Hope in Times of Trouble: An Academic Development Perspective of Learning and Teaching During a Crisis

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Abstract

Higher education experienced unprecedented disruption with the arrival of COVID-19. While the pandemic has dissipated to some extent, the lessons learned helps to consider responses to disruptive events in the future. This paper explores the reflections of two academic developers' experiences from two diverse institutions, as they supported academic staff with the transition to remote learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through shared displacement, isolation and reflections on our own learning processes, we identified a pattern that emerged in the way we engaged with teaching staff to assist with the rapid transition to online learning and teaching. Using Schön's reflective model, we consider our actions during this disruptive time as well as the lessons gained. Within the South African context, the pandemic highlighted the hauntings of our unequal past, as our respective institutions ensured that access and success remained centred. While the challenges of rapidly transitioning learning online created a barrier, through our reflections of this experience, we were able to identify the three zones that we transitioned through. In this article we share the three transitionary zones of action, which we refer to as the Three T-zones of trauma, transition and transformation. Each accompanied by phases of learning, unlearning and relearning. We argue that the crises created the opportunity to innovate; to transform and consider new ways of being and doing. We reflect on our role as academic developers and the urgency to be flexible and prepared for continued disruptions and uncertainty in the learning and teaching environment.

Keywords: Academic Development, COVID-19, Pandemic, Displacement, Dispossession, Remote Learning

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the traditional landscape of education throughout the world. The mandated closure of higher education institutions led to a sudden shift to remote learning accompanied by the loss of physical connections and resources that had long been central to the educational experience. In South Africa, the sudden closure brought into focus the disparities and inequalities that continued to plague higher education. The pace at which universities could pivot to remote emergency learning and teaching was impacted by institutional, staff and students resource availability and access. In our paper we aim to reflect on our observations of shared feelings of displacement and dispossession we experienced as academic developers along with academic staff and students during this challenging period. We recognise the emotional and psychological impact the pandemic induced and through our reflections attempt to shed light on the various dimensions of this shared experience. Drawing upon personal narratives, personal observations, reflections and relevant literature, our paper examines the various phases through which we transitioned We discuss the challenges and the opportunities faced, the coping mechanisms employed, and the potential long-term effects on the educational approaches at our respective institutions. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of acknowledging and addressing these shared feelings to foster resilience and support the well-being of academic staff and students in future disruptive events.

Literature Review

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education institutions has been well documented as a pivotal moment in time. At the start of the crisis they may have been assumptions about the ease of which classes could transition online. As noted by Le Grange (2020) who draws our attention to the prior use of learner management systems (LMS) in learning and teaching to varying degrees within higher education. The expectation was that, students and academic staff would be familiar with the LMS, whether used as an information sharing platform or as part of a blended learning and teaching approach (Le Grange, 2020). Despite the varying degrees of preparedness, researchers, Taylor, Bearman, Scarparo and Thomas (2022) suggests that the sudden pivot to the online space, emergency remote learning and teaching practice remained challenging. Furthermore, well-resourced institutions, that had sufficient experience and background in online leaning and teaching, and or innovative educational technologies enjoyed a significant advantage as they were able to swiftly and effectively transition to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) with relatively short notice (CIHE, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; QAA, 020). Universities not as well-resourced faced more significant challenges with the pivot the online learning and teaching. In part, as a result of the scarcity of resources to innovative and technological infrastructure prior to the pandemic. All universities encountered major hurdles, including academics facing limitations in their home office setups, a lack of skills and competencies to adapt to ERT, and limited knowledge of distance learning pedagogies (Crawford et al., 2020).

Even though the pandemic fast-tracked the transition online and blended learning, Dhilla (2017) suggests that the online environment presented several challenges that academic staff and students had to contend with. These included pedagogical and philosophical dilemmas, requiring reconsideration of long held assumptions, a letting go of familiar learning and teaching practices, and finally assumed positions of authority. According to Kilgour et al. (2019), this boundary crossing to remote teaching required significant shifts in teachers' ontological and epistemological stance, as they grappled with threshold concepts that may

have conflicted with their existing approaches to learning and teaching. These shifts could possibly have evoked feelings of liminality, uncertainty, and anxiety, as transformative learning takes place, often accompanied by a sense of loss as previous ways of thinking and being are transformed (Timmermans, 2010) in a time characterised by rapid shifts, emotional turmoil and significant trauma.

For academic developers, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, held diverse roles that encompassed teaching (both formal and informal), project work, and staff support. Compton and Gilmour (2022) refers to the delicate balance that academic developers found themselves in. This between space, of competing forces of meeting institutional requirements to develop a response to the pandemic while supporting academic staff and students with the transition. At the onset of the crisis, initial support provided by academic developers was reactive and aimed at helping staff adapt to online teaching, (Compton & Gilmour, 2022). To support the transition to ERT, guiding staff through a "low-tech, high-impact" became a priority, with a focus on equipping staff and students with the necessary technical capabilities and knowledge to deliver online classes. Furthermore, according to Naylor and Nyanjom (2020), the transition to online teaching took a considerable toll on the emotional energy of academics, who reported experiencing both positive and negative emotions due to the rapid pace of change and the perceived level of institutional support. In addition, Sahu (2020) suggests that staff and students' working from home, their technological capabilities, access to data and devices, and having to share such resources and spaces with others who are working from home can further create a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about the status quo.

For academics, this uncertainty may have caused a sense of discomfort as they transitioned from the physical and social technologies which according to Buys (2020) has the ability to further create a disconnect between individuals. This disconnection from the familiar physical classroom and face-to-face teaching has the ability to result in feelings of displacement and dispossession. The university community, irrespective of the nature of the work needed to re-adjust daily routines and life confined to working from home. This loss of in-person contact further impacted on the daily lives of academic staff and students from a socio-emotional perspective as suggested by UNESCO (2020). Similarly, Huang et al. (2021) found that educators had mixed feelings regarding institutionally driven shifts to blended learning, as they felt motivated by their commitment to student welfare but were simultaneously demotivated by a lack of autonomy. These emotional complexities place instructors in a vulnerable position as they seek practical solutions while simultaneously reevaluating their long-held academic assumptions and beliefs (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2013).

Despite the challenges, academic staff demonstrated resilience and a commitment to student success. They embraced the opportunity to experiment with different instructional methods and assessed their effectiveness through continuous reflection and feedback. This willingness to adapt and learn, allowed them to navigate the uncertainties of the pandemic and support their students in their learning journey. Koris and McKinnon (2022), shared more about the help seeking behaviours of academic staff to adapt and learn during the pandemic. This included informal engagements and collaboration with colleagues within disciplines. and institutions. As the rapid shift demanded technical skills and a reimagining of pedagogical practices, academics self-organised to offer support, and knowledge sharing through social media, webinars and online offerings such as workshops and courses. among colleagues (Fekete & Divéki, 2022).

Jandrić et al. (2021) argued that emergency remote learning and teaching served as a survival reflex during the pandemic. The writers suggest, as academic staff adapted to the changing requirements of online learning and teaching, in addition, the pandemic touched on social, psychological, and educational aspects, but more significantly highlighted the contagious nature of hope. Individuals continued to hope, learn and teach as a means of survival. Academic staff confronted a steep learning curve, acquiring digital fluency, and embracing various educational technologies.

Method

We utilised Schön's (1987) reflective model which provided a valuable framework for analysing our actions during the disruptive time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lessons we have learned. By engaging in reflective practice, we were able to critically examine our approaches and identify areas for improvement. Schön's model consists of two main types of reflection: reflection-in-action, which occurs during the actual experience, and reflection-on-action, which takes place after the experience. Our action as academic developers in the South African context, s focused on ensuring that access and success remained central to our institutions despite the challenges presented by the pandemic. We recognised that the pandemic highlighted the remnants of our unequal past, with disparities in access to technology, resources, and support. This necessitated a proactive and inclusive approach to address these inequities and support all students and academic staff. Through reflection-in-action, we adapted our strategies and interventions in real-time to meet the evolving needs of our community. We actively sought feedback and engaged in ongoing communication with teaching staff to identify barriers, provide guidance, and implement effective solutions. This iterative process allowed us to make timely adjustments and improvements to our support mechanisms.

Reflection-on-action played a crucial role in deepening our understanding of the challenges faced and the lessons learned. We critically examined our approaches, seeking insights into what worked well and what could be enhanced. We recognised the importance of flexibility, adaptability, and the need to embrace innovative approaches to remote learning and teaching. We also acknowledged the challenges and opportunities of providing comprehensive support systems, including technological assistance, professional development opportunities, and emotional support, to ensure the well-being of our academic community. The pandemic experience reaffirmed the urgency of addressing systemic inequalities in higher education. We recognised the need for long-term solutions that go beyond the immediate crisis response. This included advocating for policy changes, increasing investment in infrastructure and resources, and fostering collaborations to bridge the digital divide and promote equitable access to education.

In conclusion, Schön's reflective model allowed us to critically analyse our actions during the disruptive time of the pandemic and gain valuable insights. We learned the importance of adaptability, innovation, and comprehensive support systems to address the challenges faced by our academic community. The pandemic served as a stark reminder of the inequalities that persist in our South African context, reinforcing the need for ongoing efforts to ensure that access and success remain centred at our institutions.

Reflections

Our reflection in-action focused on the initial responses we observed to the Covid-19 pandemic at our respective institutions. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the continuation of the academic project, forcing both institutions to shutdown with an eventual transition to remote learning and teaching. Located at a University of Technology (UoT) and a traditional Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI), students enrolled come from mostly disadvantaged communities. When considering our respective contexts, the pandemic exacerbated challenges for students who were already resource constrained.

As academic developers we observed that students and staff struggled to adapt to the online learning environment, despite being familiar with the use of the LMS (Le Grange, 2020). In addition, we noted that students experienced difficulties with managing their time, staying motivated, online class attendance and engaging with course materials online. Reflecting on possible reasons behind these challenges, we soon realised that the sudden shift to online learning, the lack of face-to-face interaction, in some ways constituted a loss of connectedness for both staff and students. We noted this initial period was marked by uncertainties and displacement, we referred to this period as a Zone of Trauma. Below we outline the transitionary phases as moment of unlearning, learning and relearning, the actions taken along with the lessons learned.

Zone of Trauma: Uncertainty and Displacement

As we reflected on the initial phase of the pandemic, we noted this period was characterised by a sense of fear and anxiety. In the beginning the spread and severity of the COVID-19 virus remained unknown, making it incredibly difficult to plan for the future. For us, this uncertainty created a profound sense of fear and panic, resonating at both personal and professional levels. At a personal level, our initial concerns were focused on the health, safety, and well-being for ourselves, family, friends, colleagues and students. This was followed by concerns around the unfamiliarity of online learning and teaching which heightened anxieties. On a professional level, as academic developers the sudden removal from familiar spaces and places on campus, lead to a sense of displacement and dispossession. The loss of the physical classroom environment and the structured programmes that once contained our development practices created a profound shift in academic identities. Taylor, Bearman, Scarparo and Thomas (2022, p.178) refer to this sense of loss (uncertainty and displacement) as a mourning, suggesting "that educators are experiencing a deep sense of grief for what has been lost. The researchers contend that such "transition requires ontological and epistemological shifts as teachers grasp threshold concepts that conflict with their existing approaches to teaching such that they experience feelings of liminality, uncertainty, and anxiety" (p. 178). In this phase, we, along with students and academic staff had to cross a threshold, unlearn familiar ways of being and doing, and navigate the challenges of teaching in a new and unfamiliar landscape. Beyond this, we had to reflect on our own assumptions and beliefs about effective learning and consider how to adapt to this new context. We found ourselves transitioning into a new space or zone, one in which we were eager to adapt and learn.

Zone of Transition: Adapting and Learning

During this phase, we observed ways in which academics came together to work towards adapting their teaching practices to the remote learning environment. Collectively, they

embraced new technologies and pedagogical approaches, undergoing a process of learning to develop new skills. The transition involved grappling with the challenges of online teaching, exploring new strategies to engage students, and harnessing the potential of digital tools to create meaningful learning experiences, crossing the threshold, moving out of those liminal spaces (Kilgour et al. 2019). We noted that as continuous engagement ensued, drawing on knowledges and theories, online learning best practices, and research on student engagement assisted in deepening our own understanding of the issues students and staff were facing. Furthermore, at an institutional level, gathering student feedback, guided the design and implementation of interventions to support students in overcoming their challenges. This included developing online resources and guides on effective time management, providing virtual workshops on study skills and online learning strategies, or facilitating virtual peer support groups as well as how to access academic development support initiatives remotely. Ongoing engagement through feedback and evaluation enabled us to reflect on the effectiveness of the interventions, consider what worked well and what needed to be adjusted or revised. This approach helped to refine and adapt academic development and support strategies to better address the specific needs and challenges faced by students and staff in the online learning environment. In this Zone of Transitioning, we engaged in adapting and learning new ways of doing and being.

Zone of Transformation: Embracing Innovation

Finally, the Zone of Transformation emerged as a result of the ongoing adaptation and learning process. We realised that, academic staff, having navigated through the trauma and transition phases, began to embrace innovation and new ways of learning and teaching. More collaborative engagements across disciplines and fields became evident, through webinars and workshops. Interactions with university structures, spaces and engagement with faculty and students, pointed toward a digital transformation. Even though conversations about digital transformation is not new (García-Morales, Garrido-Moreno & Martín-Rojas, 2021) this transformation would involves profound changes in teaching pedagogies, essential competencies, as well as assessment methods. Working in the online space would require a re-evaluation of the entire learning process. Further, we began to witness a remarkable resilience, adaptation, and learning among academic staff and students during this extraordinary time. Academic staff actively reached out for professional development opportunities to enhance their digital literacy skills and pedagogical knowledge, collaborating with colleagues and learning communities to share best practices and innovative ideas.

We referred to this phase as the Zone of Transformation. We recognise this zone represents a stage that follows the initial phases of trauma and transition, where academic staff had overcome the immediate challenges of the pandemic and started to embrace innovation and new approaches to learning and teaching. In this phase, academic staff began to recognise the potential and opportunities presented by the remote learning environment and actively seek to create transformative learning experiences for their students. Within the Zone of Transformation, academic staff demonstrated transformed pedagogical approaches that embraced innovative technologies, new pedagogical methods, and instructional design strategies. Discussions about the efficacy of traditional teaching methods online in the digital age and an openness to reimagining their roles and practices to align with the evolving needs and expectations of students emerged. Embracing innovation in the Zone of Transformation involves incorporating emerging technologies, interactive online platforms, and multimedia resources to enhance student engagement and participation. This experimental phase was characterised by inquiry, leaning more about ways in which to integrate virtual reality,

simulations, gamification, or other interactive elements to create immersive and interactive learning experiences. Others considered pedagogies that included flipped classroom models, asynchronous and synchronous online discussions, and collaborative projects that leverage digital tools and platforms. Collectively, we recognised the opportunities presented by the remote learning environment and sought to create transformative learning experiences for students. This phase marked a significant shift in pedagogical approaches, with academics actively reimagining their roles and practices to meet the evolving needs of the digital age. The Zone of Transformation represents a shift in mindset, where educators embrace the possibilities of the digital era and harness technology as an enabler of transformative learning experiences. By adapting their teaching approaches to leverage the potential of digital tools and resources, they strive to create dynamic and meaningful educational experiences that prepare students for the demands of a rapidly changing world.
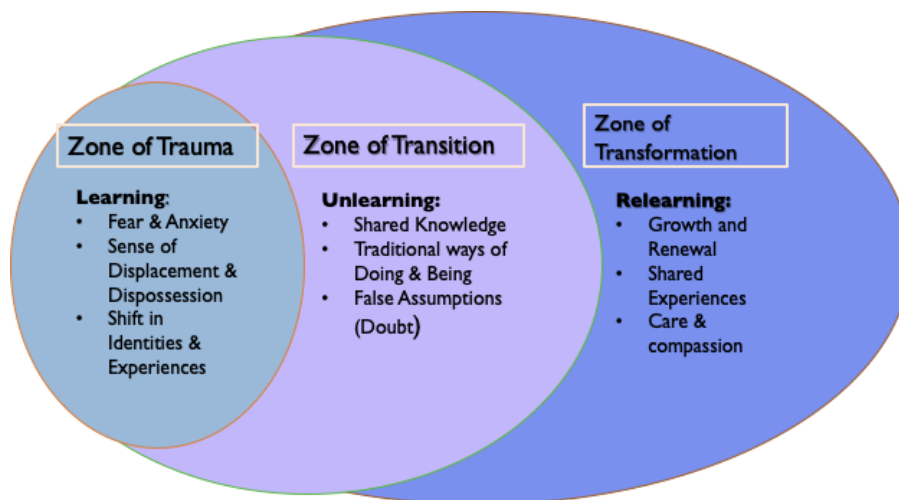

Fig. 1 Three T-Zone of Learning in Times of Disruption in Higher Education: Source Pather & Cupido (2020)

Final Thoughts

Through our engagement with academic staff, it became apparent that the pandemic impacted on learning and teaching resources with the dispossession of place and space. Resources previously available to academic staff were no longer accessible. The underlying assumption was that all staff would be prepared or capacitated to work remotely from home. This created false assumptions on staff readiness for emergency remote learning and teaching. Academic developers, teaching staff and students, as part of a university ecological system, began to explore new ways of being and doing to adapt to the new normal. This led to an increase in the sharing of knowledge and practices across disciplines, leading to new networks on a local, national and international level.

We noted significant shifts within the learning and teaching space, we all started to unlearn old ways of doing. Through this, a pattern of resilience and commitment developed, a hope that not all was lost. Most importantly, the pandemic heightened the need to teach with care and compassion, which created a sense of connectedness with students that was not observable during face-to-face teaching. The learning and teaching approaches were carefully considered to ensure that "no student would be left behind." As we reflect on the transformative changes that started to occur, the words of Emily Klein [8:80] resonates with our experience as academic developers engaging with academic staff through this difficult time:

By learning...to build new pedagogical content knowledge relevant to the school's philosophy and design...By unlearning...letting go of deeply held assumptions about what it means to be a teacher, what classrooms look like, what the essence of learning and teaching is...relearning is the process of creating new understandings and behaviours around the same concepts—what it means to be a teacher, what learning and teaching looks like, etc.

Reflecting on actions, it is evident that this experience has led to much growth and renewal within the academic setting as all staff and students were impacted in some shape or form, although not equally so as the equity gap for staff and students became apparent. Out of these circumstances, the shared experience of staff, which in some ways have always been there for students, has led to new learnings, one framed by care and compassion as we navigate this journey together. This relearning has developed into a growth and renewal allowing for a release and letting go of old assumptions and behaviours. In our engagement with academic staff, it was evident that they felt confident to unlearn old ways of doing to deal with their own uncertainties. This created an opportunity for growth, innovation and change, which could be seen in the number of professional development opportunities and community of practices which emerged. Also possibilities to re-invent new ways of learning and teaching. So what have we learnt from this experience?

Lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic have underscored the significance of cultivating hope amidst adversity. The unprecedented challenges brought about by the pandemic necessitated a shift in our approach to staff engagement and interaction, resulting in a newfound sense of connection that was previously overlooked. By embracing experimentation and curiosity, we discovered innovative methods to foster active participation and collaboration, harnessing the potential of discussion forums, chat rooms, and breakout sessions to facilitate meaningful dialogue and peer-to-peer interaction.

The transition to remote and blended learning compelled us to critically examine our pedagogical approaches, leading to heightened engagement and the acquisition of essential digital literacies that were previously lacking. The pandemic served as a catalyst for recognising the importance of comprehensive student support and the creation of inclusive learning environments. This resulted in academics being more mindful of the emotional and mental well-being of their students. Moreover, as a university community, we proactively addressed concerns regarding digital equity by providing accommodations and alternative assessment methods, ensuring equitable access to educational resources for all students.

Furthermore, the pandemic compelled us to think about our role as academic developers to reflect and embrace the continuous professional development needed in this space. We draw on the reflections of Stanton and Young (2022) and Barbara Grant's who describe academic developer as 'a light-footed shape-shifter who slips around the cracks of our institutions' and engages in 'mindful role-playing' (2007, p. 41). The researcher suggest that academic development has to be characterised by an openness and willingness to let go of "fixed identities and positions." Instead the authors encourage academic developers to "hold authority lightly... not claiming absolute knowledge or exclusive expertise, but rather taking the 'it depends' approach has allowed us to be flexible and improvisational. That humility and deftness, the willingness to find the best answer wherever it may lie, has helped us to distinguish the signal from the noise so that we can recognise new patterns in our work and move forward" (2022, p. 212).

Conclusion

In this paper, we reflected on our experiences and the emergent three zones of action that emerged during this tumultuous time: the zone of trauma, the zone of transition, and the zone of transformation. These zones, accompanied by phases of learning, unlearning, and relearning, provide insight into the lived experiences of academics as they grappled with the challenges brought about by the pandemic. It is our hope, that the three T-Zones of trauma, transition, and transformation provides a framework for future disruptions, to help others in the educational or non-educational space to become unstuck, to confront and overcome challenges, adapt to whatever the new circumstance may be. As we move forward, it is crucial to build upon the lessons learned and leverage the newfound possibilities of digital education to shape a resilient and inclusive higher education landscape.

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