

## **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:

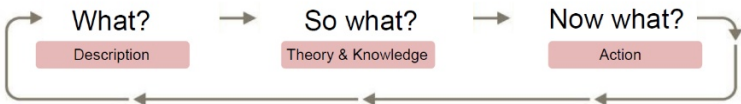


Figure 1: Reflective Framework (Rolfe *et al.* 2001: 1)

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 reimaged 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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