

Remote Teaching and Learning: Resilience and Academic Voices

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been driven to rethink, redesign, and respond overnight in the COVID-19 pandemic. The instantaneous closure of education institutions in South Africa, and worldwide raised several questions in terms of the adaptability and readiness of the HEI sector to adapt and respond to the changes. The changes called into question issues such as in-person teaching and learning practices, digital resources, academic staff, and student readiness for learning in digital environments, and connectivity and access to internet services and facilities. The roles of academics and students have changed drastically. COVID-19 has taught us several lessons in higher education. As teacher educators, to move successfully to post-COVID-19 educational environments we need to heed these lessons by listening to the voices of role players such as students and academics. Drawing on Ungar's resilience theory, the aim of this paper is to provide the voices of academics working in teacher education during the rapid and unplanned move to remote teaching and learning during the pandemic. The research paradigm is interpretative, and the approach adopts the use of qualitative case studies. The methods include ongoing interviews with, and narratives by staff, conducted online because of social distancing rules. The author also conducted participant and non-participant observations of online classes.

Keywords: Remote Teaching And Learning, Covid-19, Academic Voices, Resilience

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Introduction

South Africa was declared a national state of disaster and schools and universities were closed in mid-March 2020, to contain the spread of the coronavirus. This move marked a change in education never seen to this extent before. The move caused momentous concern within the education sector, most especially regarding the way forward for teaching and learning in schools and universities. In their 2020 proposals for a post-Covid-19 era, the World Economic Forum and the World Bank, highlighted the need for a revival of educational systems. The COVID-19 pandemic has propelled Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to rethink, redesign, and respond in real time. The dramatic closure of education institutions in South Africa, and worldwide raised several questions in terms of the adaptability and readiness of the HEI sector to adapt and respond to the changes. The challenge for universities lies in successful online teaching and learning, given the demand for the almost immediate digital transformation of courses. Teaching and learning required modification through the incorporation of technology (UNESCO, 2020). Indeed, the real challenge is the pace at which these adaptations had to be made in the context of the current pandemic (Kedra and Kaltsidisi, 2020).

The changes called into question issues such as in-person teaching and learning practices, digital resources, academic staff, and student readiness for learning in digital environments, and connectivity and access to internet services and facilities. Given the roles of academics and students have changed drastically, this has prompted worldwide scrutiny of teaching and learning in a way never experienced. The implementation of sustainable pedagogical approaches subsequently requires broad consultation particularly with key stakeholders such as academics and students, given that lack of academic and student engagement can gravely affect the sustainability of new pedagogical models that are initiated.

COVID-19 has taught us several lessons in higher education. As teacher educators, to move effectively to post-COVID-19 educational environments we need to heed these lessons by listening to the voices of our academics. The aim of this paper is to provide the voices of academics working in teacher education during the rapid and unplanned move to digital teaching and learning during the pandemic. The research paradigm is interpretative, and the approach adopts the use of a qualitative case study. The methods include ongoing interviews with, and narratives by staff, conducted online because of social distancing requirements. The author also conducted participant and non-participant observations of online classes. The paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, the literature review is presented, under sub-sections: Emergency remote teaching, and resilience. In Section 3, the research design is presented. In Section 4, I present the research findings. Section 5 discusses the research results and their practical implications.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Emergency Remote Teaching

Courses offered online in response to crisis situations are markedly different to online teaching and learning experiences that take months to plan, design and implement. In current times staff and student safety remains a priority. Institutions in South Africa opted to close in March 2020, as has remained the case into 2021, except, more recently, for staff and students working in laboratories or facilities, where access to specific equipment is mandatory. To continue teaching and learning in a fast-moving, little understood pandemic remains requisite, with staff and students having a range of capabilities to function online. Technological access remained

a priority, and universities began delivering tablets and laptops to students who did not have access to maintain a smooth flow of teaching and learning. Data was also dispensed to staff and students; however, the bulk of the data was allocated to little used late-night hours. Universities went into overdrive to conduct sessions on how to teach online, with staff and students every so often declaring discomfort at their limited ability. Technology support staff were inundated with cries for assistance.

Researchers in online and distance learning, distinguished design solutions that have been developed and implemented: distance learning, distributed learning, blended learning, online learning, mobile learning, and others (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust and Bond, 2020). The authors offer discussion around the terminology and formally propose a specific term for the type of instruction being delivered in these pressing circumstances: emergency remote teaching. For Hodges et al (2020) emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. ERT involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended courses that will most likely return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. The central objective is not to re-create a robust educational system but to provide temporary access to instruction that is quick to set up and is available. Thus, the authors distinguishing between ERT and online teaching and learning.

Resilience

Resilience examines positive development in people when faced with significant adversity. For Ungar (2008; 2018), resilience is the capacity of individuals and groups to navigate their way through the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their wellbeing, and their capacity to negotiate for these resources in culturally meaningful ways. The concept has multiple uses. It may describe characteristics refugee children, as an example, have when, despite being born and raised in disadvantaged circumstances, they grow up successfully; resilience may refer to competence when under stress; and resilience may be positive functioning indicating recovery from trauma (Ungar, 2008). These conceptualisations overlap. What is common is that resilience occurs in the presence of adversity. As Masten, Powell and Luthar (2003) write: “Resilience refers to patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity” (p.4). Resilient people need resilient families, communities, and schools. For Ungar, this raises two important issues. First, if someone successfully develops under adverse circumstances (a precondition for us to speak of someone as resilient), different communities under stress may offer different resources that sustain their well-being. It is possible to argue that those who make the most out of whatever is available to them should be considered resilient even if their behaviour does not look like resilience when viewed by members of outside communities. Although Ungar’s work lies predominantly with children and youth, the concept is applicable to other age groups and circumstances as well. In Ungar’s (2008) work, findings from a 14 site mixed methods study of over 1 500 youth globally support four propositions that underlie a more culturally and contextually embedded understanding of resilience: 1) there are global, as well as culturally and contextually specific aspects to people’s lives that contribute to their resilience; 2) aspects of resilience exert differing amounts of influence on a people’s lives depending on the specific culture and context in which resilience is realized; 3) aspects of people’s lives that contribute to resilience are related to one another in patterns that reflect their culture and context; 4) tensions between individuals and their cultures and contexts are resolved in ways that reflect highly specific relationships between aspects of resilience.

Research Design and Methodology

This research follows the interpretivist paradigm, utilising a qualitative case study, the aim of which is to examine the experiences of academics at a university in Johannesburg during the Covid-19 lockdown. Based on definitions by Yin (1994), Knobel and Lankshear (2007) and Gillham, (2000), the case study is an in-depth, descriptive, and interpretive study that focuses on a single bounded instance. It is based on real-life contexts and relies on multiple sources of data collection. Purposive sampling was used to discern, comprehend, and gain insight; in other words, a sample was selected so that the most could be learnt (Merriam, 2002). For this study, ten academics (male and female), at various levels of their careers in a School of Education at the university participated.

Data was collected through online interviews because of Covid-19 social distancing restrictions, as well as observations of online classes I teach. Interviewing is a valuable source to access the participants' views. The main purpose of an interview, according to Henning is to provide access to people's thoughts, feelings, and practices. The interviews were voice recorded and complemented by extensive written notes. After collecting the above data, the audio recordings of the conversations were transcribed. The second component in data collection was observations, which constitute watching people's actions, listening to their conversations, and asking them questions to clarify at times (Gillham, 2000: 45). I also observed as participant of the classes I taught. I made comprehensive field notes which form the basis of the data analysis. In this study, I draw on Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework of thematic analysis. The goal of thematic analysis is to identify themes, or patterns in the data that are important, and use these themes to address the research. This is more than simply summarising the data; a good thematic analysis interprets and makes sense of it. Thematic analysis provides systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data. Codes, which are the smallest unit of analysis, are the building blocks for themes, which are larger patterns of meaning.

Throughout the research, the privacy and sensitivity of the participants is protected. They were fully informed about the researchers' identity and background, as well as the purpose and procedures of the research. I also acknowledge my positionality as the researcher in this process, as a lecturer of the modules observed. This means that I, like my students was also grappling with the shift to emergency remote teaching and learning. Thus, this research is an attempt to understand the teaching and learning experiences of students' and colleagues' during this period.

Findings and Discussion

Academic Voices of Distress: "When One Day Ends, The Next One Starts"

"This is new to all of us. Daily, I have to sort out my schedule: teaching, housework, helping my kids with their schoolwork. We had to buy a new laptop for our kids as well...then think about where everybody works. Space is an issue. This arrangement is not ideal. What I cannot fathom is how much we need to help our students, we must be there for them daily, at all hours. They are needy, this is justifiable...they are from homes where parents have lost jobs, they are struggling financially, they have family members who are ill... How can we help, I really feel helpless? I want to do my best, but the pressure is unrelenting. When one day ends, the next one starts" (Academic A).

“For me, the university is trying to assist, I really get this, but there are too many of us who are asking questions all the time. The tech guys are inundated and sometimes they don’t answer our calls and emails. Too many of us and too few of them. There is no interaction in class, and attendance is at an all-time low. The faculty expects excellence. Sometimes I feel they don’t care. Our modules are online, they (managers) go into our modules...this feels like an invasion of our privacy. This is the equivalent of them being in our classes. We cannot survive with this pressure from below (students) and above (managers). Everyone has a job to do, right? But we are caught in the middle.” (Academic B)

“I have to look after my career, this means there are demands to do my job on one hand, and my teaching responsibilities. For now, I am prioritising my teaching, I need to sort one thing at a time. Yet I realise I have to meet my other deadlines and obligations too, research, publications, I hope the powers that be are more considerate about this at a time like this. We will see when it is time for performance management. I am more concerned that students are not attending class, and I do not get a response from them. Some log on to Blackboard, then they get kicked out – the connections are not good at all. This cannot be fixed; this is just how it is. Like a constant game. So, we just record all our classes and hopefully they are able to access these when they have time and better connection, and data. It’s a real struggle, I understand that.” (Academic C).

“I am ready to give up. I have issues with my teaching every day. My connection is not always good, even with loadshedding...we are just not winning. How can I expect my students to cope? My husband is not well. He has comorbidities, as do I. My mum is elderly, so I brought her over to live with us so I can take care of her. I have had a Covid test, it’s negative, but my body is sore. My mind is sore. I don’t know how much more we can take. I have already lost colleagues, friends and family members.” (Academic D).

“I am quite positive; I do believe we can make this work. I enjoy working from home, I think I would even be happy to work at a distance institution. But I do think we have too many meetings, which distracts from teaching. Perhaps this means we can rethink how we teach in the future. The only issue is I get lonely, I live alone, and it gets depressing having no other form of interaction. This I miss most.” (Academic E).

Several academics spoke about their distress during the pandemic and subsequent lockdown (refer also to Kedraka and Kalsidis’ (2020) study in Greece). Most woman and some male participants expressed their anguish of having to maintain their academic work schedule, together with household chores, and having to oversee their children’s schoolwork simultaneously. This was noted prolifically along gendered lines. They also found students needed extra encouragement and support during this time. This observation seems pervasive and is cognisant with the requirements of a humanizing pedagogy. A core responsibility of academic staff is providing support to students in need. The drive for such a pedagogy calls for a level of consistence with students during a crisis. The possibility of disadvantaged students being further disadvantaged is highly probable in shifts to ERT. Thus, such pedagogy is crucial for both teacher and student success and critical for the academic and social resilience of students. Academics demonstrated tremendous resilience when confronting the pressures of the adversity of teaching online. They did not have much choice. This is reminiscent too, of Bartolome’s (1996) call for trusting relationships. Academics spoke about students who did not have money, food or medicine, and no means of getting them. Several of the participants were assisting students financially to ensure they were not destitute (refer also to Cicha’s and colleagues (2021) findings). Academics also found that in many instances, students were not

attending, or able to attend remote classes for various reasons. Class attendance dropped, which in turn affected student academic performance. This could however mean that students were listening to recorded lessons when they had access to free data.

Certain participants were also concerned at what they felt was an unappreciative university. Given the overnight move to ERT, there were calls on academics to arrange their modules for online presentation overnight. Given that online teaching usually requires months of preparation, this was cause for concern. Not all the participants felt comfortable or prepared for this move. Despite universities offering training in online teaching, they felt that the university appeared indifferent to their mental state. Programmes on mental health, for instance were only offered much later in the lockdown. While the university had to ensure adjustments were made, participants felt the demands unreasonable where it was expected that all online modules were structured in the same format, and many did not have the immediate skills to do this. “We cannot all teach the same, our classrooms do not all look the same” (Academic F). This involved added administrative work, which there was not always time to do. They felt the university could have been more compassionate and humane to what staff were going through in their personal lives. Managers had access to Blackboard modules, and this further bothered staff who felt their “privacy was invaded” (Academic F). They certainly felt underprepared for the change. Technicians who were ill-prepared for the demands on their time were available all day for queries, and they too were exhausted, and could not afford to respond to all queries timeously. Feelings of physical and mental exhaustion were unrelenting. As participant A said, “When one day ends, the next one starts”, or “We are caught in the middle” (Academic B).

Another challenge was loadshedding. In South Africa, the major power supplier, ESKOM, resorts to loadshedding, which occurs when the power supply to different areas is shut off to conserve electricity. This became a major stumbling block, when students and academics experienced irregular power connectivity. “It is ESKOM’s loadshedding or remote teaching, we cannot have both. This affects teaching, assessments, presentations, we are being held to ransom” (Academic G).

Academics were also concerned that they also had to meet their annual performance management targets during an abnormal time. The university expected them to meet obligations such as publications and research, which was difficult to maintain at this time. As Academic D said, “My body is sore, my mind is sore”. Participants felt physically and emotionally drained. Academic E referred to the loneliness she felt. She felt she could cope with the demands of work; however, the lack of emotional interaction and communication was draining.

Consequently, academics felt varying levels of exhaustion, anxiety, and loneliness, and essentially felt the university’s impetus for teaching and learning and research was relentless. Staff and students experienced illness as well: many contacted the virus and had family members who were ill, or who had succumbed to the virus. Participants experienced incessant moments of quarantine or isolation as the virus spread. They had to battle with illness themselves, as well as of family members, see to children and do household chores, and found the situation unyielding.

For most academics, the pandemic was a time of confusion, anxiety, and stress. Both groups suffered mentally and physically, and while they appeared to try to cope, often this was inconsistent. For all, the lack of human interaction was disconcerting. The pandemic impacted on their lives, and they did not know if they could recoup lost time. Academics attempted to use

various platforms, as well as synchronous and asynchronous methods of teaching, and students responded differently to these methods.

Conclusion

Given the experiences of this group of academics, although not generalisable, it is important that teaching is not just about persevering as usual. Of the lessons learnt, academics must be resilient and adaptable to change. In the face of the changing nature of teaching and learning, it is the adaptable teacher who can persevere emotionally and physically. This highlights the need for resilience. Resilience is a process which demonstrates the capacity “to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful” (Walsh, 2006:4). Resilience means adjusting in the wake of significant adversity. Teachers need to recognize the social and political contexts of their own and their students’ lives. This involves the influence of societal power, racial identities, and cultural values. Despite the challenges, the pandemic is a portal (Roy, 2020) that has allowed us the opportunity to reinvent ourselves, as well as how we teach and learn.

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