

## CHAPTER 2

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

*Anthea H M Jacobs*

Stellenbosch University

[jacobsa@sun.ac.za](mailto:jacobsa@sun.ac.za)

#### **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.

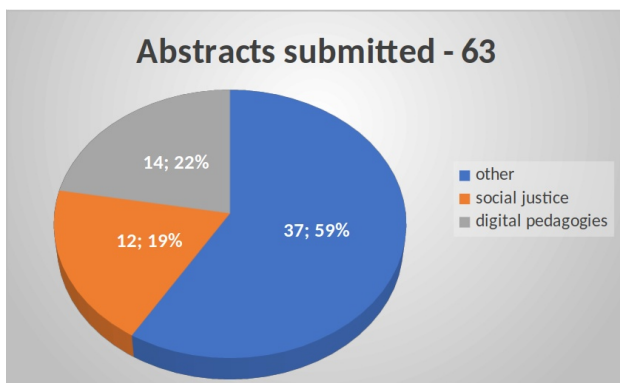


Figure 1: Results of analysis

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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