# What Knowledge is Most Worthwhile in Crisis Conditions? Re-engineering our Curriculum in the Context of COVID-19

**Labby Ramrathan**
**ORCID iD:** https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9963-0675

## Abstract
The novel coronavirus has jetted institutions of higher education into uncharted territory that requires a rapid response due to its potential to exponentially affect peoples' overall health and result in high mortality rates. This means that institutions are now required to shift teaching, learning and assessment processes, within a context of extreme uncertainty and rapidly changing circumstances. Within this pandemic context, this chapter explores, through a review of notices, guidelines, and instructions, the response by educational authorities to potentially long periods of closure of educational institutions. The review suggests that the common focus is to shift teaching, learning and assessment to digital platforms. The chapter, therefore, highlights the absence of engagement with curriculum issues and asks a fundamental curriculum question of: what knowledge is most worthwhile during this COVID-19 influenced extended university closure. The chapter makes an argument to shift the discourse into curriculum spaces to find appropriate responses to the academic disruption of its study programme.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, higher education, curriculum spaces, curriculum responses to higher education closure

*Labby Ramrathan*

# 1 Introduction

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most universities were engaged in curriculum transformation as a response to various drivers. These drivers included changes to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), evolving professional requirements (e.g. Minimum requirements for the Teacher Education Qualifications), decolonisation imperatives brought about by the sustained student protest of 2015/2016, and an increasing presence of online platforms to promote teaching and learning within a learner centred pedagogy. Hence, curriculum transformation had become somewhat of a norm within higher education institutions. As the world is gearing towards the fourth industrial revolution, artificial intelligence is becoming more prominent in our engagement on innovations for teaching, learning, and assessment. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a seemingly new way of life for the immediate and near future. This new way of life has impacted almost every sector of the country, including the education sector. The social distancing demand as a response to curb the rapidly spreading of disease, has prompted several guidelines to be immediately implemented in societies across the world, including total shutdown, except for critical services. In the face of severe lockdown regulations and in the absence of any forms of cure or vaccines, societies are compelled to socially distance as a way of life for a long while to come. No clear indications are available to suggest when such lockdown conditions will become relaxed enough to allow for the kind of social interaction to which we are accustomed. In this period of high levels of uncertainty, it becomes extremely difficult to develop plans for social integrations across all sectors of the economy, and of society. In this respect, education, both school and post-school education, have been touted by some esteemed educationists, amongst them Jonathan Jansen, as the end of the academic year as we know it, suggesting that new insights and new ways of educating the learners and students is needed within this academic year and perhaps beyond. What then are these new insights and new ways being proposed to save the integrity of the academic year?

This chapter reviews suggestions, guidelines, and proposals for teaching, learning, and assessment by institutions, scholars and governing bodies, including the state. The review includes an analysis of documents, notices and training initiatives across higher education institutions, to guide and support staff in developing on-line teaching, learning, and assessment

strategies for continuing the academic year. Documents and media reports that are in the public domain were also reviewed. Through this review of suggestions, guidelines, and proposals, I argue in this chapter, that the focus has largely been on curriculum coverage, use of digital learning platforms, and extension of the academic year. Little focus was given to curriculum issues in terms of addressing a fundamental curriculum question regarding 'what knowledge is most worthwhile?' (Spencer 1884), particularly within the context of COVID-19. I also argue that, despite the sustained focus on curriculum transformation over the past decade within higher education, modes of delivery of existing curriculum became the default line of action. In a previous publication of moving beyond counting the numbers (Ramrathan 2016), I argued for a shift in focus on technical issues like counting the numbers of staff and students that prevailed within the discourses of higher education transformation, and to taking transformation into curriculum spaces. In this chapter, I also argue that we have lost, or are about to lose, yet another opportunity to shift our higher education transformation into curriculum spaces by a failure to introspect, and consider the content of what we teach, and what students should learn within higher education. The focus of what students should learn and who determines what learning should unfold, is more critical now within the context of a global pandemic, where more questions are being asked than answers being given within the high levels of uncertainty that currently exists. The 21st century has been characterised as a period of fast-changing, unpredictable, and often disruptive contextual challenges and opportunities (Marope 2017). COVID-19 is an example of the disruption, fast-changing, and unpredictable events and occurrences that is characteristic of this 21st century.

## 2 Curriculum within Higher Education

While the concept curriculum is widely used within the school education system, it is less prevalent in higher education, largely because concepts like degrees, study programmes, courses, and module content occupy greater expression (Marope, 2017) in this sphere of education. The field of Curriculum Studies remains poorly defined in South Africa (Le Grange 2014), without a generally or universally accepted definition of the concept 'curriculum'. The concept came into the educational discourse through the appropriation of the Latin word *currere,* meaning a racecourse, or a course to follow, and has come to mean a course of study or a plan for learning (Pinar 2004; Le Grange 2010;

2017; Marope 2017). Based on this conception, the Tylerian view of curriculum focusing on the attainment of learning objectives over this course of study or plan for learning (Tyler 1949), became the dominant conception of curriculum and still persists as a powerful influence on school and higher education curriculum. Tyler's (1949) conception of curriculum comprised four domains. These include the aims and objectives domain, the content to be taught, the methods of teaching and the assessment of learning (Le Grange 2014) and corresponds with Tyler's (1949) key curriculum questions which are:

- What educational purposes should the school (higher education programmes) seek to attain?
- What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to help attain these objectives?
- How can these educational experiences be effectively organised?
- How can we determine whether the objectives are being met?

Further scholarship of the discourses in curriculum have expanded the notion of curriculum to include inter-relationships between curriculum, individual, and place (Pinar 2004), ushering in a level of complexity. The complexity associated with more current thinking makes the curriculum both a complex and a controversial endeavour (Pacheco 2009), a concept of complexity which it is difficult to pin a precise meaning, and for which the politics behind curriculum determination is controversial. Pinar (2010) re-introduced the concept *currere* within this complexity as being autobiographical, based on lived experiences with both an inward and an outward reflection and imagination; and in practice, it is temporal, tentative, historical, and social. He argues that curriculum inquiry constitutes a complicated conversation around these constructs.

More recent engagement on curriculum within the context of the 21st century knowledge and skills debates suggests that the concept of the curriculum is entering into more dynamic and responsive discourse. Marope (2017: 15), in his attempts to re-position curriculum within a supra or global discourse for the 21st century, suggests a new definition of curriculum as a 'dynamic and transformative articulation of collective expectations of the purpose, quality, and relevance of education and learning to holistic, inclusive, just, peaceful, and sustainable development, and to the well-being and

fulfillment of current and future generations'. This certainly is a loaded conception of curriculum, suggesting that curriculum is an omnipresent concept that includes transformation, relevance, and inclusiveness of current and future generations of the people. In line with this, Di Giacomo, Fishbein, Monthey and Pack (2013) as cited in Soudien and Harvey (2020), suggest that no single static curriculum will fulfill the growing needs of the changing global education field. These authors maintain that the knowledge, skills, disposition and content will need to be, through critical reflection, adaptable and responsive to innovation.

More relevant to this chapter is a focus on the learning that is located within a curriculum. Several philosophies on teaching and learning have come to influence education, especially school and higher education. Teacher-centred and learner centred approaches to teaching and learning have, in cyclic periods of dominance across decades of education, influenced what happens at sites of teaching and learning, including higher education. Earlier conceptions of learner-centredness included a location, and spheres of influence on the learner. In teacher-dominated periods of teaching and learning, what is taught and how it is taught was largely under the control of the teachers (lecturers). In more recent learner-centred periods of domination, the learner is, once again, placed at the centre of decision-making within a developmental and constructivist framing. At the cutting edge of scholarship on learning, a return to biology has re-introduced the cognitive domains of influence in learning. Both Marope (2017) and Soudien and Harvey (2020) alert us to the leaps made in brain physiology to help us more deeply understand human learning. They argue that neuroscience as a field is progressively shedding light on deep learning, and on deep pedagogies that include creating and learning in rewarding environments so that learners can realise their full potential.

What then does all of this engagement around the curriculum mean to academics within higher education, more especially in the humanities and social sciences domains within the context of the closure of universities due to the novel coronavirus pandemic? Several points emerge for consideration that have largely been avoided through the suggestions, proposals and guidance given to academics in preparing for curriculum coveragem and saving the integrity of the academic year. These include an attention to deep learning and deep pedagogies in a time of complexity, uncertainty, deeply inequitable home environments, advanced technologiesm and the fast pace of change that continues to privilege the elite.

# 3  University Responses to Campus Closures due to the COVID-19 Lockdown Regulations

Currently, all universities are closed due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. This closure of educational institutions comes in response to the national and perhaps global lockdown imperatives that curb the spread of COVID-19. The expected implication is that little or no teaching and learning is currently taking place across higher education institutions. In instances where online and digital teaching is not the norm, academic staff are being asked to prepare for the delivery of their planned curriculum in alternate modes of delivery. The closure of universities is not a new concept within the South African context. Protest actions by students and staff have led to closures of universities due to the rampant destruction of university property, intimidation of non-protesting students and staff, and safety issues. Over the decades, protests have been seen as a mechanism for expressing dissatisfaction with systems and processes and in making explicit demands for radical transformational changes within and beyond the universities arms of control. According to Badat (2015), student protests have become a predictable event, due to their sustained occurrence. He (Badat) refers to this as an organic crisis within the South African higher education landscape. The sustained protest action of students is often accompanied by intimidation, violence, and massive destruction of infrastructure (Badat 2015; Butler-Adam 2015). Badat (2015) goes further by acknowledging these forms of protest, as student assertiveness for their right for quality higher education experiences. It is in this striving for the assertiveness for quality higher education experience that I turn to reflect on the actions proposed or taken, to continue teaching and learning within an extended lockdown situation, that will see universities staying shut for a considerable time to come.

A review of notices to academic staff in response to the broader university closures suggests that the immediate instructions given to staff across university contexts was to exploit the online system to develop teaching, learning and assessment materials, by using the various digital platforms that are currently available, including the exploitation of their own existing learner management systems. This initial reaction by university authorities suggests that they hold curriculum coverage and teaching, learning and assessment as their central concern to save the integrity of the academic year. Subsequent plans for online teaching, learning and assessment were somewhat cautious, as

concerns were being raised regarding issues of access to digital devices, internet connectivity, and social justice issues.

The initial responses are captured in italics, and have been drawn from notices, invitations to staff, and institutional plans. It must be acknowledged that the extracts from these notices, invitations and plans may have been taken out of context with respect to those documents that were presented to staff and as such, may obscure the spectrum of responses of institutions to maintain their academic integrity of the programme design and delivery.

The response to the closure of the University of KwaZulu-Natal commenced with a *call for a review of our current **modes of delivery and assessment strategies** and for innovative and creative approaches to be adopted.* This call focused on creative approaches to modes of delivery and strategies for assessment. Further notices to staff featured only online modes of delivery, and within that strategy, there was a call for innovative and creative ways of teaching and learning through the digital platforms. The School of Education, for example, stipulated a review of the module templates and course outlines and provided guidelines that supported the online teaching, learning and assessment strategy. These guidelines included:

- identify what can be learnt remotely and what cannot;
- individual academics working with colleagues in their Discipline to identify the skills, outcomes and content that need to be covered and how activities will need to be adjusted;
- list all teaching and learning activities that can be achieved remotely; and
- identify materials that you have access to, or can create, to teach remotely.

In these guidelines, the separation of content material into what can be taught and learnt through online technology was privileged. A critical review of curriculum content itself was not the intent. This suggests that a focus on delivery and curriculum coverage was privileged as a response to the university closure. Furthermore, the guidelines do not advise staff on what to do with aspects of the curriculum that cannot be taught remotely through online platforms. Collaboration amongst staff were encouraged in this period of review, suggesting that there may have been opportunities to review what was being taught, and what intended learning was expected.

At the institutional level, invitations to staff to participate in workshops and training sessions focused on enabling teaching effectively with technology, as per the following example: 'UKZN Teaching and Learning Office (UTLO) invites you to participate in The Activated Classroom Teaching (ACT) approach. This online course […] enables academics to **learn how to teach effectively** with technology'.

The institution, through its recovery plan, illuminates the potential challenges of going online for the teaching, learning and assessment of its programme to maintaining the integrity of its programmes and the academic year. In its plan, called *Teaching & Learning Framework Recovery of the Academic Programme 2020,* the university acknowledges that, while it is not immune to the effects of the disease, 'its obligations to both staff and students for the **delivery of** robust lectures and spaces for critical engagement, it will inherently need to relook at **the way we conduct** our business to ensure that students and staff are not prejudiced this year. The chosen pathway was to go digital. Consequently, this requires all of us to **move the academic content of our courses onto virtual platforms** so that the maximum benefit for students and staff is realised – staff can deliver their **mandates** while students can learn'.

Some of the principles underpinning this plan may have slowed the process of going into online teaching, learning, and assessment. For example, the principle of 'Students should be placed at the centre of all decisions taken and should be consulted in whatever solution is proposed; and Equitable and quality access for all students should be foregrounded in our approach', centred the student in plans. In this respect, the institution had to consult with students and ascertain the capacities and capabilities of students to access and engage with online teaching, learning, and assessment.

Centring the students during the lockdown has also spurred a group of concerned academics across the country to put together a document entitled *Public Universities with a Public Conscience: A Proposed Plan for a Social Pedagogy Alternative in the Time of Pandemic*, which calls for a halt to the envisaged plans to go online for teaching, learning, and assessment across all higher education institutions. The document claims as follows: 'Our contextual analysis shows that the current unilateral implementation of online teaching and learning by education institutions will result in an academic disaster and will exacerbate the COVID-19 humanitarian disaster. Neither teaching staff nor students possess the means to make this shift right now. 'Going online'

immediately will simply widen existing inequalities and make meaningful learning impossible for the vast majority of students'. Meaningful learning was of concern by this group of academics, and this concern shifts the discourse into learning domains, rather than a curriculum coverage and teaching methodology domain.

A review across universities in several provinces of South Africa reveals that universities are turning to virtual worlds through various digital technologies to continue with the teaching, learning and assessment processes, whilst recognising that a sizable number of students do not have access to the digital platforms either because of internet connectivity or digital devices. Shoba (2020), in the *Daily Maverick* (17 April 2020 edition), has suggested that 'online teaching and learning has been **touted as the top solution to save the academic year** in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the extended lockdown period', and further adds that challenges of student access and staff competence in developing virtual learning materials has brought about a feeling of anxiousness about its success. Some institutions have engaged with mobile network companies to zero rate access sites. For example, in one of the institutions in the Eastern Cape, a notice was sent to staff and students indicating that 'due to the impact of the COVID-19 on the University's academic year, cellular service providers have offered to zero-rate certain learning websites for all universities. This means a user can access content via their cellular service at no cost'. In another memo sent to its staff, it stated that 'we are working on multiple pathways that range from digital to face-to-face contact, and a blended approach to these extremes, to enable all students to fulfil their study obligations'. In recognition of the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to undermine this academic year, a university in the North West Province in a memo to students, indicated that preparing for online teaching and learning is on-going and that they 'realise that if this **academic year is not salvaged,** it would greatly impact on everyone's lives and, therefore, we have to work together and support each other as best we can, to ensure success at the end of this year'. This memo suggested that collaboration and support amongst staff and students would greatly help in saving the academic year and that online teaching and learning is the mode of delivery that would save the academic year.

From these accounts of responses to university closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that focus was placed on curriculum coverage, protecting the integrity of the academic year, and use of digital technology and

virtual platforms to meet academic obligations. It is also clear that there are several concerns about a rapid transition to the digital platforms for continuing with the academic programme. which include access to reliable internet connectivity, access to and availability of digital devices, social justice issues related to current inequalities and fear of entrenching and expanding such inequalities. There is also a realisation that there are few alternatives, but that these alternatives are dependent upon when and how universities will re-open.

## 4   What does Bringing the Discourse into Curriculum Spaces Mean?

Noting the evolving conceptualisation of curriculum from a course of study to a highly complex intersection of, amongst others, persons, knowledge, learning, context, social, cultural, complicated conversation, dynamic and transformative drivers, it is too simplistic to consider online teaching, learning and assessment as the only possibility to continue with a programme of study or retain its academic integrity. That is, it is possible to take the existing curriculum of a study programme and transform it into an electronic form to enable teaching and learning within a digital platform, free from the disruption and the implications of the disruptions to what we teach and learn within a university context. Drawing from the memos, guidelines and plans that universities had given to their staff and students, it seems that this simplistic solution will be insufficient to ensuring adequate teaching and learning will take place based on curriculum coverage. By asking a fundamental curriculum question of what knowledge is most worthwhile (Spencer 1884) within the context of extended university closure and within the context of a dreadful disease that has brought the entire global population to a near standstill, one would be moving into curriculum spaces. This move would allow for introspection regarding the curriculum that has been planned, the purpose for which it was planned, what was it responding to, and how students should be engaged in is crucial for deep learning of higher education students within a learning programme. By reviewing these questions within the current context of complexity, complicated conversations, dynamism and fast-paced changes that may not always be predictable, like that of the COVID-19 novel virus, then one would be entering into the domain of curriculum space.

There are four possible considerations for curriculum review. The *first* is based on Apple's (2018) simple curriculum questions that he has been posing

across his five decades of work in curriculum studies. Apple points to us as academics by saying that 'rather than simply asking whether students have mastered a particular subject matter and have done well on our all too common tests, we should ask a different set of questions: Whose knowledge is this? How did it become 'official'? What is the relationship between this knowledge and how it is organized [sic] and taught?' (2018: 686). This means that we should be interrogating the curriculum that we teach in our modules by asking these simple but fundamental curriculum questions. These questions then open up spaces to understand and act on education in its complicated connections to the larger society (Apple 2018). These questions are fundamental in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and could illuminate what and how we teach our modules, knowing the broad scale inequalities and injustices that prevail within South Africa, as educational and other responses to the disease have exposed. For example, higher education institutions' plans to go online using digital technologies, has exposed the inequalities amongst students, in that their plans may not reach a significant number of students based on geographical location and socio-economic situations. What we have been doing by focusing on curriculum coverage and preservation of the integrity of the academic year, is that rather than politicising the academic, we are simply academising the political (Apple 2018). This means that we should fundamentally question the very nature of the curriculum that we teach in our modules. Perhaps the question to academics is, whose curriculum are you academising?

The *second* consideration is based on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level descriptors (South African Qualifications Authority, 2011) that guide what and how content is taught and learnt within the programme design. Key to the level descriptors are particular words that distinguished NQF levels within the programme design. For example, the word 'fundamental' is related to the basic introductory learnings at Level 5 on the NQF; 'sound knowledge and understanding' characterises learning at level 6 of the NQF; and 'well-rounded' knowledge characterises learning at the NQF level 7. What do these key descriptive words mean within the discipline and modules that one teaches? An interrogation of the module content using these key level descriptors would then enable one to understand progression competence across the programme design. Through this understanding one can then, in the context of university closures, re-examine at the module content to extract the crucial learnings that will allow for the development of competence

that will enable the student to cope with the curriculum demands of the following year of study. Hence, curriculum coverage may not be necessary within a constricted academic year, due to unforeseen circumstances which seem to characterise higher education studies over the last decade. Rather, what is needed is a focus on key learning within the discipline and module that will enable the student to engage with more complex learning at the next level.

The *third* consideration is to exploit the circumstances of the context. This means that we could use the COVID-19 pandemic as a context through which disciplinary knowledge, skills and means of inquiry could be developed. One could, for example explore the socio-economic influence of COVID-19 on the population of South Africa globally, or determine how social work could be re-imagined from a disease control perspective. The humanitarian aspect of the disease and lockdown could become an opportunity to enhance post-colonial attitudes to humanism. Almost all traditional and emerging discipline learnings and responses could be linked to the COVID-19 pandemic in some way. Hence, it is possible to focus the curriculum on the COVID-19 pandemic as a medium through which to develop critical thinking, inquiry skills, and innovative solutions of problems and challenges faced by society from a disciplinary or multi-disciplinary perspective through a responsive curriculum.

The *fourth* consideration is to exploit the current lockdown situation and extended closure of universities to enhance a student self-study and guided self-study attitude to learning. Students in this context have the potential to develop attitudes and processes to take more responsibility in their learning. All modules have module outlines and students are made familiar with the intended and expected learning. Independent learning is key to higher education studies and lectures constitute an additional resource to enable students' intended learning. The credit bearing system used for engaging in the learning of a module or programme suggest that students engage with approximately 30% of the required engagement time to achieve competence in that module or programme. This means that guided self-study and independent self-study are the main forms of learning, and constitute more than 60% of the required time for learning and demonstrating competence in a unit of learning. Therefore, lectures should not be the major focus of engaging in teaching and learning, but rather, the student ought to take the initiative to engage in learning through guided instructions. Hence, the curriculum needs to be reviewed so as to allow for greater involvement of students in developing their competence expected of the module. Fast-paced changes and increasing access to and

exploitation of the digital platforms are increasingly becoming the norm in the 21$^{st}$ century context (Marope 2017), and as such, pointers to student self-learning should equally become the norm for higher education studies, especially in the context of an exploding body of knowledge available at the fingertips with advanced technology. Learning and recall of the knowledge and skills are not what university education should be in this fast-paced knowledge explosion context. Rather, it ought to be asked how to access such knowledge and skills, innovations in problem-solving and new insights, where there is a need to foreground higher education studies within the context of the 21$^{st}$ century complexities, increasing disruptions to and fragmentation of society broadly conceived, and attendant unpredictability. Hence, traditional teaching of students within higher education is slowly fading, as the digital technology within the fourth industrial revolution increasingly takes its foothold in education and beyond, where students need to take centre stage in what they want to and need to learn.

## 5   Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that, in the context of COVID-19 and beyond, taking into cognisance the disruptive uncertainties that we will continue to experience in this fast-changing world. We need to go back into curriculum spaces to re-ask fundamental curriculum questions on teaching, learning, and assessment. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the extended closure of universities and left all in a quandary as to how to maintain the integrity of the academic year. The chapter noted the immediate response to save the academic year was conversion of teaching, learning, and assessment into digital platforms, without understanding the complexities associated with a deeply unequal and unjust society. Taking this response into consideration, I argued for a shift into the curriculum spaces to find suitable and responsive alternatives, noting that frequent disruptions to higher education studies has been and is likely to continue. The chapter concluded with some suggestions of what might be possible within curriculum spaces to address the challenges of long closures of universities that will have disruptive influence on what is taught, learned, and assessed.

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Professor Labby Ramrathan
School of Education
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban
ramrathanp@ukzn.ac.za