

Time of the Writer Festival from Physical to Virtual Platform: Lessons for Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning during the Time of COVID-19

Nobuhle Ndimande-Hlongwa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9597-8690>

Sakhile Gumede

Siphindile Hlongwa

Abstract

The Centre for Creative Arts at the University of KwaZulu-Natal is a multi-disciplinary arts organization that was established in 1996. Its vision is to contribute to an enabling environment for the flourishing of artistic and cultural expressions, development and exchange. One of the festivals coordinated by the centre is Time of the Writer. This festival aims to celebrate and recognize relevant and outstanding African Writers, create a platform for African writers to engage with their peers on their work for an exchange of cultural and creative experiences, engage book lovers, critics and scholars in KwaZulu-Natal, in dialogue with established international authors on the content of their work and the state of the industry in general. The festival provides young scholars and emerging writers in KwaZulu-Natal with access to expertise. Due to the social distancing and later lockdown pronounced by the President of South Africa in light of the predicament presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Time of the Writer festival 2020 shifted from physical to virtual. COVID-19 is attacking both our local and global society, the people who connect us with our humanity, our artists. This chapter shares the methods used to deliver the virtual Time of the Writer festival. These methods ranged from live recordings, to live sessions on social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, as well as the use

of radio stations. This chapter adopted a case study method. It makes recommendations for methods used to deliver the Time of the Writer virtual festival to be considered in delivering emergency remote teaching and learning in Higher Education Institutions.

Keywords: COVID-19, Remote teaching and learning, Virtual festival, Community of Inquiry, Digital migration.

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a public health concern that requires a large public health response in line with African values of Ubuntu. This pandemic is not only a challenge for the health sector, but for all sectors affected by it. The economy and education are heavily affected by this pandemic, because many countries resorted to a lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus. In December 2019, China identified and notified the global public health community about the emergence of a novel coronavirus among patients at health facilities in the Hubei province of the country, Langba (2020). According to the World Health Organisation (2020), this novel coronavirus was identified as the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and its attendant illness as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The World Health Organization (WHO) later declared this a pandemic on 11 March 2020, as the new coronavirus continued to spread across the globe with devastating outcomes for lives, livelihoods, and economies. In South Africa, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a national state of disaster in terms of the *Disaster Management Act* in his official address to the nation on 15 March 2020. In his address, he said that ‘to encourage social distancing, gatherings of more than 100 people are prohibited’. When the president addressed the nation, we were in the middle of a welcome dinner for all the participants of the Time of the Writer festival that would open the following day. Immediately after the address, it was apparent that a drastic decision was required, whether to cancel the festival or to go virtual. The writers were anxious, as the president had discouraged air travel locally and internationally. After consultation with stakeholders on the morning of 16 March, a decision was taken to migrate the Time of the Writer festival to a virtual platform. This decision diverted the social media strategy of the festival.

This chapter has three main objectives:

- i) firstly, to provide a background to the Centre for Creative Arts and the Time of the Writer festival;
- ii) secondly, to share technical methods used to deliver the virtual Time of the Writer festival including the use of social media; and
- iii) thirdly, to share how these technical methods could be used to deliver emergency remote teaching and learning at institutions of higher education guided by a community of inquiry framework (CoI).

2 Background to the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for Creative Arts and Time of the Writer Festival

The University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for Creative Arts (UKZN-CCA) is a multi-disciplinary arts organization that was established in 1996. Its vision is to contribute to an enabling environment for the flourishing of artistic and cultural expressions, development and exchange. UKZN CCA coordinates four annual hallmark festivals which are the foremost of their kind in Africa and have been the only consistent Arts Festivals in the City of eThekweni/Durban. These festivals are Time of the Writer; Durban International Film Festival; and JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Festival and Poetry Africa. UKZN CCA plays a vital facilitative function as promoter of the arts. It creates platforms for networking and cultural exchanges, acts as a capacity builder, and fulfils goal 3 of the UKZN Strategic plan 2017-2021, which is high-impact Societal and Stakeholder Community Engagement; as well as goal 4, which targets internationalization. UKZN has identified Social Cohesion as one of the four research flagship areas in order to address inequality. Inequality remains a challenge globally as well for South Africa. There is unequal access to resources (Human Rights Commission 2018). In an attempt to achieve equity, UKZN CCA bridges the gap by working with marginalised communities in Durban and neighbouring places.

UKZN CCA is part of a number of cultural networks in Africa involved in dialoguing strategies to promote cultural activities, networking dynamics, information exchange and new forms of Pan-African and international cooperation. This is in line with the vision of the University of KwaZulu-Natal to be a premier university of African scholarship (UKZN

Strategic Plan 2017-2021). The principal aims of UKZN CCA are the production and promotion of arts and cultural activities from within the City of Durban, exposure of different cultures through the arts, provision of creative platforms, performance spaces and economic opportunities for local and international artists and related industries, facilitation of inter/trans-cultural exchange opportunities and network development between South Africa and the world and various other international writers, poets, filmmakers, dancers, choreographers, cultural managers and organizations, the provision of meaningful seminars, training workshops and activity programmes for aspirant local artists and communities, with a key focus on community engagement and development and strategic development of audiences.

The festival that is key to this chapter is the ‘Time of the Writer festival’ (ToW). This festival aims to celebrate and recognize relevant and outstanding African Writers, create a platform for African writers to engage with their peers on their work for an exchange of cultural and creative experiences, engage book lovers, critics and scholars in KwaZulu-Natal in dialogue with established international authors on the content of their work and the state of the industry in general. The festival gives young scholars and emerging writers in KwaZulu-Natal access to expertise. The ToW festival is one of the largest and longest-running literature festivals in Africa. In 2020, the festival chose the theme, ‘*Do you read me?*’. Through this theme, we intended to address and respond to all the social ills we see in our country. Gender-based violence remains a national challenge (Russo & Pirlott 2006; UN 1993; 1995). Writers’ contribution to understanding themselves and one another is important. We cannot deny the importance of creating and maintaining communities in which reading is the norm. It is imperative that as writers we understand one another’s stories. As part of sustaining the status of the city of Durban as the first African UNESCO city of Literature, the ToW festival 2020 was organized in partnership with the Ethekwini Municipality Libraries department in order to deliver a community engagement programme that actively promotes reading and writing. The ToW festival promotes both South African and African writers in the current cultural climate that sees literature as part of a bigger social process around nation building and social cohesion within South Africa and our continent, Africa. This festival has – and continues – to encourage debates and dialogue around all forms of the spoken and written word as part of UKZN CCAs’ agenda to celebrate contemporary culture and histories, both local and international. The ToW festival 2020

featured a diverse gathering of leading novelists, social commentators, activists, playwrights and short story writers, the majority of whom are from South Africa. There were also writers from the USA, Namibia, Uganda, and Ukraine. The ToW festival was delivered virtually from 19-25 March 2020 and became the first virtual literary festival of 2020 (Africainwords 2020). The following section will go into detail, sharing the technical methods used to deliver virtual ToW 2020.

3 Technical Methods Used to Deliver Virtual ToW 2020

This section of the chapter will focus on the technical aspects of the festival by looking closer at the tools that were employed to facilitate the shift from a physical programme to a virtual one. The technical aspects of the project were as at the centre of elements that had to be observed in order to achieve the goals of the festival. This had to be achieved without compromising the quality of the final product. The task at hand was to organise technical equipment for the recording of writers and later publish the videos on the UKZN CCA's various social media platforms, and this exercise had to run concurrently with the live broadcasts. Central to the success of this project was the ability of the team to carry out the plan with maximum precision. It required a schedule for writers and a proper brief on how they will relay information on the screen. The recording place had to be a spacious venue with minimal echo inside, for example, air-con levels had to be adjusted. It had to accommodate branding of the Time of the Writer Festival as well as lighting for equipment set-up.

3.1 Set Up for Recording

It is vital that we share some guidelines to follow in order to achieve an environment best suited to conducting a shoot for interviews or live broadcasts. This is based on our experience during the virtual ToW festival 2020 edition in line with the objectives of this chapter. The guidelines are as follows:

- Set up a day before the recording, if the environment and time allow.
- Establish the background of the set to suit the purpose of the shoot, for example, festival banners.
- Two or more cameras to add different angles for editing.
- Noise should be as minimal as possible.

- Lighting also needs time to set up, not less than two hours at the most.
- Mixer to control the shots from various cameras.
- Equipment used, 2 x monitors, atem box, laptop, hard drive, 3 x tripods, lights and light stands, comms headsets (Wireless headsets used by the camera crew), 3 x camera's, cabling, multi-plugs, headphones, lapel mics. It will differ from each set, depending on the intended outcomes.
- Presenters should be prepared and be made aware that if they make a mistake a re-shoot will be done. This prolongs the session and at times may lead to anxiety.

In an environment where an edit station is set up it will allow for quick editing and re-shooting, if necessary, while the participants are still on the scene. We could not achieve some of these due to the fact that we were working according to a very limited time frame.

3.2 Writers Interviewed for the Festival

We managed to interview about six writers, since most had already gone home and others had to leave early on Monday 16 March. Part of the brief given to them was to talk about their books and highlight the festival's chosen bookseller, which was Ike's Bookshop. Despite the fact that almost all these writers had previous experience in either television or radio, the team had to remind them just before the actual recording how the sequence of events was going to unfold. This entails pointing at the focus camera and giving them a heads-up when cameras had to roll. Few scenes had to be recorded again, because we had less time to prepare and the venue was given to the Centre for Creative Arts to utilise for a few hours. However, we did achieve our intended goals despite the challenges.

3.3 The Use of Social Media for the Virtual Festival

Social media is defined as 'collaborative online applications and technologies that enable participation, connectivity, user-generated content (UGC), sharing of information, and collaboration amongst a community of users' (Henderson & Bowley 2010, 239). Social media applications can be classified, based on the degree of self-presentation/self-disclosure they require, and the social

presence/ media richness they allow, in six categories: collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), blogs, content communities (e.g. YouTube), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft) and virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life) (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Social media provides a wide set of tools and applications for firms and organisations to manage information and knowledge, collaborate with customers, co-create experiences, and enhance the perceived value of the services and products (Cova & Cova 2002; Kaplan & Haenlein 2009; Pasanen & Konu 2016; Sigala 2012).

Instagram and Facebook were the most convenient when the decision to go virtual was announced. The initial idea was to utilise every social media platform available prior to the opening night and during the festival. The framework included live interviews on Twitter, Skype, Facebook and Instagram. Twitter, Instagram and Facebook were used much earlier than the rest of the mediums in order to send press releases, call-outs and interact with key stakeholders, many of whom were part of the reading campaign. Mintel (2013) supports this idea of using social networks as key delivery of marketing channels for events and festivals. Several book launches on Facebook and Instagram afforded audiences an opportunity to interact with the writers in real-time. Skype and Twitter questions and answers also produced a wealth of knowledge that was also beneficial to the festival, the audiences and the wider literary world.

Post-production, the videos were distributed to all the platforms, including Facebook and YouTube. They were produced in mp4 format, simply because it is reliable and it does not lose quality when one has to compress it. Compressing videos can prove to be a challenge, while this type of format is also compatible with various media players such as Windows Media Player and VLC. VLC is a multimedia player which plays most multimedia files, for example DVDs, CDs and streaming. Interesting newspaper articles and video footage created from the radio interviews were posted on the social media channels. The virtual festival has built up an archive of cultural importance, which was also uploaded on YouTube.

3.3.1 Alternative Technologies

There are other options for live streaming and one can buy a device that can connect to popular channels like YouTube. In this instance, one can feed the

video to these channels for broader audiences to access the broadcasted live event. Devices that use SIM cards make it possible and portable to stream in places where there is cell phone coverage. This kind of technology can be used even in the most remote areas of South Africa, including remote areas in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

Overall, the virtual ToW festival 2020 was a success due to the decision to use social media. Any organisation that hoped to make a meaningful impact during COVID-19 had to explore the route of using smart technologies. Research conducted by various scholars such as Fuchs and Schreier (2011), Pitta and Fowler (2005) and Sigala (2012) note the importance of social media applications in customer involvement and the co-creation of new services with them. The link between social, print and broadcast media was a very important aspect of the entire campaign for virtual ToW festival 2020.

4 Methodology

The chapter follows a case study approach. It takes ToW festival 2020 within the Centre for Creative Arts, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa as a case study. There is no desire to generalise the findings. The context of the CCA and indeed the University is unique and there is no intention to generalize findings. The chapter is largely qualitative by nature. The chapter draws on information collected from the delivery of ToW festival 2020. The ToW festival 2020 was identified through purposive sampling. This festival was unique because it was the first virtual literary festival delivered in 2020 during the time of COVID-19. The study was interested in answering the ‘how’ and ‘what’ questions, i.e. how the ToW festival was delivered virtually and what lessons for emergency remote teaching and learning can be derived from the virtual delivery of the festival.

The information for the chapter was collected from various sources. The three authors of the chapter were practically and directly involved in the planning and delivery of the virtual festival. In that way, practical experiences were used as a source of information. The second source of information was institutional websites about the Centre for Creative Arts and other websites that reported about the festival including the publicity report for the ToW festival 2020. Qualitative data analysis was employed. Data collection and data analysis happened concurrently as an ongoing process.

5 Theoretical Framework

The theory adopted in this chapter is the Community of Inquiry Framework. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is a social constructivist model of learning processes in online and blended environments. The framework is built upon three dimensions, namely *teaching*, *social* and *cognitive presences* (Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2000; Garrison 2017; Huang 2015; Huang *et al.* 2018; Picciano 2017). The framework supports online learning environments and activities.

Teaching presence is defined as the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the realization of meaningful learning. This involves the,

- (1) instructional design and organization of the course and activities;
- (2) facilitation of the course and activities; and
- (3) direct instruction (Huang *et al.* 2018).

Social presence refers to the ability to perceive others in an online environment as ‘real’ and the projection of oneself as a real person. Social presence involves open communication, affective expression, and group cohesion (*ibid.*).

Cognitive presence is the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. The ultimate goal of the Community of Inquiry is to build a solid foundation of social presence and teaching presence to stimulate cognitive presence in a course (Garrison *et al.* 2000).

Understanding the CoI framework is an important enabler in establishing remote teaching and learning in South African higher education. Remote teaching and learning are the only viable solutions in order to save the academic year. The use of social media platforms is vital to facilitate remote teaching and learning. Social media may be useful in sharing educational content and in increasing engagement between students and with teachers (Chugh & Ruhi 2018). Whilst it is understood that well-planned online teaching takes over approximately six to nine months and takes two or three iterations before academics are used to the process (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond 2020), emergency remote teaching and learning work in

contrast, because it is a rushed shift to address an emergency, in this case COVID-19, since no physical teaching and learning can take place.

6 Lessons for Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic globally forced many countries to lock down. Institutions of higher learning and schools had to shut down to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In order to save the 2020 academic year, institutions of higher learning across the globe started to rethink teaching along the lines of online learning. The South African Higher Education and Training (DHET) sector had to respond to this emergency. The DHET urgently established a COVID-19 Task Team comprising the Universities South Africa (USAF), the South African College Principals Organisation (SACPO), and Higher Health and Health Experts to coordinate a sector response and collate institutional case management (Nzimande 2020). This task team requested all universities to conduct surveys in order to check their readiness in delivering online teaching and learning. The intention of the surveys was also to identify any institutions that require immediate assistance from the DHET in order to enhance their capability. However, not all the institutions submitted their surveys on time. Few universities such as UCT, Wits, UP, Stellenbosch and UJ reported that they were going to roll out online learning on 20 April 2020 (Khumalo 2020; Hlati 2020). Understanding both the existential and resource inequality of South African Higher Education (Swartz *et al.* 2019) is critical at this time of COVID-19.

The Minister of the DHET, Dr Blaze Nzimande, stated the following in a media statement of 17 April 2020:

It is expected that universities will return to online and remote learning from 4 May 2020. There should be no full return to face-to-face campus activities until the peak of the virus is over, which is projected to be only in September 2020.

The situation in higher education requires that universities immediately shift to remote teaching and learning in order to save the academic year and address teaching and learning obligations. Many universities in South Africa are using learning management systems such as Moodle, Blackboard and Sakai

(Ssekakubo, Suleman & Marsden 2012) in preparation for remote teaching and learning. At the same time, they should adhere to the principle of no-student-left-behind. This section of the chapter looks at the lessons learnt from the Time of the Writer in the delivery of the virtual festival. The festival organizers and the publicity team had four days to prepare and deliver the virtual festival. This was work in emergency mode. Whilst there is a huge difference in the delivery of the festival and delivery of quality higher education, there are lessons to be learnt, especially of the key innovative technologies that could be used to deliver emergency remote teaching and learning.

The CoI framework provides the cognitive presence in addressing the complex ideas and convergent thinking (Huang *et al.* 2018). Anderson (2017) is of the view that with the predominance of the social media available and used today, participants (both teachers and students) have a great many tools that can be used to enhance their social presence beyond the institutional learning management system. An important part of Higher Education is aimed at developing students' understanding, within a particular discipline, of the criteria and values that underpin academic study of that discipline, and these include questions of what constitutes valid knowledge in that subject area (Bates 2019: 48). New technologies need to be tested as universities migrate to emergency online teaching and learning. The form of teaching in emergency remote teaching and learning is an interim change of instructional provision, due to emergency conditions and the purpose is to offer temporary access to instruction (Hodges *et al.* 2020). As universities prepare for emergency remote teaching and learning, one of the lessons from the virtual ToW festival 2020 is that the use of smart technologies is the way forward during COVID-19. In order to migrate digitally and reach out to the many university students, audio recordings are one of the recommended options of delivering the curriculum that should be considered in addition to video recordings. This is the *teaching* and *social* presence in the CoI framework. Students could view these videos during their own study time. This is what Bates (2019) calls a 'flipped classroom'.

Another lesson is that universities may collaborate with various radio stations, both community and commercial stations, in order to provide learning opportunities for students. The Department of Basic Education in KwaZulu-Natal is working with ukhozifm to assist Grade 12 learners. These classes were not necessitated by COVID-19, but have been there for many years. During lockdown, additional time was allocated to these classes to assist learners. This

will be vital, because it will acknowledge the worldview of many African students who come from oral cultures. Whilst we acknowledge arguments such as the one presented by Rosemead (2020) that technology can never replace a well-trained creative teacher, because learning is a social process, we need to embrace digital technologies in difficult times like these presented by COVID-19. The Council of Higher Education (2020) has also lifted restrictions for all programmes they have accredited for contact only so that they are offered, supported and assessed through virtual and online delivery and blended learning approaches.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal has developed an online learning resource known as UKZN Tech Online Portal (UTOP) (<http://utlo.ukzn.ac.za/utop>). This information hub houses Moodle, (<http://utlo.ukzn.ac.za/utop/Moodle>) which is the official learning platform for UKZN. UKZN has Kaltura (<http://utlo.ukzn.ac.za/utop/Kaltura>), which has been linked to Moodle to enhance video capability. UKZN's Technology Enhanced Learning (UTEL) (<https://utel.ukzn.ac.za/>) is also available to assist staff members to prepare for remote teaching and learning. It is this facility that was used for video recordings in order to deliver a virtual ToW 2020. In order to share best practice online, the UKZN Tech Online Forum has been created to enable staff to share digital experience. This forum is vital, because it will be linked to the CHE national repository currently being developed in which instances of good practice, innovations, and materials will be stored and shared with the higher education sector.

In order to respond to emergency remote teaching and learning, blended learning is key to achieving that. This is because there will be complementary teaching and learning approaches integrated into technologies. This will assist universities in terms of learning outcomes to produce graduates who can perform in a technology-driven world. The use of online teaching and learning will equip students with critical digital literacy skills, and address issues of cyber bullying, hate speech, and circulation of false information (Pather 2020). We acknowledge that resources are a challenge for some students, but many universities have been working for many years preparing students for online learning. Some universities have made it a requirement that students should possess a laptop or a tablet in order to succeed from the first year of study. The increase in the number of students supported by NFAS made it possible for these students to own laptops. This is a big commendation for the Department of Higher Education and Training.

7 Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is global. The arts industry is affected negatively across the world. In this chapter, we have reflected on how we were able to stage the first virtual literary festival for 2020. It was a learning experience, and we hope that it will assist other festivals in advance planning. We also hope that some lessons will assist institutions of higher education in their planning for emergency remote teaching and learning. Since online, print and social media were key to delivering the festival. We learnt that consistent posting, sharing and tweeting are essential in order to build a following that is not only growing, but is also actively engaged. This is a recommendation for institutions of higher learning to keep students engaged at all times during this transition period to remote learning. The principle of no-student-left-behind is vital in addressing inequalities that exist in South African Higher Education. The need for additional budgets for online books is critical during this time of COVID-19. Online books could be made available to students and this could be linked to a learning platform adopted by each university. Bookshops and publishing houses also need to consider online books.

The use of Zoom was proposed as another method for offering workshops during the festival. We have seen government departments, broadcasting agencies, and universities use zoom for their meetings. This platform could be recommended for use in supervising postgraduate students. In conclusion, the use of smart technologies as recommended by ToW 2020 is the way forward during COVID-19. If there is a university that has not yet embraced remote learning, COVID-19 is now transforming the teaching and learning landscape in higher education. This calls for teaching and learning approaches to be integrated with technology.

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Professor Nobuhle Ndimande-Hlongwa
Dean of and Head of School
School of Arts
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Howard College & Pietermaritzburg
Durban
Hlongwan1@ukzn.ac.za

Sakhile Gumede
Project Officer
UKZN Centre for Creative Arts
College of Humanities
Durban
Gumdedeg3@ukzn.ac.za

Siphindile Hlongwa
Senior Administrator
UKZN Centre for Creative Arts
College of Humanities
Durban
hlongwas@ukzn.ac.za