's "pedagogy of partnering" (Prensky 2010: 4) in the design and delivery of the module. Furthermore, to foster collaborative learning, we provided students with the tools, scenarios and leading questions that enabled the fostering of ownership in their learning. We provided opportunities for students to actively construct knowledge by evaluating, analysing, critiquing, synthesising and applying new knowledge in relevant contexts. As students became partners in the learning process, we found shifts in their 'knowing and being' (Barnett 2009) which was evident in their written tasks, group activities and discussion boards. In the delivery of the module, we used various pedagogical strategies to cultivate 21st century skills, such as "critical and creative thinking, cognitive flexibility, integrative and reflective thinking, social skills, ethical reasoning, and inter- and cross-cultural competence" (Mintz 2020: 1).

Prensky (2010: 13) maintains that "partnering refers to letting students focus on the part of the learning process they do best, and letting teachers focus on the part of the learning process they can do best." Prensky (2010: 13) further suggests that students should be primarily responsible for "finding and following their passion, using whatever technology is available, researching and finding information, answering questions and sharing their thoughts and opinions, practising when properly motivated, and creating presentations in texts and

multimedia." Participants were encouraged to 'partner' with us (the facilitator and their fellow classmates) and engage in weekly pre-module activities where they could reflect on their specific discipline practices and institutional approaches to learning and teaching. They further brought their thoughts, ideas and visions to the online platform and this enabled rich discussions, a sense of interconnectedness among participants and active learning. Weekly online discussions encouraged students to reflect on their practice. We set pre-module tasks to encourage critical reflection on their roles within their institutions, their practices and the theories underpinning their practices. In doing so, we provided a space for students to engage in critical written reflection. These pre-module tasks aimed to enable participants to begin to identify possible areas for change in the field of higher education and change in their practice. At the beginning, we faced some resistance to these weekly pre-module tasks, but students quickly came on board as they realised its value and relevance to their professional growth in the higher education sector.

In their first pre-module task, participants were tasked with providing a written description on the teaching and learning strategies in their institutions. They needed to analyse institutional documents, including vision and mission statements and policies. We encouraged participants to use their agency as academics, and Margaret Archer's Social Realism Theory (Archer 1995; 1996), particularly the concepts of culture, structure and agency, to engage with the cultural and structural enablements and constraints related to learning and teaching in higher education. Our facilitation aspired to deepen participants' knowledge of the significant challenges of student access and success in the South African higher education context.

Ownership of learning – participants' perspectives

Developing partnerships in the classroom entails that students take ownership of their learning. In this module this was aligned to the purpose of the learning, teaching and assessment aimed at developing participants' knowledge of student learning to enable them to contribute to the development of the teaching and learning agenda in their institutions which will contribute to enhancing epistemological access for all students. The students in our class were in various stages of their careers ranging from junior lecturers to professors. These are some of the reflections that participants shared after a classroom discussion.

> Student A: *I feel we can support students in their learning by firstly having a conducive environment for learning. This also needs to be done by our teaching approach which must be creative and innovative. In addition, there must an engaged, participative approach from the student. As teachers, our role is to facilitate the learning process.*

> Student B: *Academic teachers have a tendency to overload the curriculum with content, burdening themselves with the task of teaching that content and student to absorb and reproduce. Threshold concepts enables teachers to refine what is fundamental to grasp of a subject and make sense of what seems central and often difficult to grasp by most learners.*

Online sessions also foregrounded theories informed by a social understanding of learning. We explained that academics need to use learning theories in their teaching, to reflect on what they do, and to share their experiences. Learning theories enable the development of

academics' pedagogical knowledge. We asked participants to think about how they will integrate some of the theoretical perspectives in their practices in teaching, learning and assessment in their institution. They needed to reflect on the needs of their students, the national imperatives, and the institutional directives that inform their teaching practice. Importantly, participants were given a space to reflect on the integration of theory and practice and share and discuss these ideas and implement them into their teaching practice. Comments from Student C and D reveals a shift in the way these students perceive their role as a teacher.

> Student C: *I believe students learn best when they can relate to the content and are able to make real life connections to the content and the world around them. In this context, I believe my role as a teacher is to help students to make meaning of the content that is presented to them and be able to see connections between the content they learn in class and the world around them.*

> Student D: *...this strategy is deeply rooted in the constructivism paradigm. Through my knowledge of Media Studies, I will make the learning activities to be more engaging and intriguing to all my students irrespective of their backgrounds and social experiences. My assessments will be incorporated in my teaching to advance high premium learning. I will ask my students to point out critical ethical matters in the global media and dissect such reportage based on the theoretical concepts.*

In terms of Prensky's suggestion of making use of available technology, participants had to actively use the learning platforms including Moodle, MS Teams, email and WhatsApp groups to meet the programme outcomes. Technology was used by participants when working on group

activities, for independent research and inquiry. It was our first-time using Moodle as a mode of instruction and we had to quickly learn how to navigate the system. It was challenging at first and we set up a separate Moodle classroom where we could 'play around' with the different tools. Using technology enabled us to mediate learning in this module and as discussed earlier in this chapter we had a mix of generational students with differing digital competencies, so we had to provide much support and training on how to use the Moodle platform.

The concept of students 'engaging in research and finding information' as proffered by Prensky (2010) formed an integral part of this module. Participants were provided with a detailed list of core and recommended readings for the module, however we emphasised that further research needed to be undertaken by participants to meet the outcomes and for theoretical engagement and knowledge building. We used tools such as discussion boards, Microsoft forms and break-out rooms to encourage participants to engage in their own learning. The breakout rooms in MS Teams were used to generate small group discussions. We found that there was a richer discussion and more participation within the small groups. During sessions we provided an article and leading questions to stimulate discussion and students could draw on their own resources to support and build their arguments. We further encouraged students to research and find information to be able to articulate a theoretically robust understanding of teaching, learning and assessment in higher education in South Africa. In addition, participants were encouraged to share reading resources in the relevant online channels on the MS Teams platform.

Prensky (2010: 13) also proposes "answering questions and sharing their thoughts and opinions" and in the teaching, learning and assessment

module participants provided their perspectives by answering questions posed through in-class discussions, questions raised by the facilitators and fellow participants on Moodle discussion boards, via the chat function on MS Teams and during online synchronous teaching. It was evident that through encouraging the sharing of opinions of participants from various disciplines, participants shared their contexts and practices as is evident in the comment from Student E.

> Student E: *Since sociocultural theories advance a mediatory role in learning, my duties as the lecturer can be described in the way they encourage learning and is realised via Vygotsky concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD describes the nature of the environment that promotes student learning. New challenging situations for learners demands new innovative mediatory tools for that activity. As a lecturer I need to afford students the right learning environment with adequate support from other students...".*

Prensky's (2010) view of 'creating presentations in texts and using multimedia' was employed in our module and we used online breakout rooms to provide participants an opportunity to work in groups, dialogue and create presentations that were shared and discussed in the plenary session. These included presentations where participants reflected on their institutions' teaching and learning agenda, shared diverse discipline practices, and teaching and learning approaches all of which contributed to building new knowledge in the field.

In an effort to foster collaborative learning, we provided students with the tools, scenarios and leading questions that enabled the fostering of ownership in their learning. Ashwin (2009) speaks of how teaching-learning are intertwined and must interact and the value of collaborative approaches to teaching and learning for students. During

the programme, through collaborative dialogical engagement, we assisted students with what Biggs (2012: 42) calls "the felt need to get there." The non-threatening partnering environment when purposefully created enables participants to engage, ask questions, grow, and develop their understanding of the need for transformation in teaching and learning, which further strengthens their ability to become more confident in their roles in the academic environment. This was evident in the way in which students engaged in learning activities throughout the module and in their final module assignment. We acknowledged that students needed a supportive context in which to learn and grow and one where they felt a sense of belonging. In doing so, we needed to carefully think about our role and how we were to motivate the cohort to succeed. Our aim was to create the climate and environment for the development of the student and for them to explore, discover and own their learning.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has opened up critical spaces for higher education practitioners to reflect on our curriculum and pedagogies. It has highlighted the need for academics and academic developers to utilise meta-theoretical knowledge to enable us to better understand that higher education is a social field. It has also helped us understand the importance of reflecting on our roles, academic practices and our views on student learning. Our main argument in this chapter is that a pedagogical shift is required in our classrooms where students are viewed as partners in the learning process. The Covid-19 pandemic foregrounded the necessity of embracing pedagogical shifts which requires that we need to undergo a process of unlearning and relearning new ways of thinking, doing and becoming. In turn, students

should be encouraged to take ownership of their learning. Theories such as connectivism (Siemens 2004), engaging students as partners (Healey, Flint and Harrington 2014) and the pedagogy of partnering (Prensky 2010) opens up incredible opportunities and the potential to enable partnerships between the facilitator and student, allowing particular dispositions, qualities and knowledge/s to be developed in both the lecturer and the student. These are vital for the 21st century classroom as it caters for a diverse student and staff population and creates a vibrant and flexible learning space for both students and staff.

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CHAPTER 17

Guiding information-finding missiles: A reflection on adapting assessments to maximise student learning in the online environment

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Abstract

Students in higher education (HE) are resourceful and creative in their information-seeking, and are able to find answers to questions very fast. Whether they are able to critically assess the value of the information they find for validity and usefulness is, however, questionable. When the global Covid-19 pandemic forced HE institutions to present courses online, I was unable to use the engaged (work-based/community) learning methodologies I usually use to achieve course outcomes and had to look to other routes of assessment. I considered a summative test-and-quiz assessment route that is the norm in our faculty and realised this would merely give students the opportunity to show off their information-finding skills, and do nothing for their learning. Thus, in the first week of Emergency Remote Teaching in 2020, I had to find alternative ways to assess, so that students could demonstrate creativity, originality and critical thinking, rather than just recalling/finding information. I draw on my recent experiences and reflect on two assessments redesigned for the online space, using Schön's (1991) model for reflection-in-action for science-based professions. I reflect on whether learning outcomes were met and examine my key challenges in the online space. I explore whether the assessments showcased students' critical abilities,

teamwork skills and communication. I appraise my own reaction to student feedback and reflect on how the experience has grown my abilities as an educator. With the immediate and long-term future of HE delivery uncertain, it is likely that most courses will require online components, and I consider the value of using the adapted assessment methods, even in the event that the world returns to post-Covid normalcy.

Keywords: assessment, online learning, information, adapting, critical thinking

Introduction

Students in higher education (HE) are information-finding missiles. Schwieger & Ladwig (2018: 45) note that Generation Z (individuals born between 1996 and 2012) has been raised with technology incorporated into their everyday lives, unlike any generation before them in human history. As a result, they are incredibly resourceful and creative in their information-seeking, using any and every means, and they are successful in finding answers – very fast. Whether they are able to critically assess, for validity and usefulness, the value of the information they find, is quite another matter.

I teach in the Agriscience Faculty at Stellenbosch University (SU), where the tradition is to examine students' knowledge and understanding through the use of summative exams, even at the higher NQF levels. There has been a move towards "flexible assessment" modules in our faculty because it has been recognised that engaged teaching and learning methods (for example, work-based learning and project/problem-based learning) are extremely valuable in meeting high impact (HI) learning criteria (Kuh 2013: 59). Positive correlations have also been

noted by these authors between HI activities, deep learning, and self-reported gains (personal and practical) for students. Kuh *et al.* (2013: 57) described activities that have been shown to meet HI learning criteria including learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative learning, and research. Furthermore, the top three attributes sought in new employees in any sector include the ability to work in a team, problem-solving and written communication skills (Schwieger & Ladwig 2018: 49). According to the SU Teaching & Learning Policy (Leibowitz *et al.* 2017: 9), the SU student should be provided with the opportunity to grapple with issues of efficiency and mastery and matters of value so that graduate attributes are enhanced. At SU these include having an enquiring mind, being an engaged citizen, a dynamic professional and a well-rounded individual (Leibowitz *et al.* 2017: 7). Thus, when I originally designed the second year Wine Science (Oenology) modules (all flexible assessment) in 2016, I needed to ensure that my assessment activities would include engaged learning methodologies that maximised employability in the Agricultural sector, Kuh's criteria and SU graduate attributes.

Context

There are a number of important outcomes in our second-year modules in the oenology (wine science) modules I teach that provide essential, underpinning knowledge for the third and fourth years of our programme. The students need to understand industry context (history, trade, global impact, sustainability and occupational legislation), and also the deep technical aspects of winetasting (cultivar aroma, influence of *terroir*, etc) to make sense of subsequent academic work and their own place in the industry. Usually, Kuh's high impact learning activities would be met through visits to industry in order to achieve

these outcomes. For example, in order to understand cultivar aroma, and the influence of *terroir*, students are expected to visit Wine of Origin areas to gather experience and information. To meet outcomes around consumers and marketing, students are expected to do a period (3-4 days over the semester) of service in tasting rooms. In order to get a grip on the Health and Safety aspects of wine legislation, they need to carry out an audit of a winery on site, using a checklist, and talking to the winemakers about hazards.

Up until March 2020, I had very positive feedback on these industry-based opportunities, and had been satisfied that learning was happening very satisfactorily. Then the Covid19 pandemic hit, and we had to go (within a period of three weeks) fully online, with zero face-to-face interaction. Not only that, but all tasting rooms, sales and movement of alcohol were prohibited. This had a huge impact on my ability to provide learning opportunities for my students. I could not even provide wine for tastings, as this was not available anywhere, including our Department's own "Vinoteek". We were forbidden from accessing any wine at all. The students could no longer do site visits, were unable to buy or transport wine, and I was left completely helpless as to how to meet course outcomes.

Schön's Theory of Reflective Practice

One of my go-to methods as an engaged learning practitioner has been reflection. Using reflection as part of assessment is challenging in the sciences, but has been shown to be a high-impact tool for students if good feedback is provided (Chabon & Lee-Wilkerson 2006: 147; Al-Rawahi & Al-Balushi 2015: 368; Phuthi & Mpofu 2021: 314). Reflection can help students to decipher meaning in what they are learning, and can thus yield useful information about how this connects back to the

overall course objectives. Likewise, reflection has been an important part of my own journey as a lecturer in HE in SA, and has been part of my own transformation from scientist/oenologist to a citizen who is deeply concerned with the state of the world, our wracked country and education system, and our students' welfare and learning.

Donald Schön (1930-1997) was a philosopher and educational theorist who had a deep respect for practitioners' abilities to use active reflection to enhance their professional practice. He saw reflection as a practical way of synthesising tacit knowledge and ability (Kinsella 2010: 567). Interestingly, he defined professional practice and the practitioner's ability to manage unique and difficult situations as an 'artistry' (Kinsella 2010: 567). Schön's theory is that there are two main types of reflection: 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action', with a precursor step 'knowing in action' (Schon 1991). Unlike Kolb's (1984) reflective theory, Schön's theory is not a circular model of reflection, and draws a clear distinction between reflection during the event (reflection in action) and reflection after the event (reflection on action).

Knowing in action: This concept is a less commonly cited aspect of Schön's theory, and provides a basis for understanding Schön's appreciation of the role of intuition that practitioners bring to uncertain, unstable, and unique situations.

Reflecting in action: This is when a practitioner experiences and considers a situation, decides how to act, and does so immediately, and this often occurs during the event, which may help the practitioner to become more dynamic and responsive.

Reflection on action: According to Schön, the practitioner thinks about what has transpired, takes time to pause and reconsider the situation,

and ponders what needs to change going forward. This enables the practitioner to spend more time considering the situation, considering various interpretations, and thinking about how they could respond differently in the future.

Despite the fact that reflecting during an event might feel somewhat strange to the uninitiated, this model has several definite advantages. Schön's theoretical perspective is positive and empowering because it encourages one to be dynamic by reflecting on the situation immediately and coming up with a creative solution. Thus, it appeals to busy practitioners who may not be able to make time to carry out reflections after the event, or just forget to do so. It can be performed during and/or after the event, which makes it flexible in rapidly changing circumstances. The practitioner develops new ways of doing that incorporate insights from previous instances of reflection (Kinsella 2010: 573).

Reflection

Knowing in action: When the global Covid-19 pandemic forced HE institutions to present courses online, the go-to response (knowing in action) on the part of most of my colleagues was online tests and quizzes. These were relatively easy (time-consuming but doable) to set up, but my own deep-seated mistrust of these methods meant that, although I was happy to use them as "self-checks" for student progress, I was intuitively unhappy about using them for actually monitoring learning and assigning a lot of credit to them. In my opinion (subsequently proved by my colleagues' experiences) the summative test-and-quiz assessment route merely gives students an ideal opportunity to show off their information-finding and 'connected' skills, even with very tight timelines and real-time cameras focussed on their

every move. In fact, looking at it from a different perspective, the students' ability to find unique and intricate routes past the restrictions we attempted to impose on their access to information is testimony to their innovative and creative skillset. These skills are highly commendable and speak to a number of graduate and employability attributes, but unfortunately, they do not address the module outcomes in terms of learning the content. I therefore decided to try and make use of the students' natural abilities to find information, but to guide them to use their critical and analytical facilities to sift out the valid and useful information from the non-sense and find ways to use that information creatively by synthesizing new material/ creating knowledge for themselves.

Reflecting in action: My first challenge was building a foundation of cultivar knowledge and aroma attributes with no wine available, and students unable to access or transport any alcoholic products. I decided to use activities described by Kuh *et al.*. (2013: 57) to meet high impact learning criteria (learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative learning, research), and divided the class into groups. I set them a research task with a creative, as well as a written, output. I asked them to design an "Aroma Wheel" for a particular wine cultivar. This is a colourful, visual representation of the characteristic aroma attributes of the wine. In order to achieve this, students were encouraged to go back through their own winetasting notes from first year (and the few months up to hard lockdown), research the popular and primary literature, and design a wine-aroma wheel for three cultivars/winestyles within their group. Thus, they were creating new knowledge based on their own lived experience, and unique olfactory memories while including classic cultivar descriptors. As aroma wheels do not exist for a large number of winestyles, and a lot of cultivars, this

was not something they would easily be able to plagiarise, so I felt confident that they would need to think for themselves. They could hand draw, and take photos to upload their design, or use any online resource they liked to assist them with production of the wheels. I was really pleased as I designed this assessment, as I felt I had addressed issues that we would otherwise have needed twenty to thirty hours of practical in, possibly without any learning on the part of the student. I felt they had no choice BUT to engage in learning through this exercise.

The second intervention was even more complicated, and once I had embarked on it, I cursed myself roundly for having attempted it. It took a huge amount of input on my part, but I could not backtrack, as I felt it really was a good way to facilitate the students' learning around Occupational Health and Safety (H&S). I was locked in and could not get out, gritting my teeth, as I ploughed my way through creating this monster of an assessment. It was a two-stage process. I disembowelled the old Powerpoint presentations in which I had "transferred" information to the students regarding hazards in wineries, using the old Banking model (Freire, 1970:73) of learning. I gave them ten pictures of winery hazards, and asked them to identify the problems therein (I called it their 'Hazard Analysis'). I designed a template for their answers. I then provided them with online readings, checklists and detailed feedback on their answers and asked them to create a H&S Plan for a small winery which included all the hazards they had identified, as well as others outlined in the readings. They could use any resource, including existing H&S plans, as long as they cited their source. They were expected to work individually. I felt instinctively that this was going to be a mistake...

In both assessments, they needed to outline their research process in an accompanying document, in which contributions by each member of

the group needed to be demonstrated. I set clear directions in an assessment brief, and wondered how they would manage. I was available on the elearning platform (Sunlearn) at specified times, as well as on email and WhatsApp for consultation. My intuition told me this would be challenging without the physical location of a winery to assess, and I felt quite apprehensive about the quality of work I would receive.

Reflection on action: The aroma wheel assessment seemed to be a popular exercise with the groups. When the students submitted the work (some of them by email), they commented that they had enjoyed the work. The submissions were of a high standard, and the students had definitely used their own language to describe wine attributes. Some groups had gone so far as to create wine-tasting wheels with holistic sets of descriptors, not just for aroma, but for taste and mouthfeel too. The submissions were attractive and interesting, and the "demis" assigned to help with the marking commented that they had enjoyed the students' interpretation. So all-in-all, I thought, a good exericse, that stretched the students and inculcated knowledge of wine aroma. They had in fact produced new knowledge, indigenous South African knowledge, by this work. I felt satisfied and realised that Kuh's HI learning activities communities (their groups), writing-intensive courses, problem solving and research had really helped me to design a good assessment which I believe had impact on the students' understanding of cultivar. I mused that there was not much I would change if I had the opportunity over again, except, of course, to ask the students to taste actual wine, and not just collate information. I felt that this assessment made me feel like an "artist-teacher", and it was, as Schön (1991) envisioned, an empowering exercise for me. A key challenge of the online space (viz. how do I get students to work with

the concept of aroma) had become a real opportunity for HI learning. The learning outcomes were met and that the assessments showcased students' critical abilities, teamwork skills and communication. There are changes I could make to improve this assignment. I could ask them to create aroma standards for the cultivar from their homes, take photos of substances with similar aromas, create a personal lexicon for each cultivar, but it was good enough for the time being.

The second assessment was a nightmare to mark. I marked around fifty H&S plans (because of the complexity involved in the task, and the specialist knowledge needed to assess the results. I realised I really had stretched the students. All of them had completed the Hazard Analysis (HA), but a significant percentage did not put much effort into their H&S plans. I was very disappointed at the results, and also disappointed that I had expended so much effort, time and energy on the assessment. In fact, in asking so much of the students, I was asking too much of myself. Despite the negatives, I realise that this exercise has also shaped my 'knowing in action' because I will not ask such onerous, administratively heavy tasks of individual students again, and will design the task so that the workload can be split between group members. The online challenge was to ask students to assess H&S in a winery they could not physically visit. Although I did not exactly meet this outcome, I learnt valuable lessons around design, and following my instincts. Schön has helped me to see that, had I listened to my inner voice and intuition about this assessment, I would have stepped back at the Reflection in Action stage, and simplified it further. I am using a far more concise version of the assignment this year, which focuses on key H&S issues.

Conclusions

Drawing on my experiences and reflecting using Schön's model (1991) I have considered two assessments redesigned for the online space. The intense reflective experience made me realise that I **must** 'reflect in action' and trust to my own intuition and instincts. This experience has empowered me, as Schön predicted, and enabled me to grow, primarily through my own experiences, rather than through external facts or theories, thus enhancing my practice. It has allowed me to trust my instinct and acknowledge my 'artistry' as an educator (even if that artistry does not always produce masterpieces). Our students benefit because I design assessments that encourage them to think critically and creatively, and exercise discernment with regard to knowledge sources. With the immediate and long-term future of HE delivery uncertain, it is likely that most courses will require online components, and in hindsight, I am grateful that I was forced out of my comfort zone, and able to make use of the online environment and showcase what our students can achieve. Adapting assessments for the online environment can be a valuable opportunity to revisit module outcomes and reimagine ways of doing things that incorporate students' lived experience, thus creating new knowledge.

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CHAPTER 18

Reflections on a compulsory 'dance-at-home' course for pre-service student teachers during lockdown

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Abstract

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic struck South Africa and the dance education course for pre-service student teachers had to be re-imagined for distance learning. Globally, many dance educators moved to synchronous online learning platforms, but in South Africa most students struggled with internet access, data, devices and the lack of appropriate physical space to work synchronously. Hence, I designed an asynchronous teaching method that facilitated dance experiences to my vastly diverse students, at home. Students were provided with instructions for dance-making activities that they could do either by themselves or with their family members. For this course, they had to provide evidence of participation in these activities by means of video recordings, photos or writing a short reflection. Pedagogically, this new method of teaching dance education is unique, since students participated in the dance asynchronously and in isolation, rather than the usual synchronous participation in community with their peers. This course however encouraged participants to involve their family members in the dance, which unlike other dance education methods, offered opportunities to share the actual dance experiences with family members, bringing the dance into the home and community environments. This enabled students to have autonomy over their own dance experiences to choose not only how they wanted to create each dance, but also, which dance vocabulary they wanted to explore and

develop. Students could thus choose how they wanted to express themselves without the usual confinement of required stylistic criteria. From these movement expressions emerged an organic decolonised approach to both experiencing and teaching dance. Moreover, these dance experiences seemed to build connection in times of isolation and facilitate experiences of healing in times of trauma. This paper reflects on this surprisingly effective new dance teaching praxis which emerged from distance education.

Keywords: decolonising dance, online education, creative arts education, trauma, isolation

Introduction

In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic struck South Africa and we joined the rest of the world in lockdown. In a matter of weeks, higher education institutions across the globe had to transfer academic programmes to online platforms to provide multiple pathways for students to complete the academic year via distance education. For South African higher education institutions, the move away from face-to-face came with a specific set of challenges. Most students struggled with access to internet due to the absence of signal where they lived, and/or due to a lack of money to pay for data and bandwidth required for online learning. Many students also lacked an appropriate device - which in the South African context means access to a smart phone and not necessarily a computer/laptop. Due to lockdown, many students' home environments also made it difficult to find a quiet corner to work in, and some students had to share their device with a sibling who also had to engage in online learning.

My task was to re-imagine a tertiary dance education course for distance learning in a manner that would accommodate these challenges. Globally, many dance educators moved to synchronous online learning platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Skype to imitate a face-to-face class experience (Gingrasso 2020; Heyang and Martin 2020). However, I was not in favour of synchronous online platforms for South African students. Synchronous online platforms would only cater for those who are privileged enough to afford good devices, bandwidth and data, and I had an ethical problem with intentionally excluding many students who do not have these privileges. Indeed, I felt that insistence on synchronous online platforms perpetuated the cycle of inequality in education, as it continued to favour those who have, and discriminate against those who have not, deepening the already present educational divide.

I was also mindful that students' challenges to connect to synchronous online sessions could cause feelings of despair, frustration and being left behind, which would debilitate students' morale and add to their trauma in a time of crisis. Because crisis it was. I was deeply aware that our students, along with the rest of the world, were faced with the emotional strain of trying to survive a pandemic. Anxiety, fear of falling sick, experiences of loss, isolation, depression, frustration and an urgent desire to learn how to deal with these overwhelming emotions, was evident amongst students (and other people).

My quest was clear, I not only had to design an asynchronous course for distance learning – but I also had to do it in a way that would add value to the quality of life students were experiencing. Many scholars have written about the value of dance in releasing stress, experiencing freedom (Stinson 1997; Marx 2015) and contributing to a better quality

of life (Bond 2019). Research has shown that dance movement therapy, a field derived from dance education, has been used to alleviate trauma and anxiety (Karkou and Sanderson 2001; Koch *et al.*. 2014; Koch *et al.*. 2019). Thus, I was adamant to create opportunities for students to actively participate in the dance, to add to their quality of life during lockdown.

This chapter provides a reflective analysis of my experiences in developing and implementing the new 'dance-at-home' course for distance education. Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper's (2001) reflective framework guided my thoughts as I critically engaged with the 'What? So what? and Now what?' questions to make sense of some memorable incidents during this course. Cook-Sather, Abbot and Felten (2019: 17) however, advise Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoLT) practitioners to move away from rigid methodological frameworks when presenting reflective writing. They encourage a "flexible, open approach" to "create the generative space necessary to represent the fullness of analysis of learning and teaching."

As such, this chapter provides a brief overview of the newly designed dance-at-home course, followed by a glimpse of what I saw on a weekly basis. Thereafter, a reflective analysis will provide my professional learning surrounding the outcomes of this dance-at-home course, as it seemed to create spaces for: (1) Decolonising dance experiences (2) Connection in times of isolation (3) Healing in times of trauma and (4) Effective teacher training. The conclusion summarises the chapter.

The dance-at-home course

This dance education course forms part of a compulsory Creative Arts module for the Foundation Phase pre-service student teachers at the

University. Its purpose is to prepare students who are mostly 'non-dancers[1]' to become dance education facilitators in their future classrooms. Dance education is different to dance-as-performance-art, since the primary focus is on the holistic development of individuals as they engage with the process of dancing and dance-making, rather than prioritising the end-product - a flawless performance (Karkou and Sanderson 2001). Whereas dance-as-performance-art requires dance training to perfect the detailed nuances of each movement, dance education provides opportunities for participants to explore their own movements and their creative Selves. Creative movement (a teaching method within dance education) generally incorporates movement exploration, bodily expression, creative problem-solving and dance-making activities (Hanna 2008).

Prior to the pandemic, these dance education sessions consisted mostly of interactive and collaborative dance-making activities with others, which allowed for placing the physical body at the centre of understanding the Self as a social being (Koff 2000). My doctoral research investigated the value of such embodied interactions for developing awareness of Self in relation to Other, ultimately promoting cohesion (Marx 2015). Due to the pandemic, embodied interactions which are an integral part of this module, were impossible. Hence, I was deeply concerned about the value and effectiveness of a dance education course that had no interactive dance-making experiences. Heyang and Martin (2020) rightfully asked how dance education could be sustainable during a time of social distancing, distance learning and pandemic.

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[1] I am not fond of this term, since all persons should be considered 'dancers'.

Another challenge was finding a suitable mode of communication to provide equal access to the course. Equal access to education is an important Constitutional (RSA 1996) human right that I wanted to uphold in my teaching praxis. Fortunately, students received free access to our online learning management system (LMS) platform Moodle as it is a zero-rated data site. Unfortunately, students had to pay for data if they clicked on a Uniform Resource Locator (URL). If my intention was to ensure no additional costs for students, I had to make my own dance tutorials and upload them onto Moodle. Moodle's upload limit was only 50 Mb. This meant that I had to record a 5-minute video with my phone's camera on a medium resolution, send it to my husband via WhatsApp, have it sent back to me, upload it onto google drive on my phone, access it on my laptop, edit the video if necessary, and finally upload it onto Moodle. Although this was a time-consuming process, it worked[2]. I made a series of 5-minute videos which students could access for free. Students could access written explanations and instructions on Moodle if they struggled with poor internet signals. The medium for free and equal access to education was set.

I designed a new asynchronous teaching method that facilitated dance experiences for students, at home. One hundred and eighty students were provided with video tutorials that included instructions for weekly dance-making activities that they could either do by themselves, or with their family members. For example, 'Choose an emotion. Design five movements that would depict that emotion. String your movements together to form a dance.' Each activity had an 'alone option' and a 'family option.' Each week, students were required to submit evidence of themselves doing these dance activities to myself

[2] Lately I am more online savvy: The video can be edited by phone, WhatsApped to a second sim card and uploaded from the phone directly onto the Moodle app.

via WhatsApp[3]. Initially, I had an ethical concern with insisting on students sending me videos of themselves dancing, since I felt like it sounded quite creepy. Also, aware that I was training future teachers, I wanted to role model safe dance teaching praxis to protect future vulnerable children. Hence, I created a choice. Students could either submit a video recording, or a set of action photos, or write a short reflection of what they enjoyed most about each activity, as evidence of their participation. Since these were submitted via WhatsApp, I could send students individual feedback through personalised voice notes. The course span across six weeks and students actively participated in a total of 18 dance activities.

Through the eyes of the facilitator

I received wonderful videos of students and families smiling, having fun and dancing together in their home environments during a time of crisis. I was deeply moved. Students danced in small tin rooms, outside 'rondawels,' in the dust of a field, in deserted lecture halls, bedrooms, corridors, garages, pavements, and in a grassy field next to cows in-front of a beautiful mountain range. I met students' family members and learnt more about 'their other-than-student identities' as students. One student had three of her own children on her hips as she showed me her activity while another gathered her four young siblings to dance with her. Another started a dance video in a whisper, 'sorry Mam, I will not be able to play the music because my baby is sleeping next to me' before she stealthily tiptoed through her routine. Many students danced with their children, siblings, roommates, boyfriends, parents,

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[3] Initially we tried video submissions through Moodle, but students seemed to prefer WhatsApp since it was more user-friendly and used little data. At this point, students started receiving a free data bundle from the university.

grandparents or some of the community's children. Others danced alone.

I felt a veil lift as I was invited into students' homes (albeit virtually). I became more aware of whom I was teaching. I no longer perceived students as cohorts of culturally diverse people who shared a communal homogenous 'student identity.' Each student was unique in terms of their role and responsibilities within their families and home environments. Glimpses into the lived lives of students allowed for a more humanising perspective of them. This changed the way I understood my role as lecturer. I became more understanding of students' circumstances and more lenient towards 'second-to-family issues' such as assessment deadlines. Moreover, witnessing students' home environments reminded me of our complex tasks as teachers to relate new content to what these diverse individuals already know, as Piaget (1947) suggests. As such, I became more mindful and adaptable during content creation to ensure a more inclusive approach to learning and teaching.

Reflective analysis

In the first week students had to choose a movement that represents each family member. They could ask family members to provide them with a movement or create their own. They required a minimum of five movements, and where the family was small, they could add the names of special people to their family dance. One student - a father, decided to gather his whole family for the activity. The grandfather of the family decided to teach the indigenous movements of their family clan name to his grandson. The student thanked me for creating this special family moment and shared that his grandmother also tearfully shared her

gratitude towards the university to create opportunities for this kind of knowledge sharing.

Decolonising the dance experience

Reflecting on this experience, I realised that some of the dance activities in the course created spaces where teaching and learning could occur through the organic communal sharing of indigenous knowledge within the family. Thus, resembling traditional methods of transferring indigenous knowledge in communities with family members (Mabingo *et al.*. 2020). In the above moment, the sharing of indigenous knowledge occurred across three generations. Moreover, since the instruction to engage in this activity came from a tertiary institution, it seemed to facilitate a validation of indigenous knowledge systems as being of value and relevant in modernity, and in higher education. The dance activities thus created spaces where indigenous knowledge could be placed at the centre of the learning experience, de-centralising Western knowledge systems and subsequently, decolonising not only the content, but also the transfer of content through traditional teaching and learning methods, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) and Zembylas (2018) suggest.

I observed that quite a few students chose to use their indigenous movement vocabulary to explore and develop their creativity during these dance-at-home activities. Students could interpret 'twist, sway, jump, turn, lean and collapse' in their own way, without the pressure of conforming to western or Afro-pop dance traditions. Students could thus celebrate their indigenous knowledge and cultural identities through their dance creations. In this regard, I was reminded of Rowe, Buck and Martin (2014) who suggest that traditional indigenous dances should not be seen as fossilised artefacts of history, but as dynamic,

evolving and artistic dances relevant to current society. Thus, encouraging creativity within indigenous dance forms, creates opportunities for community members to be validated and celebrated as innovators, creatives and artists - as they engage in a symbolic representation of the dynamic nature of their ethno-cultural group. Hence, these dance-at-home experiences affirmed pride in ethno-cultural identity, for those who chose to use their indigenous dance vocabulary.

The creative movement activities of this course thus allowed for the exploration of 'natural' movements (Kaufman and Ellis 2007), which indeed created spaces where individuals could re-discover their authentic selves (Smith 2002; Kauppila 2007; Mabingo *et al.*. 2020). The dance thus became interconnected with the lived experience of becoming.

Pre-Covid-19, face-to-face dance-making in the multicultural classroom looked different, as students designed movements with culturally diverse peers. Although I investigated the value of these intercultural interactions (van Heerden 2019), I never considered that something of value was lost because of the presence of the Other. This dance-at-home course allowed individuals to be unaffected by the peer pressure of popular dance culture or the hidden impact of being in vicinity of the other. The extent of this hidden impact on dance-making and how it works, still requires investigation.

In this course, students were free to choose which movements they wanted to explore, so they could also explore movements outside their cultural styles. Hence, students were not at risk of being unwillingly imprisoned by or 'tied to' their own ethno-cultural identities (Foucault 1994). This is something I often wonder about in debates on

decolonising the arts. One cannot assume or force a person to study indigenous art/dance/music merely because they are African. In the context of equal opportunities and respecting the dignity of individuals, it is important that we acknowledge an individual's autonomy of choice as to whether they would like to pursue indigenous or Western art forms (or both).

Connection during times of isolation

Humanity's desire to connect with other people has been emphasised during experiences of lockdown. As lecturers we were challenged to create opportunities for students to connect with each other during online learning. Sadly, this course did not create spaces for student-to-student interaction. However, this course created a different kind of connection, one that is often overlooked by higher education's emphasis on 'connecting.' This dance-at-home course seemed to foster connection between family members. The first dance activity of this course required students to learn a set choreography from a home-made video tutorial. One student who danced with her family thanked me for the activity, since it was the first time that she, her mother and sister smiled and laughed together since her father had passed away one and a half months ago. This comment struck my heart, as I realised the potential impact of these dance experiences in restoring connections between family members in times of trauma and isolation.

I witnessed many connecting moments between family members throughout the dance-at-home course. Whether family members were dancing together, encouraging from behind the camera, or applauding and providing instructions from outside the frame – it was clear that the compulsory dance-at-home course affected many family members. My own studies have shown that dance education has the capacity to

build connections, foster friendships and instil notions of care amongst participants in the dance (Marx 2015; van Heerden 2019). Thus, for those who participated simultaneously in the dance, this may have held true.

Cultivating connections with family members impacts a person's experience of health and wellbeing (Bell and Bell 2009). Moments of connection within the family can also instil hope, the kind of hope that makes possible the imagining of a better future. Experiencing connection can assist persons to experience support and care, which enables them to adapt to the "challenging reality" of living through a pandemic, dealing with a fatal disease and lockdown (Bareket-Bojmel *et al.*. 2021: 134). If these connections are not fostered, individuals run the risk of experiencing loneliness, isolation, hopelessness, depression and anxiety. These family dance experiences seemed to create moments of connection between family members, an important psycho-emotional experience to assist persons to cope with the trauma and isolation begotten by the pandemic.

The dance-at-home course also fostered a deeper student-lecturer connection than the prior face-to-face courses. Since students sent their personal videos, photos and reflections each week, I had to provide them with regular individual feedback which would not have occurred in the face-to-face classroom. I used personalised voice notes where I could address each student by name (which is something I found challenging in a regular face-to-face setting). The voice notes also added a humanising quality to the student-lecturer exchange, since students could hear the kindness and warmth of the inflection of my voice as I provided them with ways to improve their creative imagination, bodily implementation and performance. Thus, voice notes enabled me to combine the sharing of cognitive knowledge with

emotional qualities such as humour, empathy, kindness and understanding. Individualised voice notes also seemed to make the students feel special, valued and recognised, because they were getting individual attention and recognition from their lecturer. This deepened the student-lecturer relationship as it created a series of positive learning experiences, which in turn, increased students' quality of work and their creative development.

As I reflect deeper, I become aware of the limitations of critical and concise written feedback, as it leaves little room for emotive engagement between student and lecturer. Perhaps it is the absence of personalised emotive engagement during critical feedback that often induces negative learning experiences. It seemed as if the use of voice notes built a more personal connection between lecturer and student, which was significant both to student and lecturer, during a time of isolation.

Healing in times of trauma

At one point during the pandemic, I found myself writing up to three condolences messages per week. Students, myself and the rest of the world were traumatised as many lost family members and/or struggled with feelings of anxiety, stress, depression and being overwhelmed. In the dance videos however, students were always smiling – even in the serious moments when depicting the emotion of anxiety through movement, a satisfied, joyful or laughing smile would come at the end of the dance as the student moved towards the camera to switch it off. My observation of the dance videos led me to believe that each dance session created spaces for students to experience moments of joy, amid the trauma. The act of dancing releases hormones such as endorphins into the body which enables feelings of happiness (Bungay *et al..* 2020).

The dance experiences provided spaces where students could breathe deeply, have fun, relax and experience some relief from the stress and anxiety they were experiencing, which resonates with what scholars Stinson (1997), Marx and Delport (2017) and Bernstein (2019) suggest. Students could channel their complex emotions about the pandemic into a physical and creative outlet. They could be present in the moment of movement as the dances allowed for a mindfulness (Koch *et al.*. 2019) that distracted them from potential feelings of being imprisoned by panic or despair. They could focus their attention on the act of creating something beautiful and meaningful through movement - movement, which some may view as a sign of life - during a time of loss, fear and uncertainty. Students also experienced a sense of accomplishment with each dance submission, a valuable feeling in times of feeling overwhelmed. In this regard, Bernstein (2019) argues that dance experiences can affirm and empower individuals to re-discover themselves as creative and whole human beings after trauma. I wonder whether creatively solving the problems posed in each dance activity, somehow reminded students of their capacity to deal with a challenge successfully and creatively? I also wonder whether the dance-making activities empowered students to re-discover themselves as creative and capable human beings during a time when many felt powerless, as Bernstein (2019) suggests.

Connecting dance with emotional healing, as mentioned earlier, is not a new idea. Over centuries ethno-cultural dances have been used, and are still used, to build and heal affiliated ethno-cultural communities across the globe (Onyeji 2004; Edwards 2010; Marx 2015). Indigenous African dances for example, are still used to heal associated communities. Dance movement therapy is also a recognised method of psychotherapy (Karkou *et al.*. 2019; Koch *et al.*. 2019). A most recent

study proposes that involvement in music and dance can alleviate the psychological and emotional strain associated with contracting Covid-19 (Cineka and Raj 2021). I propose that involvement in this dance-at-home course seemed to create spaces for healing in a time of pandemic. In this regard, UNESCO (2020) released a statement that encouraged teachers across the globe to use creative arts activities (such as these dance activities) to provide psychosocial and emotional support to students and learners as they deal with the trauma of a pandemic.

Effective teacher training

A further surprise was that students who engaged in the dance-at-home course developed a more mature understanding of the value of dance education in the classroom, than during the face-to-face course. Perhaps it was because the individual had to take full responsibility for the creative processes and outcome of each activity. This responsibility may have reminded them of the responsibilities they will have as future dance facilitators. Perhaps it is the added responsibility and determination that comes with online learning – you are on your own now, you better make it work. It may also be that they themselves experienced the value of these dance-at-home activities as they dealt with emotional challenges during the pandemic. Or it might have been because students had the option to reflect on each experience, which may have invoked a deeper understanding of their experience (Ghaye 2011).

Conclusion

In the context of this book, I would like to highlight the professional learning that has occurred as a teacher educator. Initially, I was convinced that a distance dance education course without embodied

interaction with culturally diverse others, would have little value. What I did not expect, was that the absence of student-to-student interaction would generate new spaces for meaningful experiences. This new dance-at-home course created spaces for decolonising the dance experience, since students could use their indigenous movement vocabulary within their home and family environments, to creatively explore both traditional and innovative avenues of expression. Thus, as a professional educator, I learnt how to create organic and authentic spaces where indigenous knowledge can be shared. I also learnt about the value of exploring movements in mono-cultural settings.

This course seemed to build connections in times of isolation. Students could dance with their family members, increasing experiences of care and support in times where many experienced fear, anxiety and isolation. As professional educator, I learnt that using personalised voice notes as feedback facilitates a more humanising student-lecturer connection, which facilitates positive learning experiences and increases feelings of support in times where many felt isolated.

This dance-at-home course also created spaces for healing in times of trauma, since it provided students with a creative and emotional outlet for the stresses related to online learning and the pandemic, as it realised experiences of joy and accomplishment. This asynchronous 'dance-at-home' course made equal access to dance education during a pandemic, possible. The dance experiences seemed to increase the students' quality of life, as it equipped them to teach dance education to their future Foundation Phase learners.

A personal note

The implications of these newly acquired insights places me in a conundrum. Whereas the value of the 'dance-at-home' course is evident above, my previous research indicated that the face-to-face course promoted social cohesion in a multicultural society (van Heerden 2019). Thus, the current question I am asking myself is – in the context of South Africa and 'unity in diversity' (RSA 1996), which is more important? Is it more important to decolonise learning experiences, or to promote social cohesion? There are many more deep questions here, perhaps for future research.

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CHAPTER 19

Writing centre tutors' experiences and perceptions of online academic support: Reflecting on the digital transformation during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Academic writing support initiatives have historically been conducted and designed around face-to-face interaction in physical spaces. Writing centre tutors have the role of critically interrogating academic discourse and practices that may lead to changes in norms and standards. This paper seeks to explore how writing centre tutors experienced the transition and service delivery from face-to-face to online tutoring. The transition from tutoring writing in co-presence settings to synchronous and asynchronous digital teaching formats is important to the digital transformation. The Covid-19 pandemic has permeated nearly every facet of human activity, and the tertiary institutions are no exception. As a result, the writing centres at Durban University of Technology (DUT), South Africa accelerated their transition

to online tutoring and learning systems. The transition and service delivery from face-to-face to online tutoring expedited the creation of an enabling online environment that initiated innovative tutoring techniques that have been used for all undergraduate students. The study is premised on Mezirow's (1978) transformational learning theory, which studies tutors' decontextualized and recontextualized academic writing practises following their transition to online tutoring. Data collection included reflections from 12 writing centre tutors within a qualitative inquiry. Data were collected and analysed using NVivo to find common themes and trends to accomplish the purpose. The findings indicated that tutors do indeed possess a set of important ideas that may contribute significantly to the transformative learning process and that the writing centre, through its approaches and learning practices, can serve as a vehicle for achieving actual transformation. There is no doubt that technology can increase the quality of education globally and improve academic writing support outcomes. Thus, multimodality in writing centres can thus help bring out the richness of diversity, enabling more students to participate successfully in diverse communication processes.

Keywords: academic writing, Covid-19, digital transformation, physical spaces, writing centre

Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history. These massive unplanned disruptions in higher education necessitated an unplanned and unbudgeted transition from traditional learning to an exclusively online learning setup, which later on took various forms of blended learning (Jelińska and Paradowski 2021). DUT writing centres experienced an unprecedented shift from the

day-to-day work involving face-to-face consultations and workshops where students could schedule appointments on the WCONLINE in advance and walk-in for face-to-face consultations. This enabled tutors to work with students on all phases of writing from brainstorming to revising. During face-to-face consultations, tutors would assist students, provide feedback, share tips and strategies, and help them plan for further developing or revising their writing.

The Covid-19 pandemic has complicated writing centre practices and challenged tutors in several ways (Nanima 2019; Westfall 2021). The DUT writing centre had to transition to an online learning platform with insufficient training, bandwidth and little preparation. The centre also had to adjust to the idea of relying on technology for all its activities. Moreover, the total shift overlooked the digital and gender divide that exists among different categories of students in most tertiary institutions in South Africa. Adjusting to this change came with a tantamount responsibility of ensuring that students and staff who use the centre are catered for. This was almost impossible considering that many students come from communities that are plagued with problems beyond their control such as lack of gadgets and poor connections. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds are the ones that are affected the most. Closures can also have considerable effects on students' sense of belonging and their feelings of self-worth which are key for inclusion in education. Thus, tools such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google classroom, WhatsApp, and Lark education, have become the new mediums of interaction and these tools have changed the way of consulting and reaching out to students. These platforms of communication facilitate an efficient and effective way of reaching out to colleagues and students through video meetings, chat groups and sharing of learning material. This chapter, therefore, reflects on the

dynamics experienced by writing centre tutors at the DUT Midlands campus in this forced migration to an online learning platform. This chapter is predicated on the notion of transformational learning, which is based on experiences, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action.

Transformational learning theory

The transformational learning theory developed by Mezirow (1978), resonates with the present study, which reflects on writing centre tutors' decontextualised and recontextualised academic writing practices involving a shift to online tutoring. This theory is rooted on how people view the world and become receptive to changes through reflective experiences. Transformational learning was developed to provide a holistic objective lens to learning that is influenced by personal experience. In this instance, the focus is on the tutors' experiences of digital transformation during the Covid-19 pandemic. The apparent shifting to online tutoring indicates that writing is strongly influenced by writing centre pedagogical practices and the nature of how tutors experience the transformation.

Mezirow (1997), in explicating the learning approach, notes that learning of transformation and learning by the experience are both critical in reflective teaching and learning. Mezirow added that this reflective-based learning develops "autonomous and independent thinking" (Mezirow 1997: 5). According to Mezirow (2000), three underpinning components guide teaching and learning practices, the centrality of experience, and rational discourse. Firstly, people critically reflect on relevant experiences and practices. Secondly, people engage in dialogues about their experiences and finally, learn from these experienced approaches (Taylor 2007). Under transformational learning

students learn by doing and thus learning knowledge is created through educational experiences. As such, tutors' life and practice experiences are central to learning and acquiring new knowledge (Kolb and Kolb 2009). This means writing centre tutors have an objective lens through which they critically reflect on the experience of online engagement with students to foster effective writing development. Secondly, tutors reflect on their experiences and share best practices of online consultations. Taylor (2007) points out that transformational learning enables and provides a safe learning environment where students are inducted and supported to meet the demands of the academic discourse. In this study, writing centre tutors critically reflect on experiences with tutoring techniques that have been used to expedite the creation of an enabling online environment.

Methodology

This study is based on a collaborative reflective exercise, between the writing centre tutors and the writing centre practitioner. Through reflective journals, the study examined the reflective experiences of 12 writing centre tutors from 2020 to 2021. The details of the collaborators are presented in Table 1. Data was analysed manually, and it was determined after this procedure that a software package would be required for the entire study. Data was collected and analysed using NVivo.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

Demographic Variables	n (%)
GENDER	
Male	7 (58.3)
Female	5 (41.7)
AGE	
25-30	7 (58.3)
31-36	5 (41.7)
ETHNICITY	
African	11 (91.7)
Coloured	1 (8.3)
CITIZENSHIP	
South African	9 (75.0)
Nigerian	1 (8.3)
Zimbabwean	2 (16.7)
EDU LEVEL	
Master's	3 (25.0)
PhD	9 (75.0)
LANGUAGE	
English	1 (8.3)
IsiZulu	5 (41.7)
Ndebele	1 (8.3)
Shona	1 (8.3)
Sotho (South)	1 (8.3)
Xhosa	2 (16.7)
Other Black Lang	1 (8.3)
YRS TUTORING	
1	2 (16.7)
2	8 (66.7)
4	1 (8.3)
5	1 (8.3)

DISCIPLINE	
Arts	1 (8.3)
Commerce	1 (8.3)
Human Science	2 (16.7)
Science	7 (58.3)
Tourism MGT	1 (8.3)

Table 1 shows the age distribution of the tutors who participated in the study. The sample consisted solely of tutors at DUT's writing centre Midlands campus, ranging in age from 25 to 36 years. The sample's age distribution is consistent with that of individuals registered for postgraduate degrees in South Africa (Department of Science and Technology Report 2015). Male respondents made up 58.3% of the sample, while female respondents made up 41.7% (see Table 1). To adhere to the qualitative case study approach, data was acquired from 12 tutors, 11 African, and one Coloured population group. In terms of respondents' home languages, ten respondents said that they spoke one of the eleven official South African languages, while two tutors indicated that they spoke Shona and other Black languages in the African diaspora. The tutors are majority isiZulu speakers (41.7 %), which meets the demand of the students enrolled at DUT, as the majority are first language, isiZulu speakers. This aids in meeting student needs and ensuring that consultations are inclusive. The DUT writing centres primarily appoints postgraduate students on a contract basis. As a result, the sample composition was deemed appropriate because it comprised representatives from the major postgraduate educational levels.

A shift from physical to online space

The DUT writing centre had to adjust to the idea of relying on technology for all its activities, in the latter part of 2020 to meet the

needs of now virtual clients. While teaching and learning was done through technologies like Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Classroom, and WhatsApp, the Writing Centre mainly relied on its already-adopted WCONLINE booking system. The WCONLINE platform was then adapted to facilitate not only booking appointments but also conducting online consultations. In addition, the DUT writing centres adopted a multi-modal approach, which included Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp video conferencing calls and telephone calls. While this migration and adaptation has been generally positive and successful, there have been challenges experienced by both the tutoring staff and the students.

The reflections from tutors note the process of migration, which saw them using several technological platforms to reach out to students in need of their services. The initial experimentation with Microsoft Teams, Word, WhatsApp and Zoom to provide feedback to students became the 'new normal' during this period and was beneficial. Both tutors and students had to transform and adapt to this 'new reality.' However, some teething problems were experienced in reaching out to students, since the majority of DUT undergraduate students come from underprivileged backgrounds - access to computers or the internet was the initial hurdle. These experiences were a stumbling block in an attempt to adapt to multimodal learning environments, which was a perspective shared by various academics. The writing centre tutors, who struggled with student commitment before the Covid-19 lockdown, bore the brunt of this apparent challenges.

According to their reflections, tutors had three types of student users:

- Type A active: students who ask questions and contribute during a consultation.

- Type B passive: students who do not ask a question, never say a word nor contribute during a consultation.

- Type C non-digital natives: students who have limited digital resources or are computer illiterate and have no online learning infrastructure, laptops and access to the internet.

Attending to these three types of students virtually takes more attention and patience amid the pandemic. Active students were likely to initiate consultations, make follow-ups and attend to feedback provided. On the other hand, passive students and non-digital natives, although for different reasons, were unlikely to consult the writing centre of their own accord. Passive students would only come upon external compulsion from lecturers, while the technological challenges of online engagements scared off many non-digital natives. The widening gap in educational opportunity and support between students from different backgrounds, illustrated here is one of the greatest risks of the pandemic. Type C students provide systemic challenges, compounded by structural issues such as the often-interrupted supply of electricity and data, which have been seen as external impediments to physical-online transition in many organisations. Collaborative engagements between various stakeholders are therefore necessary for ensuring smooth and transformational pedagogical migration (Archer 2017). For example, the Midlands writing centre initiated integrated academic research support for undergraduate fourth-year nursing students.

Analysis and discussion

Use of online feedback

Determining the impact of tutor's online writing centre engagements with students was challenging during the pandemic and lockdown

period. While the tutor can readily read the student(s)' body language and facial expressions during face-to-face engagements, online consultations limit this non-verbal communication. This was most challenging in dealing with type B and C students, where unidirectional monologues were characteristic of consultation sessions. Unfortunately, these were the majority of the writing centre's users. As a result, tutors had to move to an inquiry-guided learning (IGL) model, characterised by rigorous and thoughtful questions (Baxi 1998; Levy 2012) that demanded students' engagement in the consultation process. A tutor who consulted with a type C student user narrates the pedagogical transformation.

My second most difficult session was an onsite consultation with a first-year student who was computer illiterate. It is not that she did not understand the content of what she was supposed to be writing, it is just that she had a challenge with typing the assignment properly, so most of our time in the session was taken up by the computer lesson that I had to give on typing. From this session I have learnt to ask students a few questions which help me understand their level of computer literacy, this often helps understand the student if they are having challenges with writing properly in an assignment.

Contextual and individualised adaptations

While writing centre practice has always acknowledged the need for individualised response to student literacy challenges, the context of the pandemic re-emphasised this pedagogical axiom. Firstly, as indicated in the types of student users discussed above, student circumstances are not the same. As such, students demand equitable engagement. Kirchhoff (2016) argues that great situational awareness

and emotional intelligence are vital skills for a tutor to determine and respond to students' various motivational levels. Thus, if we are to advance, we must be responsive and adaptable to students' unique writing needs. This notion of a Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger 2010) has been part and parcel of writing centre engagement before Covid-19. However, this has amplified the approaches in the online space to allow for effective online support. One tutor highlighted:

The first essential is to equip and infuse the writing centre tutors, who work directly with the students, with skills and values such as patience, humility and service to foster a suitable environment for them to be willing to understand and serve students from all walks of a life.

Secondly, Covid-19 has forced a transformative reflection in most writing centres. We had to rethink the meaning of writing centre support in ways that transform the way we conduct our online consultations. In many ways, Covid-19 has influenced the shift to new and creative approaches to online writing support. Additionally, it has emphasised the critical nature of rapidly shifting our beliefs and incorporating new knowledge and creativity. Another tutor added:

Students' interpersonal communication varies individually and culturally, and the writing centre works to honour the writer's communication style and needs by being open, flexible, and sensitive to the needs of each student.

Thirdly, forced migration has redefined the zones of possibility as far as writing centre support is concerned. We have thought about new ways of online engagement where the physical space will not matter because of the ability to use various e-learning platforms like MS Teams, Zoom,

WhatsApp etc. Nanima (2019) maintains that Covid-19 has expedited an irreversible transformational embrace of the fourth industrial revolution. As for writing centre tutors, continuous reflections must see us improving online academic support necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

A way forward for writing centre online spaces?

The shift to online support has been noted by Reville (2017: 2), "The field will show permanent changes as a result of this crisis and our adaptation to it … because of this experience parents, students and teachers will be seeking profound changes in the way writing centres operate in the future". The longer that our education system is interrupted, the more likely that these new experiments that writing centres and educators are doing, will take root. The learning goals or refocusing on the essentials was key to meeting the current situation and ensuring that the writing support was accessible and accommodative to all types of students (A, B, C). Focusing on the essentials, allows for tutors to go deeper, create spaces, build relationships, communities, and think deliberately about how they are engaging with students. It has also been an amazing time learning from each other in the writing centre. The key question is whether these changes that we see and experience, these new uses of technology, of teaching, of emphasising new skills, are going to exacerbate gaps between students with different backgrounds. We need to take a more optimistic look, but that will take deliberate effort and commitment to make sure that the lessons learned and the gains that are possible from this incredible time are spread across all our students. The challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic have enforced three lessons:

- a hybrid writing support consisting of online and face-to-face consultations.

- the inclusion of transdisciplinary approaches across all disciplines that foster equal dynamics of communication, and enable collaborative engagement and

- reflecting and refining writing centre pedagogical practice and becoming adaptive to the needs of the students

Conclusion

We are all intrigued by the prospect of a post-Covid-19 writing centre. When will it be safe to return to campus on its whole without the use of social distancing measures? When will normalcy be restored? While most will welcome a return to normalcy, others may wish for some of the pandemic's changes to persist, thereby creating a new kind of normal. Writing centres appear to be one area in our institution where the pandemic has brought about positive change. This article examined the experiences and perspectives of writing centre tutors on online academic support, while also focusing on the digital transformation during Covid-19. The findings indicated that tutors possess a set of important ideas that may contribute significantly to the transformative learning process and that the writing centre, through its pedagogical approaches and learning practices, can serve as a vehicle for achieving actual transformation. There is no doubt that technology can increase the quality of education globally and improve teaching and learning outcomes but, this cannot be achieved until all the needed infrastructure is also provided to the poorest, less privileged, and remotest communities. Therefore, writing centres could play a vital role in shifting assessment practices to include oral, visual, multimedia and

technology-enriched aspects. The fundamental pedagogical approach of writing centres is a one-on-one or group consultation, which is based on the notion that knowledge is not something we receive from books and lecturers, but something we produce in a community of informed peers. Multimodality in writing centres can thus help bring out the richness of diversity, enabling more students and staff to participate successfully in diverse communication processes.

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CHAPTER 20

Rethinking (English) academic literacy practices during a pandemic: Mobility and multimodality

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Abstract

It's a challenge to teach academic English in a postcolonial and decolonial context and to unproblematically teach the language of the oppressor, the coloniser, to a group of students who did not choose to be in my class, who did not choose to learn academic English. My students are in my class because they have been assigned the label of "in need of" something – in need of skills, in this case, that will offer them epistemological and ontological access to spaces that, as a result of the pandemic, have now also become predominately virtual. In this paper I critically reflect on what impact this shift has had, and indeed could continue to have, on the teaching of academic literacy skills. I restrict my reflections to the mobilities turn and to a mobilities perspective on the teaching and study of academic literacies (Blommaert & Horner 2017), a perspective that calls into question the notion that language and literacy are inherently stable, located in a specific time and place, and instead highlights that mobility and (in)stability are unrecognised norms of academic literacy – norms that I did not recognise before the pandemic. I reflect on how teaching practices and curricula would transform if this norm was recognised, and what implications this would have for decolonising English teaching and learning at postcolonial universities.

Keywords: English, academic literacies, mobilities paradigm, mobilities turn, decolonial turn

Introduction

Stellenbosch University is a historically white Afrikaans-medium university. For many years Afrikaans and English have both been used as languages of instruction and for this reason there are two parallel language streams for the development of academic literacy skills on the Extended Degree Programme (EDP) in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences: an Afrikaans stream and an English stream. Since I am a lecturer on, and coordinator of the English stream, my reflections here pertain to my work there.

The majority of students in the English stream are multilingual and use English as their second or third language. The curricula of the modules I design and teach, Texts in the Humanities 123 and Texts in the Humanities 153, are built on the understanding that students' engagement with academic English is crucial for participation in academic life, and that equipping students with the skills to manipulate the representational resources of English is a necessary pedagogical goal (Turner 2003: 187). However, the use of English as a language of learning in post-colonial South Africa has been, and is still, fraught with controversy and tensions. Stein and Newfield (2006: 3) wrote that "issues of power, policy and choice of medium are clearly part of the policy-practice nexus in education and impact profoundly on how students learn and construct their identities". This is still true today, almost two decades later. In fact, one year into the Covid-19 pandemic, in 2021, when I asked students to reflect on the notion of identity and the connection between identity and language by writing a self-reflective narrative about their own identities, many students wrote narratives similar to the following three examples.

English is the most common language, studying in a majority white majority environment and interacting with a different social class, it requires a certain level of sophistication, knowledge and intelligence, and all of this is transmitted through language specifically my usage of the English language, I am expected to be able to articulate and be descriptive in English, I believe it would be a totally different case if I were to say all of that in isiZulu. It is evident to me that people equate English with intellect… [Participant 2]

English was a language that was not always used in my village because it brought colonial and oppressive memories to the community members. [Participant 4]

Being brown and raised in Giyani a small town in Limpopo, I always had the misconception that Limpopo is the lowest of the provinces planted inside my head, having a fluent and clear pronunciations of the English words was/is associated with being smart and posh, you would instantly be treated and placed on a higher pedestal by other students and teachers, who would make it utterly obvious that they were biased based on how fluent you were in English. I recall standing in front of a mirror practicing my pronunciations which I believe now is the reason I get unnecessary remarks such as "You do not sound like you are from Limpopo" or "Did you attend a private school?" I might have created a whole new identity for myself. [Participant 9]

Throughout their narratives, students positioned English use in relation to economic status, perceived intelligence but also colonial dominance. They also made explicit and implicit reference to "standard English" and positioned their use of language in relation to standard English,

and in deficit terms, in having to create a new identity in order to make room for standard English and frequently spoke of a loss of identity as a result of this.

A few months after receiving these narratives I enlisted the help of a postgraduate marking assistant who was on an exchange in France (I only discovered this later). I would review her marking and comments before sending the work back to the students and ended up deleting many comments that read something like "your English is good enough to be at University otherwise you would not have gotten in but you should seek help from the writing centre." I had forgotten to tell her that a well-documented disadvantage of standalone support modules like Texts in the Humanities 123 and Texts in the Humanities 153 is that they are offered to second or third-language speakers of English who have been segregated from the 'mainstream' (and also 'the norm') based on factors pertaining to performance in school, race and socio-economic class. This has led to academic practitioners adopting basic-skills construct as curricula models over the years, as well as deficit discourses and other deficit models which have been shown to have "serious consequences for the students' sense of belonging to social-disciplinary communities" (Eybers 2015: 85).

The deficit model that is so often used to understand EDPs and students on these programmes can be traced back, in part, to the language ideology of monolingualism. According to this ideology, bilingualism and monolingualism are viewed as deviations form a monolingual norm, such as in the idea that a bilingual is essentially two individuals in one person (Grosjean 1985). In response, alternative language ideologies have developed, termed 'plurilingualism' and 'translingualism' (García 2009, Li 2011). These alternative ideologies

have been picked up by EDP practitioners who reject the idea that languages are "relatively stable, internally uniform, and discrete structures that 'users' – whose language identities are likewise seen as stable and internally uniform – then put into practice (well or badly)" (Blommaert and Horner 2017: 3). In reality, language ideologies such as plurilingualism and translingualism have highlighted that languages, the people who speak them, identities, and the contexts of use always exist in relationship to one another. These perspectives of language also highlight that languages are not discrete, stable, internally uniform and atemporal (as it had been conceptualised in the monolingual paradigm) but are more accurately conceived of as internally diverse and intermingling and a product of material social processes (Blommaert and Horner 2017: 3). In the following section I reflect on these ideas and points highlighted above in the context of teaching academic literacy skills from a distance during the pandemic, and what I learnt from that.

Mobilities and academic literacies

As a lecturer on an EDP I was already extremely aware of the socioeconomic, linguistic, digital and data divides experienced by many of my students and, in April 2020, when the doors of the university closed to all, I wondered how this group of EDP students would experience the new normal in very remote and impoverished areas of the country. In order to find out, I could email them or simply "watch them" by using the data generated from the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) that I am required by my institution to use. The VLE does not only offer me the means to create multimodal content in a variety of genres, and the platform for students to submit them, it also provides me with data about when students clicked on the course link,

how long they stayed on the virtual platform, what folders they opened and what documents they downloaded. I used this data to gauge students' level of engagement with the course, to find a mean, to compare students, and to make adaptations to the design of the curriculum. From my top floor apartment, it felt as if I became the surveillant, the watchwoman in the panopticon. I moved from a teacher to a data user (Ratner, Anderson and Madsen 2019, Bernard 2021), but I also engaged with different and new forms of digital literacy as my students were required to do the same.

While we are asked to stay at home, we had also become mobile and moved away from the fixed locations and spaces of the University, the classrooms and residences, "the stacks and carrels of research university libraries" (Blommaert and Horner 2017: 4). We used our laptops, our mobile phones and tablets. We did everything online. Scholars working within the new mobilities paradigm or the mobilities turn recognised the implications of this dynamic and movement away from campus. Broadly speaking, scholars within this paradigm explore the movement of people (migration, travel), ideas, as well as the movement of people through classes (upward mobility) and this has served "as a catalyst for rethinking scholarly work in a variety of fields" (Blommaert and Horner 2017: 1). They recognise that mobility is a defining feature of globalisation and that the use of mobile technologies severs the links between knowledge production and the reception of knowledge to particular, fixed locations. Mobilities scholars recognised that, in a globalised world, students, staff, and even higher education institutions are mobile (through internationalisation, as was the case with my postgraduate marker in France) but also through the technologies of knowledge production and circulation. As my students were mostly now learning from home, the situation required more

'border crossings' (Giroux 1992) between formal, institutional learning and learning in everyday settings – an idea put forth by numerous literacy researchers as early as the 1980s. Heath (1983) and Street (1995), for instance, asked us to be critical of the narrow view of what counts as learning and communication in contemporary classrooms. The idea of 'border crossing' urges teachers to be more cognisant of, and responsive to, the worlds that students experience outside of the classroom.

As highlighted in the previous section, Blommaert and Horner (2017) point out that mobility is also a feature of language itself. To illustrate this point in a South African context, Stein and Newfield (2006: 4) write that

> *In the real world, outside the artificiality of classrooms, people draw on whatever semiotic resources they need to communicate their meanings. In multilingual communities in Africa, people have multiple language systems to draw upon, as they move fluidly across languages, genres, discourses, modes and varieties.*

A mobilities perspective aligns with the academic literacies perspective (Lea and Street 1998) that challenges the dominant perspective of 'literacy' as "singular, universal, uniform, and stable" (Blommaert and Horner 2017: 1). A mobilities perspective urges us to move away from thinking about stability as the norm of academic literacies to thinking about mobility and instability as the norms of academic literacies. As material, social practices, they do not exist outside the material social realm – there is no fixed location of literacy learning. Taking a mobilities perspective on academic literacies means a rejection of the existence of 'general writing skills' or a singular, generalised and autonomous 'academic literacy' applicable across time and space, as

well as the project of inculcating such skills (Blommaert and Horner 2017: 5). All academic literacy is mobile in the sense of being diverse, fluctuating and interdependent in relation to other kinds of literacy (Blommaert and Horner 2017: 12).

Furthermore, in the information age, and through the use of technology, the speed and volume of text production, circulation and consumption has also risen dramatically. Student and scholars search for information now covers an unlimited scope and reach, which has a significant impact on the structure of the knowledge economies (Blommaert and Horner 2017: 10; Harrison and Luckett 2019). Knowledge transfer happens from person to person, site to site, genre to genre, technology to technology, discipline to discipline, moment to moment. This means that students, typically working from a mobile phone or a shared computer, draw on a set of resources that change as the technological tools they work with change, which then change again according to their linguistic repertoires and the linguistic resources they draw on, and then change again if they translated it back to English. This meant that during the pandemic, I could no longer restrict my students to library resources, computer laboratories and the classroom as I did before the pandemic. My acceptance of this is a simultaneous acceptance of Blommaert and Horner's (2017: 13) argument that academic literacy "is no longer something to be achieved once and for all, but at best a shifting state of tolerance for engaging diversity and change with literacy practices". Instead of focusing on a final, measurable goal, a mobilities perspective places emphasis on writers' ability to adapt and to identify the features of academic writing across genres and media.

Similarly, working within a mobilities paradigm, attempts to produce and measure the degree of a student's 'mastery' over the production of

a singular and stabilised 'standard written English' are no longer applicable. This resonates with years of sociolinguistic research which has established that all human language is complex and rule-governed, and no language is superior to another on linguistic grounds (Lippi-Green 2012; Flores and Rosa 2015; Baker-Bell 2020). The disconnect between this research and public discourses and practices lies in power and class dynamics rather than the language (as a grammatical system) itself. In other words, 'standard' English is a hypothetical construct (Baker-Bell 2020) or a myth (Lippi-Green 2012). Within a standard language ideology framework, certain minoritised, often racialised, bodies are conflated with linguistic deficiency, which is unrelated to objective linguistic practices (Flores and Rosa 2015). Thus, the real danger of language ideologies, standard language ideology in particular, may be their power to discriminate through their invisibility (Lippi-Green 2012).

Conclusion: What would happen if the norms of mobility, instability and plurality were recognised?

In reflecting on my experiences during the pandemic and wondering what impact this might have on the future of my curriculum and those of others, I am not promoting an 'anything goes' approach. All students should have access to languages and literacy practices that are deemed legitimate by society and social institutions, however, standard language ideologies have had a negative impact on speakers of "illegitimate" languages and varieties (Sterzuk 2010: 100). We must acknowledge the presence of language ideologies that "function to maintain and perpetuate unequal social boundaries between and among groups of speakers" (Weaver in Lawton and de Kleine 2020: 198). We must also acknowledge that "language-related issues are really

about speakers of languages, not languages themselves" (Lawton and de Kleine 2020: 198) and that the teaching of academic English is more often than not rooted in the myth of a 'standard' English and that 'standard' English "is upheld as the goal of writing and literacy instruction" (Lawton and de Kleine 2020: 197). This calls on academic literacy practitioners to adopt an asset-based perspective (MacSwan 2020) in which languages are always a resource and not a barrier.

Blommaert and Horner (2017: 14) point out that there is an institutional tendency towards monolingualism but the globalised and continually expanding academic population (the 'users' of academic literacies) develops in the opposite direction towards superdiverse polyglossia – there is diversity of users, diversification of genres and modes of communications. A mobilities perspective on teaching academic literacy is more realistic, it urges us to teach academic literacies as historical, varying across time and space, contested and contestable, and as a site for the exercise of power relations. Language difference is thus viewed not a deviation from the norm of sameness, but as itself the norm of language practice. Teachers adopting this paradigm "no longer accept the conventional notion of the English monolingual writer writing 'in' English (only) as a valid or useful construct... Instead, emphasis is placed on the agency and responsibility of all language users for the (re)production/revision of language through their specific language practices" (Blommaert and Horner 2017: 3).

Finally, it is important to ask, what implications would this have for decolonising English teaching and learning at postcolonial universities? I have discovered that, allowing room for movement, mobile technologies, multimodalities, multiple forms of literacies, border crossings, bridges, several English language varieties and languages

(even as I work towards academic English) work as a reconstitution of literacy in more inclusive, ethical and democratic ways. My focus is now not solely on teaching academic English, but on *meaning-making* and drawing attention to *resource*s that can be used to create meaning, resources that the students often already have at their disposal. I now discuss the process of academic writing with reflective thinking and reflective writing, a genre that is not traditionally thought of as an academic genre. I teach students about the characteristics, conventions, and style of reflective writing. In pivotal moments throughout the curriculum, I ask students to *reflect* on the content of the course and to write about their reflections. These reflections are only possible if students have understood the work in a way that is relevant to them and their own lives. I have found that reflective thinking and writing works as a bridge to academic writing, as students learn to rework their reflective pieces into more conventional academic pieces in a way that allows them to identify their own stance and to retain their own voice, while weaving in the voices of others.

I have also begun to incorporate multiple modes and visual literacy into my courses, and I encourage students to include images and photographs in their reflections. While it is true that universities have traditionally placed more value on the spoken and written word than other modes of communication, the university has always been a place of symbols, signs, videos, images and audio - and even more so as we shifted online during the pandemic. By explicitly incorporating these modes into my courses, I am acknowledging, rather than ignoring the fact that digital technology has radically transformed literacy practices, even within the university. By incorporating these non-traditional practices and genres into an academic English literacy classroom, my hope is that my students may find ways to (re)negotiate their

relationship to English and writing, and that they are able to "reconstruct their languages, cultures and identities to their advantage" (Canagarajah in Sterzuk 2010: 100).

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CHAPTER 21

Transition to Online Pedagogy During Covid-19 Pandemic: Reflecting on Experiences and Perceptions of Lecturers and Students

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Abstract

In the context of a global pandemic, education at most universities in South Africa underwent rapid adaptation and transition to online and blended modes of teaching and learning. Tertiary educators were expected to adapt to flexible schedules, changing pedagogical practices, and learning and work environments shaped by technology. The Covid-19 pandemic has made it increasingly important for institutions to migrate their traditional face-to-face (F2F) instruction methodology to fully online teaching, learning and assessment. Educators and institutions had to urgently adapt new innovative pedagogies, responding to the demands of the pandemic. A new approach was required to address the learning needs and challenges of first-year students, who were obliged to study in varying environments and yet still expected to attain a high-quality qualification. This case study reflects on first-year engineering educators' and students' experiences and perceptions of multimodal instruction, learning and assessment, transitioning from face-to-face (F2F) to online environment. We used the reflective framework of Gary Rolfe (2001) and the theoretical constructs of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

(Engeström 2001) to explore how first-year University of Technology engineering students traverse the F2F-online continuum. The collected data were analysed using quantitative methods. We found that the lecturers expressed an overall positive perception and students an overall negative perception about multimodal online pedagogy. The migration to an online environment provided the lecturers with professional learning opportunities to customise their teaching practices in the new context.

Keywords: Online instruction, face-to-face instruction, Covid-19 pandemic, engineering mathematics, first-year engineering students, perceptions, reflection, professional learning

Introduction

The current pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus disease of 2019 (Covid-19) made it increasingly important for educational institutions to adapt their instructional methodologies to address the challenges experienced by educators and students (Hoover 2020; Zalat *et al.* 2021). This sudden change pulled us from our comfort zone of face-to-face (F2F) teaching, learning, and paper-based assessments. It became a real challenge for educators who had no professional training in online teaching practices. Numerous studies show that many educators do not effectively use the technological resources at their disposal (George *et al.* 2012; Karimzadeh *et al.* 2017). Thus, there is a need for pedagogical change to gravitate towards online environments, because of the advent of the fourth industrial revolution, the current global digital explosion, and to accommodate the millennials (Amir *et al.* 2020). Many lecturers had to improvise and acquire the skills to explain concepts online and facilitate student engagement. The use of technology for in-person, distance, and remote teaching has been happening since the

early 1980s (Segalla and Hauk 2005) the widespread closing of schools due to the Covid-19 outbreak seemed to shock the educational community, with many lecturers scrambling to figure out how to shift their pedagogy to emergency remote teaching (ERT). Therefore, professional development can assist educators to navigate this global pandemic and can help to improve training and support for educators, so they are ready to design quality learning experiences for any situation.

Several studies noted that had educators been better prepared to design technology-rich learning experiences and spent more time using technology in their classes prior to the pandemic, it would have been easier to ensure continuity of learning for students at a distance and it would have significantly reduced the stress of transitioning to ERT for themselves, their students, and the students' parents or families. In terms of professional development training, some studies found that the effectiveness of once-off professional development (PD) training for ERT is not adequate. These changes not only affected lecturers but also impacted students, especially first-year students. The assumption that students are technologically literate because they use technologies for their daily social activities, e.g., cell phones, the internet, social media, etc. is flawed (Stols *et al.* 2015; Carey 2020). The mere presence or possession of a device does not imply a habit of studying digitally (Sari and Yoni 2021). Nevertheless, there is a legitimate concern that as the millennial generation enters university in greater numbers in the context of Covid-19, there will be a need to accommodate them psychologically and technologically (Stols *et al.* 2015; Bordoloi *et al.* 2021). There also seems to be a prevailing assumption that face-to-face instruction can simply be directly translated into an online format (Churton 2008; Mdlongwa 2012;). These pedagogical challenges might

have a negative impact on students' first-year experiences and student success.

The objectives of this chapter are to reflect on the experiences of first-year students and lecturers in engineering during the transition from face-to-face to the online environment. The Cultural Historical Activity Theory (Edward 2005; 2008) is used to understand the experiences and perceptions of the lecturers and students. This chapter provides a reflective analysis of the lecturers' and students' experiences using Rolfe *et al.*'s (2001) reflective framework to critically engage with questions like, 'What? So what? Who? How? and Now what?'

Literature review

Before the outbreak of Covid-19, the social interaction in the classroom allowed for student-lecturer and student-student in-person immediacy. Mehrabian (1969) defines immediacy as, "those communication behaviours - some visual, others vocal - that enhances closeness to and non-verbal interaction with another''. Furthermore, Frymier (1993) found that instructor immediacy is positively related to students' motivation to study. When education institutions were locked down due to the Covid-19 pandemic the student-lecturer and student-student immediacy was replaced with synchronous and asynchronous online environments. The Covid-19 outbreak exposed many educators' readiness to use technology to support students at a distance. Meanwhile, lecturers who used the technology frequently in their practice and included blended learning in their lessons reported an easier transition to fully online teaching. However, many lecturers found it very challenging to teach online and remotely (Whalen 2020). The most challenging factor seems to be the ability to replicate features of a traditional F2F classroom environment i.e., social interaction,

prompt individual feedback, practical demonstrations, addressing individual needs, and summative assessment into online formats (Sari and Yoni 2021).

Literature shows that lecturers improvised and customised their teaching practices to engage with students in online environments (Bordoloi *et al.* 2021). In doing so, lecturers used video conference platforms to replicate the essence of a physical encounter; however, while the expensive videoconferencing equipment that is often used in commercial settings works well, most educators only have access to inexpensive technologies. On the other hand, students learn asynchronously online with the benefit of choosing the time and circumstances of their learning setting and synchronously participating in live online sessions. Trust and Whalen (2020: 18) opined that to ensure continuity of learning for any situation and to support students across spatial and temporal boundaries, educators need to be "fluent users of technology; creative and collaborative problem solvers; and adaptive, socially aware experts throughout their careers".

When we explored the transition from the F2F to the online environment we drew on the CHAT framework to explain, interpret what is happening in the classroom, and used Rolfe's framework to answer the following questions: Who is mainly involved? Who else were involved? What was achieved and what was the motive for drawing this activity system? What was used? CHAT enabled us to analyse the pedagogical practices and Rolfe's framework to present the reflections on the practices.

The theoretical framework

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) was originally proposed by the Russian socio-cognitive theorists Leont'ev (1974) and Vygotsky (1980), and further developed by Engeström (1999, 2001), as a guiding analytical framework. CHAT provides a framework for analysing interactions between lecturers and students that includes not only the interpersonal/communicative aspects of those relationships but also the cultural, historical, and economic dimensions. It makes us aware of the relationship between subjects and the objects of their activities, the role of tools, mediation, and the context of the activity (Engeström 1999). The first principle of CHAT is that the *object* drives the activity (Engeström 2001). The *object* is what the subjects understand as the purpose or intention of the activity, that which "propels them forward to take action" (Engeström 2018: 48). Figure 1 illustrates the teaching and learning activity system during the Covid-19 pandemic for this study, in which the *objects* are the effective online pedagogy of lecturers and the acquisition of engineering concepts by students. The participants of interest in any educational activity system are the students, whose purpose (object) is to learn; and the lecturers, whose purpose (object) is to teach (Roth 2004). Therefore, the *subjects* are the students and the lecturers.
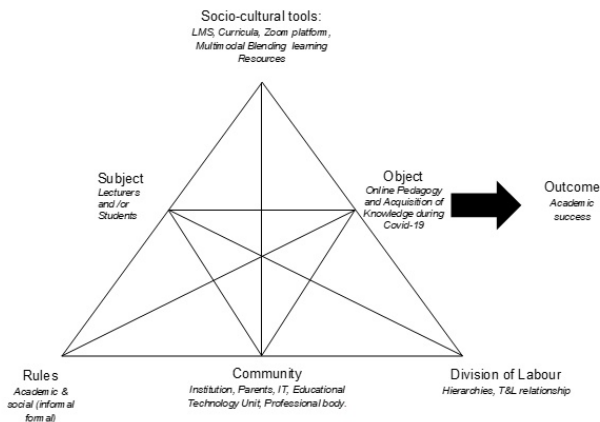
Figure 1: A teaching and learning activity system (adapted from Engeström 1999)

Within this system, the online blending learning resources, socio-materials (e.g., institutions, discourses) and *cultural mediational tools* such as curricula, facilities, equipment, internet-based and library-based resources, and the learning management system (LMS) are directed at the objects. The lecturers and students form part of a much broader system - the university that is embedded in an Institutional culture that has rules and hierarchies of decision-making *rules and divisions of labour*. It is important that the correct *tools* and resources are used with appropriate *rules and divisions of labour* to guide the activity system, e.g., which tasks are appropriate for students, and which are more appropriate for lecturers in achieving the respective *objective*. The *community* of an activity system are those who are affected by the systems, for example, parents and professional bodies but are not directly involved in the work of achieving the object (Uden 2007). The community can also be beneficiaries of the activity, and stakeholders in the activity. In the case of this study, important

community participants include the university and the information technology (IT) department.

Practices and conventions in education have "deep roots" (Sannino and Engeström 2017: 24) and are slow to change to accommodate new objects, subjects, tools, rules, communities, and divisions of labour (Edwards 2008). The Covid-19 pandemic forced the education system to change and accommodate online pedagogical approaches. However, CHAT cautions that the introduction of new tools, such as the online conferencing platform, mathematics e-textbooks, etc. could cause disruptions (contradictions or tensions) in the system, but such disruptions are not necessarily negative. Contradictions reveal unique opportunities for creative innovations, for new ways of structuring and enacting the activity.

CHAT will be employed to analyse and connect lecturers' and students' responses with theoretical knowledge. CHAT allows for a dialectical process in which the students and lecturers interact with the environment and with various digital artefacts. Moreover, CHAT allows a controlled analysis of the data looking at different aspects but maintaining a holistic viewpoint. The analysis of this chapter is located within Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and implications for CHAT will be also discussed in the next sessions.

Reflective model (framework) for writing this chapter

The reflective model by Rolfe *et al.* (2001) will be used for the structure and design of this chapter in which the authors analyse students' and lecturers' experiences, practices, and responses, to learn from it and improve the professional learning. The reflective model (Rolfe *et al.* 2001) is based on three simple questions: What? So what? Now what?

When using this model, the authors begin by introducing the problem before making observations about the issue and finally concluding by telling the reader what they would change next time. The "What?" question focuses on the issue of reflection, or the tasks involved. The "So what?" question refers to the issues that extend from the "What?" question. The "Now what? question deals with the outcomes, recommendations, and suggestions.

One of the authors of the reflective model, Fook (1999: 202), asserts that critical reflection "relies upon knowledge, which is generated both empirically and self-reflectively, and in a process of interaction, in order to analyse, resist and change constructed power relations, structures and ways of thinking". Rolfe and Freshwater (2020: 53) assert that "Reflection is a process of thinking, imagining, and learning to consider what has happened in the past, what might happen if things had been done differently in the past, what is currently happening, and what could possibly happen in the future." This reflective model also serves as an obvious catalyst for professional growth in a collaborative setting. Professional growth is based on the concept that professional learning resides internally in the classroom context and is cultivated both individually and collectively (Vescio, Ross and Adams 2008).

What did we plan to study?

We used a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire with open-ended questions to collect data from a purposive sample of 10 lecturers and 36 engineering students. The questionnaire was validated by fellow lecturers for this study. We also obtained research ethical clearance from the university before we conducted this study (FREC Ref: 13/2020). The questions focus on the experiences and perceptions of the lecturers and students during the transition period - immediately

before and after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The students attended two one-hour lectures weekly physically in a classroom before the national lockdown. When the national lockdown was announced, teaching, learning, and assessment were moved fully to the online environment. After the online mathematics lessons, we asked students to give anonymous feedback on virtual sticky notes via Google Jamboard. This feedback allowed us to reflect on our teaching practices and timeously make changes in our online lessons (Hattie *et al.* 2007; Molloy and Boud 2012; Boud and Molloy 2013). According to Molloy, Boud, and Henderson (2020), the essential feature of feedback is that progress about current work is provided to students, influencing the quality of subsequent work. Receiving immediate feedback from students gives lecturers a unique opportunity to improve their teaching practices.

During both formats of curriculum delivery, a multimodal blended approach was used which included the use of the learning management system (Blackboard Collaborate) and social media (WhatsApp). However, the talk-and-chalk physical lectures and paper-based assessment were unique to the F2F format, and the virtual conference platforms (Zoom, MS Teams, etc.) and adaptive assessment technology (Cengage WebAssign) were unique to the online format. Table 1 indicates the multimodal approaches during the F2F and online environments.

Table 1: Summary and comparison of F2F and multimodal instruction and learning

| | Face-to-face (F2F) | | Online | |
	Synchronous	Asynchronous	Synchronous	Asynchronous
Learning space	Same time and same space Classroom and Labs = Campus	Different time and different space Home, Blackboard, WhatsApp	Same time and different space Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate Ultra	Different time and different space Blackboard, WhatsApp, WebAssign
Pedagogy	Talk-and-chalk, lecturer style, practicals	Notebook, textbook, self-study	Computer screen, chatbox, microphone	Computer, cell phone, e-textbook, self-study
Affordances	Eye contact for engagement	Own space, own pace	Teacher facilitator or student-screen	Own space, own pace
Engagement	Teacher-students or student-student	Self-study	Breakout rooms	Self-study
Activities	Groups or individual	Self-study	Online consultation	WhatsApp groups

The transition through the eyes of the students and lecturers

The Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) posits that an activity system does not exist in isolation but is influenced by the socio-cultural conditions (Engeström 2001). In the same way, the transition to fully online teaching, learning, and assessment is influenced by the perceptions of lecturers and students (Sari and Yoni 2021). The new pedagogical environment (learning activity system) had to consider the socio-economic conditions and the way in which students and lecturers view teaching, learning, and assessment. The members of the community of activity system (Figure 1) in this study had to make changes and respond to sudden changes due to Covid-19, for example, the students' parents created learning environments at home because the university residences were closed. Furthermore, the information and technology department also had to put online infrastructure in

place, educators had to improve their technological skills, etc. to support the subjects (students and lecturers) to attain the objects in the activity system. More importantly, the students and lecturers need to buy into the new learning activity system and share the same perspective on achieving the outcomes of the system.

The students' perceptions

Figure 2 illustrates the students' perceptions about different elements of face-to-face (F2F) and online instruction, learning, and assessment based on their responses to the questionnaire.
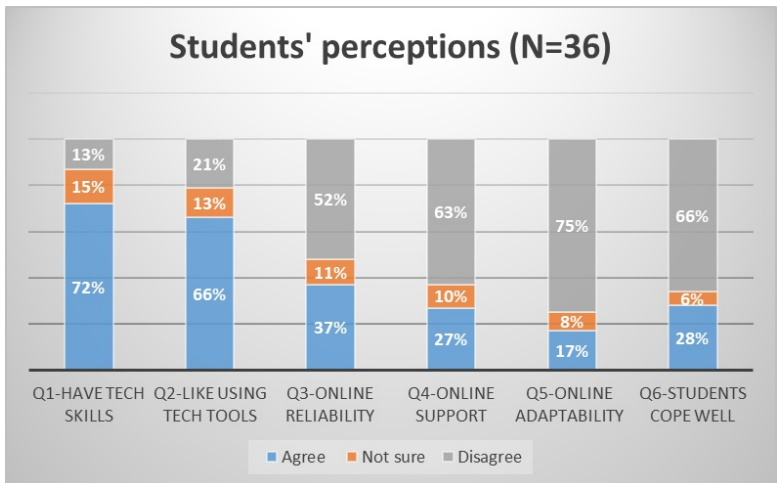
Figure 2: Students' perception of online teaching, learning, and assessment

The students' responses evince an overall negative perception of online teaching, learning, and assessment during the transition to fully online environments. Most of the students (66%) expressed that they do not cope well with online learning, in Question 6, because they felt that the course material was too much for online learning. They mentioned that

"It is an additional burden to master online technology skills and at the same time receive instruction, study content, and complete assessments". The sudden move to digital platforms caught lecturers off-guard because they had limited digital resources for their course material. This probably explains the typical response of students to Question 5, "The content is not adequately adapted to the online platform environment, because the digital content does not have local examples". Almost two-thirds of the students (63%) mentioned that they do not receive enough online support in their responses to Question 4, stating that they did not get proper guidance on how to navigate the university's Learning Management System (LMS) and other online platforms. On the other hand, in Questions 1 and 2 most of the students indicated that they have the necessary technical skill (72%) and like to work with technology devices (66%). One wonders if the students appreciate the fact that there is a difference between social and academic-related technology (Sari and Yoni 2021). The responses to Questions 1 and 2 bear out the notion that younger students are "digital natives" who use technology for almost every daily task comfortably (Prensky 2001: 13). According to the CHAT framework, mediational tools or technology are resources that support the outcome/performance of the subject/students, therefore, the positive responses to Questions 1 and 2 might ultimately become, 'ingrowing' (Leont'ev 1997: 22). By that, Leont'ev suggests that students begin to take control and use them without external help. This 'ingrowing'-notion may improve the negative perceptions expressed in Questions 4 and 5, about support and adaptability.

The overall negative perceptions expressed by the students to this questionnaire indicate a serious need for mediational means/tools to assist students to move through Vygotsky's (1980) Zone of Proximal

Development (ZPD). The online environment and digital resources should scaffold students from the unknown area of knowledge and concepts to a more knowledgeable level.

The lecturers' perceptions

Figure 3 illustrates the lecturer's perceptions about different elements of F2F and online instruction, learning, and assessment based on their responses to the questionnaire.
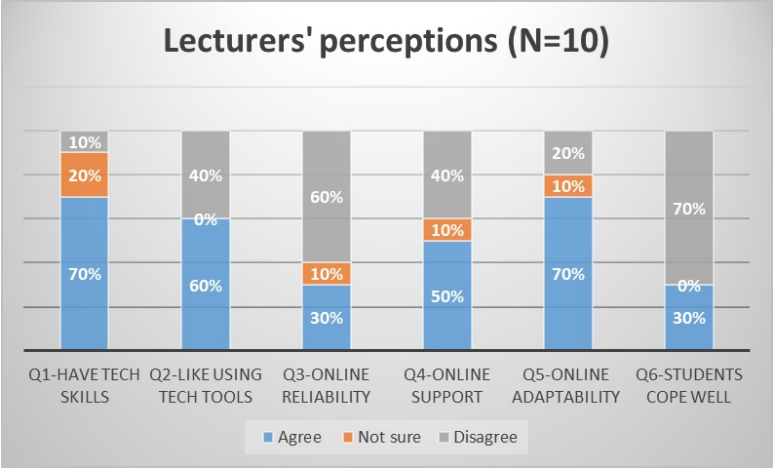

Figure 3: Lecturers' perception of online teaching, learning, and assessment

The data in the graph indicates an overall positive perception based on the responses. A closer look at Figure 3 indicates that most of the lecturers like to use technology (70%) during lessons, possess adequate technological skills (60%), do get the necessary online support (50%), and believe that the paper-based course content can be adapted to digital formats (70%). These responses were expected from the lecturers because they received technological resources and technical support from the university. Furthermore, the lecturers agreed that "The

LMS and online conferencing platforms like TEAMS and ZOOM are easy to use and we do not need extensive training because we used it as part of our professional training". This response is in line with the apex of the CHAT triangle (Figure 1) - mediation tools and artifacts like technological devices, the online teaching platform, teaching methodology, etc. The comment also emphasises the important roles that the members of the community - part of the basis of the CHAT triangle - in the activity system play i.e., the maintenance of the technological infrastructure by the information and technology (IT) department, the provision of technological resources by management, and the training on how to effectively use the technological resources.

However, only Questions 3 and 6 attracted negative responses, 60%, and 70% respectively. In Question 3 the lecturers expressed their doubts about the trustworthiness of the digital material and validity of online assessments. One of the lecturers mentioned, "Students share answers telephonically during an assessment, and there is no way to control cheating by students". The lecturers and students form part of the broader university's activity system of teaching and learning culture that has hierarchies of decision-making rules and divisions of labour. It is important that the correct tools and resources are used with appropriate rules and divisions of labour to guide the activity system, e.g., which tasks are appropriate for instruction and assessment, therefore assessment should be changed cheat-proof and the lecturer should have more control. Furthermore, the overwhelming response of the lecturers to Question 6 that students do not cope with online teaching, learning, and assessment, refers to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Lecturers highlighted that "Students were anxious and hesitant to participate actively during online sessions, at first" object and debate on passive and active learning and "Students do not

complete assessments, because of trauma caused by their family members affected by the Covid-19 virus". Within the Covid-19 pandemic context, the parents and family support play a crucial role to create a conducive learning space at home. The South African socio-economic realities of many disadvantaged students who do not have reliable access to internet connectivity and technological devices might not cope with online teaching, learning, and assessment.

When we compare the perceptions of the students and lecturers, it is evident that they do not share the same perceptions about online teaching, learning, and assessment. They expressed different perceptions of online support received, and the adaptability of the course material for online teaching, learning, and assessment. Interaction and improvisation of the lecturers led to professional development challenges, academic integrity, and e-textbook allowed lecturers to do formative assessments. Fawns (2022) asserts that pedagogy should encapsulate the mutual shaping of technology, teaching methods, purposes, values, and context - which he refers to as 'entangled pedagogy'. The entangled pedagogy informs the professional development of lecturers to be inclusive in their approach and negotiated agency between themselves, students, and other stakeholders. The authors agreed with Fawns (2022) that when the lecturers design the new curriculum, the focus should not only be on technology and pedagogy but also on context (e.g., Studying conditions, students' background, and economic pressure), purpose (explicit curriculum by answering the question *what* students will do but also *why*) and education values (beliefs) of the students and lecturers.

What happened in the F2F classroom and in the online environment?

The sudden outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic led to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) resulting in the drastic transition

of pedagogical settings. The face-to-face instructional settings where students were seated at desks and the lecturer taught from the front of the classroom changed to fully online environments allowing lecturers and students to work remotely from home as illustrated in Figure 4.
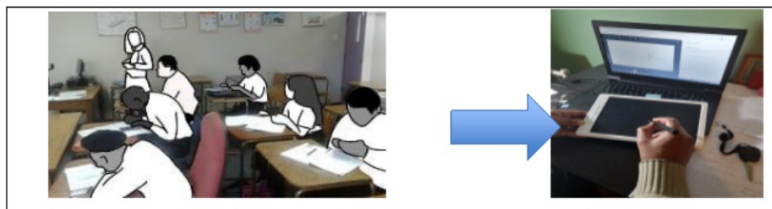

Figure 4: Line drawing of transitioning from F2F to the online environment
(Permission was granted - ethical clearance)

In the physical classroom, before Covid-19, the instruction process involved mainly question-and-answer and taking notes from the writing board, and occasionally students had group discussions with peers close to them. The students' notes and assessments were pen-and-paper based. This setting allows for instructor immediacy which makes it easy for instant feedback (Molloy and Boud 2012; 2020; Boud and Molloy 2013), and responsive teaching and learning. One of the lecturers responded in the questionnaire that, "… during a F2F lesson in class I could see if students understand what I am explaining by [looking at] their body language and facial expressions". This observation supports Rovai's (2000) and Whalen's (2020) assertion about instructor immediacy which states that immediate verbal and non-verbal kinds of communication, such as smiles, head nods, the use of inclusive language, and eye contact, help to promote learning.

When teaching, learning, and assessment transitioned to a fully online environment, the lecture sessions were conducted on online

conferencing platforms (Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate). From other responses in the questionnaire, lecturers were uncertain if the academic year would be completed, and students and lecturers were anxious if they would adjust to the new way of teaching, learning, and assessment. However, the university responded slowly, but positively to the initial impact of Covid-19 by putting technological infrastructure and resources in place. Lecturers were provided with technological devices and internet data, but minimal training to effectively use the resources. The rollout of technological resources and internet data for students took place over a much longer period. Students accessed learning material via Blackboard LMS, Google Docs/Forms, WhatsApp, and email. They were able to use adaptive technology (an e-textbook with WebAssign for self-study) and submit assignments and assessments. During online lessons, students used a threaded electronic discussion board to take part in the presentations and provide responses. Figure 5 illustrates a screenshot taken during an online lesson on vectors.

Figure 5: Screenshot of a Zoom presentation of a lecture on Vectors (Permission was granted - ethical clearance)

During this lesson, the lecturer assessed the students' conception of vector analysis. The problem was shared on the LMS with the students before the lesson and they had to solve it beforehand. During the online lesson, the online whiteboard was shared with the students who are asked to volunteer to solve the problem. The students used black and blue annotations, and the microphone to explain their solutions to the problem. All the students provided their responses in the chatbox, which the lecturer used to stimulate discussion and facilitate learning by creating an interactive and safe place to make mistakes and ask questions to verify understanding.

Professional development became an important aspect of lecturers during the transition to fully online teaching, learning, and assessment environment. The Covid-19 pandemic forced lecturers and students to push the boundaries of instructional methodologies and institutions guidelines and build personal networks that cross these boundaries. Arguably, strong forms of agency are required to help lecturers in their professional development, such as practitioners who need to collaborate across organisational boundaries, to find moments of stability as they move into the new fully online teaching, learning, and assessment pedagogical setting. These forms of agency require sustaining (Edwards 2005). Archibald *et al.* (2011) opined that lecturers are the agents in their own professional learning. This was demonstrated by the lecturers in the way they used the teaching and learning environment as a professional development opportunity. Many lecturers might have used little technological tools in their pedagogical processes before the national lockdown but had to train and equip themselves to use technology in all aspects of teaching, learning, and assessment methodologies. They had to build the airplane while flying.

So, what now after the transition?

We used the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (Engeström 2001) to interpret the experiences and perceptions of educators and students during the transition to fully online teaching, learning, and assessment environments. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) offers a holistic and contextual method of discovery that is used to support this qualitative research. CHAT is a practice-based and practice-oriented theoretical framework that focuses on tool-mediated actions by actors or agents (lecturers and students) as well as socio-economic relations (Foot 2014).

During the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, new opportunities emerged for lecturers and students within the teaching and learning spaces. Our reflections revealed that the perceptions and experiences of lecturers and students during the transition from F2F to the online environment had some similarities and differences. In general, both students and lecturers have positive perceptions about their willingness and use of technology in teaching and learning. However, they have different perceptions when it comes to the online support they received and the online adaptability of course material. The negative perceptions could be attributed to the anxiety and online learning fatigue of students, furthermore, the amount of required content that students must cover in a course, and the time spent in front of the computer screen is too demanding (Mheidly *et al.* 2020). However, many South African universities tried their best to keep the promise of 'leaving no student behind', but many underprivileged South African students were victims of the initial onset of Covid-19 because many educators were not trained for online teaching, and many students did not have the necessary resources. However, the educators

improvised and improved their professional development while coping with the demands of teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Archibald *et al.* (2011) assert that professional learning changes teacher perceptions of their practice which has the potential to improve both teaching and student outcomes. In this study, the lecturers acted as agents of their own professional growth by acting decisively to improve their practices, preparing them for the post-Covid context. Additional research is needed to provide better support, preparation, and professional development for lecturers. For instance, scholars might consider evaluating how lecturers use technology for hybrid teaching (online and F2F), even post-Covid-19. How do lecturers replicate their in-person teaching strategies with digital tools to produce authentic, technology-rich learning activities with digital tools and applications? These perceptions and responses from the lecturers and students could help to improve learning skills and professional development. Professional development should include engaging in social, learner-centered activities, like self-directed learning, ongoing practice, conversations with mentors/coaches, and collaboration with colleagues would be the most helpful way to adapt their practice to the current situation. Therefore, professional learning should not be a matter of induction into established practices, but it also needs to include a capacity for interpreting and approaching problems, contesting interpretations, reading the environment, drawing on the available resources, being a resource for others, for focusing on the core objects of the profession whether it is students' learning or social inclusion.

The central part of this chapter was to understand professional learning and not only interpret challenges that the lecturers and students faced, but also act and reflect on them to underpin an

enhanced version of professionalism. We hope that our experiences and reflection in this chapter will assist other researchers and practitioners to deal with the transition of online learning, which is no longer an emergency but a reality.

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This book is a collection of written reflections on South African academics' professional learning during Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) and how they navigated the rethinking and adaptation of teaching, learning and assessment. Seen through the lens of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on professional practice, the book opens up perspectives on a wide variety of teaching, learning and experiences, demonstrating how it can be used to re-imagine the higher education landscape. It provides a snapshot of what transpired behind the scenes as the higher education sector prepared for and executed their ERT plans. These reflections also offer glimpses into how staff in higher education displayed resilience as they moved from feelings of angst, desperation, fear, trepidation and excitement to a sense of innovation, accomplishment and fulfilment. What is evident about the reflections are academics' honest insights into the scholarly and practical measures engaged during ERT, as well as the support for each other through various communities of practice. The reflections highlight some of the challenges and tensions that emerged, but it also presents an opportunity to celebrate the lessons learnt and to build on the possibilities for change in practice through professional learning.

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