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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