



CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

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

EDITORS: ROSALINE GOVENDER & ANTHEA H M JACOBS

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**EDITORS
ROSALINE GOVENDER AND ANTHEA H M JACOBS**

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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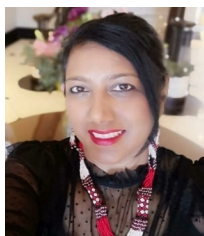
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DEDICATION

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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Rosaline Govender has a Doctorate in Education from UKZN. She has been working within the field of academic development since 2011 and her experience spans across student, staff and curriculum development. At institutional level, she has served as a member of several task teams including General Education and Siyaphumelela. At national level she serves as the Project Manager of the HELTASA's Professional Learning Project. She is the Co-convenor of the International Teaching and Learning Collaboration between DUT and Dr. SNS Rajalakshmi College of Arts and Science (India). Her research interests include student success, professional learning, academic development, teaching and learning and gender issues.



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Anthea Jacobs is an Education Policy Studies Masters and PhD graduate with experience working as an educationist in the basic and higher education sectors. She sees herself as a teaching and learning 'jack of all trades', happiest when working with academics who are keen to explore the field of education. An important focus for her is the strengthening of the scholarship of higher education teaching and learning and she believes that collaborative engagement is key to building the next generation of educationists. She currently works as Advisor to Higher Education Teaching and Learning, responsible for the professional development of academics.

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Christiaan Bekker is a lecturer, and serves as Subject Group Leader, for the Psychology Department at the North-West University (NWU), Vanderbijlpark Campus, South Africa. He has been lecturing large undergraduate classes since 2013 and has presented at the NWU Teaching and Learning Conferences as well as the HELTASA (Un)conference in 2021. He completed his PhD in 2022, with the focus on investigating the factors influencing academic emotions, specifically boredom, as well as engagement, burnout, and subjective well-being in public secondary school learners. Other research interests include teaching and learning practices at tertiary level as well as well-being in the LGBTI+ community.

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Zonnike Coetzer was a teacher before her appointment as an Academic Facilitator at the University of the Free State. This created a passion for student centred learning, and a deep awareness of what learners can achieve if one aspires to leave no learner behind. She relies mostly on this passion, as well as her qualifications in Psychology and Education to manoeuvre through an everchanging pedagogical environment to assist students in accomplishing their academic goals.

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Danielle (Danny) Fontaine-Rainen is currently the Director of the First Year Experience (FYE) at UCT. She has an undergraduate, honours, and master's degree from UCT (in Environmental and Geographical Science). She has a PhD in Urban Geography from Clark University (Worcester, MA, USA). She has particular disciplinary research interests in urban development (particularly how we build cities to facilitate and/or constrain children's access to daily physical activity) and FYE research interests in first-generation students and their success at university, academic advising, indicators of students' success and pedagogical interests in course design – including assessment design and universal design for learning (UDL).

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Aditi Hunma has a background in literature, and a specialisation in Education in the Applied Language and Literacy Studies Stream. She teaches on academic literacy, research literacy and postgraduate education courses. She enjoys teaching and designing relevant approaches for the millennial generation. Her involvement in the design and delivery of Coursera MOOC entitled *Writing Your World*, highlighted the fact that academic English is a foreign language for all, and yet at the centre of how knowledge gets constructed and reconstructed at university. Her research interests lie in how digital spaces to nurture academic writers, can also be harnessed to play a transformative role in higher education.

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Marelize van Heerden lectures Dance education, Music education and Philosophy of Education at the Faculty of Education, Nelson Mandela University, South Africa. She holds a Master's Degree in Music and a Doctorate in Education. Her doctorate regarded the potential of dance education to promote social cohesion in South Africa. She also studied Cultural Sociology at Masaryk University in the Czech Republic. Her research interests include dance education, training teachers for the multicultural classroom, decolonisation, aesthetics, ideas of Self in relation to the Other, recognition of dignity, nation building and peace education. She had her own modern dance studio (AIDT) and was the official choreographer of the internationally acclaimed Nelson Mandela University choir (2005-2017).

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 Barr¹, “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***

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 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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