Editorial

Re-thinking the Humanities Curriculum in the Time of COVID-19

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The news around the novel coronavirus began circulating across the globe in the early part of this year. This relatively unknown virus was deemed to be a major challenge to the world, both in its biological and economical effects that could have devastating implications for the well-being of individuals and of countries across the globe. Being confronted by the reality of the coronavirus within our country, there was little information about the virus, its medical catastrophe on the humans and its effects on society and humanity. The disease was deemed to be in the same category as other significant pandemics, like the Spanish flu in the 1917/18 and others before. The 1917/ 19718 pandemic that reportedly infected 500 million of one third of the world's population, and around 50 million across the world (cf. 1918 Pandemic). As concerns about the effects of this coronavirus began to increase, countries began to take steps in preventing the spread of the disease, some of which included social distancing

amongst people, increasing travel restrictions across countries and within countries. More drastic measures included lockdown of towns and countries where people were being confined to their homes with minimal travel being allowed to procure basic necessities. Industries, educational institutions and other economic and social activities outside of critical services were being closed across the globe as a way of attempting to reduce the spread of the disease. COVID-19, as the coronavirus has come to be known, had left nations across the world with no vaccines, treatments or cures available to assist in the curbing of transmission of this highly infectious disease. It is in this emerging pandemic that this book was conceptualised.

The closure of universities and the uncertainty of how long institutions would be closed for, created a concern for the teaching and learning aspects of higher education studies. The integrity of the academic year across all programmes, including undergraduate, post-graduate and research pro-grammes, were in jeopardy as the uncertainty of the disease and its trajectory across the nation and globally increased. In response to the early indications of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and implications that the lockdown would have on curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment within higher education, the editors of this book deemed it most appropriate to record the initial reactions to the concerns around higher education studies. The scope of this intent is vast and, as such, this volume is the first of a number of book volumes and journal issues being produced. The different volumes and journal issues provide a sample of approaches and interventions on the impacts of COVID-19 on academe, especially from Humanities perspectives. With its primary focus on curriculum theory and practice, this volume, the first, then opens the research and critical and constructive reflections on the re-thinking the Humanities curriculum in the context of COVID-19.

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COVID-19 has become a threat to the health and wellbeing of the world population. Its global pandemic nature has the potential to destabilise systems and processes that have defined human existence, epistemology and knowledge up to now. New ways of thinking, new responses to systems and processes and new boundaries are being formed as a result of this rapidly spreading disease. In responding to the disruption to higher education, we ask, in this volume, a key question of: *how have institutions responded to the*

institutional closures and the protection of integrity of what is being taught, learnt and assessed across programmes in the Humanities. In response to this key question, a compilation of ten chapters in this volume addresses initial insights, problematisations, opportunities and actions taken by institutions on the Humanities curriculum within the context of COVID-19.

The volume commences with a chapter that fundamentally questions the nature of the Humanities curriculum. Labby Ramrathan asks a very fundamental curriculum question of what knowledge and whose knowledge is most worthwhile during this pandemic context. Through a review of the actions taken by universities in response to university closures to continue with the teaching, learning and assessment, he argues that we may lose an opportune moment to re-visit what we teach, ask students to learn and assess their learning. COVID-19 has provided a moment of deep reflection on the curriculum and this moment may be lost due to a pedantic focus on curriculum coverage and on-line teaching and learning to complete the academic year despite the disruptions caused by the disease. Shan Simmonds picks up the on-going and copious cycles of curriculations and re-curriculations and the demands that they placed on academics and considers the possible repercussion of academics encountering the curriculum as a stranger. She proposes that the challenges emanating from this pandemic could open our eyes to the beauty and power of disruption so that we can think anew about curriculum. As such, academia needs to especially consider the significance of slow pedagogy theory as a possibility to engendering a curriculum as lived.

Nokukhanya Ndlovu and her co-authors have argued, in their chapter, that the massification of higher education had necessitated a move toward on-line teaching and learning to address the increasing enrolment of students within higher education institutions. They further argue that COVID-19 has become the catalyst towards pushing institutions to move beyond even blended approaches and to utilize online teaching and learning and as such this shift was an expectation from a curriculum perspective. Krystle Ontong and Zayd Waghid take this catalytic change further by arguing that most university educators who have been tasked with moving all learning activities online had a matter of days or a few weeks at their disposal – conceptualised as emergency remote teaching (ERT). Furthermore, online education is a completely new experience for many lecturers and students. In their chapter, drawing on the main measures taken by a particular university in the Western Cape in response to emergency remote teaching, and emphasising the significance of space and

place in e-learning – or 'splace' – they propose a framework, namely a Community of Inquiry (CoI), which may be necessary for creating spaces for effective learning within an online space.

This volume then delves into the issue of inequities that may be inherent and be perpetuated and carried over in the shift to on-line teaching and learning. Suriamurthee Maistry engages the shift to on-line teaching and learning from a critical neoliberalism perspective. In his chapter he argues that COVID-19 has refocussed attention on curriculum overload, and elaborate neoliberal assessment regimes that suffocate quality and materially- and socially-conscious teaching and learning. With the advent of COVID-19, we have an 'opportune' moment to reflect on much in education that has become normative but also problematic over time. More closer to home, Petro du Preez and Lesley le Grange, in the race to go on-line for teaching and learning argue that few would question the affordances of new technologies to expand learning into virtual spaces. In a country like South Africa, there is an acute digital divide which the COVID-19 crisis has laid bare. Online teaching and learning poses a threat to both formal and epistemological access, not because of digital literacy, but that students may not be enjoying equitable benefits from the affordances of new technologies. Kasturi Behari-Leak and her team of authors extended on this challenge but from an African *Ubuntu* perspective. Using *Ubuntu* as meta-theoretical underpinning, and through a critical autoethnography approach, they 'deep dive' into reflexive explorations to engage in an in-depth analysis of curriculum complexities in times of change, especially for new academics in transition.

The final three chapters of this book take on a broader focus on universities and on society in the context of COVID-19. Mlamuli Hlatshwayo takes a broad view of universities as affected by COVID-19 and says that universities have not been immune from this crisis, with most of them grappling to finish the academic year, ensure quality in the curricula itself, and move towards online methods of teaching and learning as a substitute for contact classes. In his chapter, he theorizes what he terms the 'lockdown University' – a quarantined university that pretends that it is still 'business as usual' and still attempts at reinforcing its traditional practices and institutional behaviour during the COVID-19 crisis. Oscar and Karen Koopman argue that university face-to-face teaching will gradually be replaced in the future with online teaching. They draw their arguments from the Fallist movement that has affected the university sector for the last five years and more recently, the

current impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In bringing to this volume to a close, Ashwin Desai, using E.M. Foster's short story, 'The Machine Stops', shifts us into society's conundrum brought about by the uncertainties of COVID-19. The discerning reader will be quick to realise that the chapter is guilty of what it sets out to expose; a con-fusion of ideas. 'How else could it be', Desai asks, 'at a time when the only certainty, is uncertainty', and we may add, where the word development in national plans are replaced by the word disaster. Thus, is the intent of this volume – a con-fusion of ideas in the early stages of COVID-19 as a response to the pandemic and the Humanities Curriculum in a time of crisis. The volume captures the early curriculum responses to COVID-19 with a view to document the trajectories of the Humanities curriculum into the depths of COVID-19 and beyond.

The next three volumes of the book focus on digital teaching and learning, teaching and learning as such, and the perspectives on all being learners, across the Tertiary Education spectrum, in the time of COVID-19.

And, for up-to-date information about COVID-19 in South Africa, visit the site that the South African Department of Health has opened to this effect. It provides resources, news and updates, as well as information on South Africa's Risk Adjusted Strategy, or the *Draft Framework for Consultation on COVID-19 Risk Adjusted Strategy* (2020), FAQs, and the COVID Alert SA app (cf. under References).

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