De-humanising the Humanities Curriculum: Social Distancing and Virtual Learning in Post COVID-19 Higher Education in South Africa

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Abstract

Since its emergence in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus in the public consciousness the extreme inequalities in many aspects of life and the disabling poverty that characterise our educational landscape. In addition, the pandemic has jolted our identities and shifted our humanity from offline selves to online personae. This paper is a conceptual study that uses desktop methodologies to advance its thesis. As such, it relies on personal reflections, articles, and online reviews to make a pragmatic analysis of the future of the humanities during and in a post COVID-19 era where communication and interaction between humans and society have been disrupted through social distancing and lockdowns. The objectives are to examine the impact of social distance on the humanities curriculum and how virtual learning has mediated distance in the social distance in light of the pandemic. The study also raises questions and considers the critical analyses these require to provide curriculum and educational workers and scholars at large with ways of understanding educational practice, both within and outside of schools, in the wake of the pandemic. The paper builds on Dewey's Engagement Theory, asserting that the future of humanities is threatened if the humanities curriculum does not quickly recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic by re-inventing new strategies for effective teaching and learning.

It concludes by imploring teachers, researchers, and theorists to reconsider their foundational understanding of what counts as pedagogy and of how and where the process of education occurs in the fast-changing society of today.

Keywords: humanities; curriculum; social distance; e-learning; education; higher education

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid response it necessitated has exacerbated the already acute financial stress faced by many universities worldwide. In developing countries such as South Africa, this crisis seriously challenges the sustainability of democratic, affordable education pursuing a public good. In the face of a recession and dwindling revenue streams, universities now face the future with growing angst, if not trepidation. Considerable resources were invested in mitigating the effect of the pandemic on teaching and learning. At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, students were provided with laptops and free data, and staff were trained in using online technology in the switch to the virtual classroom. Ironically, a pandemic that brought death, turmoil, grief and financial woes upon the university community was also the force that galvanised the university's innovation to ensure its survival and maintain the quality and integrity of its teaching and learning processes.

This study posits that the current crisis is also an opportunity to re-imagine the university. It does so by offering a philosophical and practical purview of the humanistic approach in education grounded in a balance between cognitive and affective learning (Firdaus & Mariyat 2017). The pandemic has interrupted the shared experiences of learning, empathy, and human emotional exchanges that form the underlying pedagogical approach to the humanities curriculum. Consequently, the study raises the question: how can the interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogue and reflection that underlie humanistic pedagogy be sustained in the context of social distancing and virtual learning during and in a post COVID-19 pandemic? Pellegrino and Hilton (2015), in *Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the Twenty-First Century,* provide a taxonomy of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that embody the learning characteristics in the humanistic approach to education. Table 1 lists these characteristics.

Table 1: Characteristics of the humanistic approach to education

Interpersonal Skills	Intrapersonal Skills
Communication	Flexibility
Collaboration	Adaptability
Team Work	Artistic and Cultural Appreciation
Cooperation	Personal and Social Responsibility
Coordination	Intercultural competency
Empathy	Appreciation for diversity
Perspective Taking	Capacity for lifelong learning
Trust	Intellectual interest and curiosity
Service Orientation	
Conflict Resolution	
Negotiation	

Source: Pellegrino & Hilton (2015)

However, these interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, forms of dialogue, and reflections are challenged by synchronous learning (when two or more learners are connected simultaneously or in real-time using the same platform or communication channel, for instance, a video conference) and asynchronous learning (when learners access the same material at different times and locations, for instance, using e-learning websites at different points) during the pandemic (Finkelstein 2006). This is because students as human beings are isolated from the physical world's reality at the expense of the virtual. It paves the way for the learning processes to be dominated by the opinions of educators based on content (texts) rather than the 'self' (humanity).

Moreover, online teaching and learning are built from different pedagogical assumptions requiring different pedagogical strategies. The humanities are the branches of knowledge that concern human beings, their history, culture, language, literature, arts, and philosophy. The methodology often includes an analytical and critical method of inquiry. Unlike in the natural, biological and physical sciences, questions and answers in the humanities are mainly subjective. Often there is no one solution to a question, and multiple formulae may be needed to cover all possibilities holistically (Hoffman 2011: 10).

Dewey differentiated between schooling (teaching) and education

(learning). Education, he claimed, should be defined as "that reconstruction or reorganisation of experience [because of remote learning] which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (1998: 76). Although Dewey's paradigm seems to have fallen out of favour, at least as far as current educational policies are concerned (remote learning), his work remains fundamental in many education departments, especially in the domain of humanistic inquiry (Daniel 2020). His philosophy that children (learners), not content, should be the focus of the educational process has left a lasting impression on educators who share in his beliefs and philosophies about education and how children learn most effectively. Humanistic education is oriented to respecting human rights, expressing opinions, developing thinking, and acting per the noble values and humanitarian norms. Thus, the essence of education is a process of humanisation and humanising, which implies that education is the basis of the formation of human personality (Bozkurt & Sharma 2020).

However, according to Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020: 16),

> We … are in a period of transition, a moment when the modes and the technology for cultural reproduction are shifting, this time from print (offline) to electronic (online) environments, which opens new possibilities for freedom as well as oppression.

The study offers instructional paradigms in universities and the possibilities for academics to develop learning that is more flexible in the face of the pandemic and in light of the new experiences both within and outside schools, particularly in the domain of humanistic inquiry.

This paper is divided into three sections. Firstly, it discusses the humanities curriculum in the digital age in higher education. It provides a background for understanding the transformative stages of the humanities curriculum in teaching and learning and how the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a humanistic shift from offline selves to online personae. Secondly, it analyses the impact of learning online during the lockdown period on teaching and learning of practical-oriented disciplines in the humanities. Thirdly, it discusses the Zoom® platform as an online teaching tool, especially in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the humanities curriculum. The study concludes by drawing findings from the three sections to make recommendations for the humanities curriculum and

how students and higher education teachers can use it to cope in a post COVID-19 era in Africa.

2 Reducing the Distance in Social Distance: The Humanities Curriculum and Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

According to Stenhouse (2015: 155), Humanities is the integrated study of history, literature, language, philosophy, music, theatre, the visual arts, and dance.

The humanities curriculum emphasises the development of critical thinking, creativity and the rights and responsibilities of the individual in society. It allows for interpersonal and intrapersonal learning. Students in the humanities explore aspects of human nature (physical, psychological, social, aesthetics and spiritual), human behaviour (examining ways individuals explore, think, and lead) and human ideals (the pursuit of truth, love, justice and beauty) (Stenhouse 2015). The humanities curriculum derives appropriate learning activities from human nature, behaviour and ideals. Although all learning activities are appropriate for teaching humanities, the most favourable activities require students to be active in the learning process: examining problems, appreciating and engaging in artistic endeavours, and confronting ethical and moral issues.

Most importantly, the humanities curriculum is characterised by its interdisciplinary focus, arts emphasis, cultural diversity and personal values. These combine to embody the teaching and learning processes in the curriculum, both in the assessment methods and learning outcomes (LOs). Table 2 presents both the assessment and learning outcomes of humanistic education.

Table 2: Assessment and learning outcomes of humanistic education

Appropriate forms of assessment in the humanities	Desired outcomes for students in the humanities
• Use of broad knowledge	• Use of and strong command of knowledge

• Use of knowledge and opinions contextually • Reasoned thinking and behaviour • Recognition and use of nuance • Recognition and appreciation of interrelationships among disciplines • Development and use of personal criteria for inter-relationships and criticism	• Use of knowledge to guide their behaviour • Communicate and be persuasive about their knowledge • Recognise enduring human problems • Use their knowledge to inform their involving system of values • Be culturally sensitive in their host nation • Use their knowledge to improve their lives and the lives of others

Source: Flinders & Thornton 2018

From the above, it becomes pertinent to ask: how can the humanities and its curriculum adapt to the era of the COVID-19 pandemic? How would the humanities ensure that its curriculum sustains its pedagogical approaches in view of the abrupt shift to virtual learning? How would the humanities develop new pedagogical approaches that would synergise its relationship with online learning and the prevailing odds that characterise it?

Studies such as those by Ali (2020), Bozkurt and Sharma (2020), Lowenthal *et al*. (2020), amongst others, demonstrate the overwhelming experiences of university academics and students in utilising the benefits of the online experience to reshape and re-organise their day-to-day activities. The constantly changing activities brought about by the pandemic have constrained the desire to move totally to online teaching, learning and interaction.

The traditional school system focuses heavily on teaching students the 'hard skills' (the measurable abilities such as course content tested by exams). Meanwhile, the 'soft skills' (the qualities and traits that help students develop as critical thinkers) are usually learned indirectly. However, online learning is

more content-oriented; hence, it disadvantages the value of negotiated learning, characteristic of humanistic approaches. Dewey's paradigm is a critique of online learning because it is based on the exchange of materials (texts and content) without paying attention to the holistic welfare of the students. The humanistic approach views human behaviour as motivated mainly by an innate drive towards growth that prompts the fulfilment of one's unique potential and to achieve an ideal condition known as self-actualization (Douglas 2015). For example, Chris Staley, a distinguished professor of art, and Heather McCune Bruhn, an assistant professor of art history at Pennsylvania State University, have been grappling with the shift of their hands-on art education after transitioning to online platforms. Staley was teaching a class that involved touching and shaping clay, and he explained that most students do not have access to clay or clay equipment at home. For Staley, the change raised many questions:

> "I had to ask myself, How can I make this a viable and meaningful experience?" Staley said. "How do you touch people's souls? When you are shaping the clay, you are shaping what you like and what you want to express. It was a challenge to try and create a new dynamic while making the class as meaningful as possible" (Penn State News, 2020).

Similar challenges may be faced in dance classes, art and project work that require intimate cooperation and collective synergies that are impaired by social distance when mediated through technology. Ali (2020) notes that success in online learning is determined by the extent to which the instructor and the institution can provide appropriate structures and the appropriate quantity and quality of dialogue between instructor and learner, considering the extent of the learner's autonomy. For this to occur, it must be noted that some of the students or learners, as the case may be, are already confronted with challenges such as financial constraints, internet connectivity, and lack of media-enabled appliances like android phones and laptops (Abubakar 2015). Therefore, the humanities must be humane in understanding the discrepancies underneath the students' experiences by ensuring that teachers develop flexible pedagogical approaches. The pedagogies, we argue, should encompass a structured system that respects institutional regulations and is considerate of students' needs. The humanities must endeavour to compensate

for online learning with compassion derived from a constant reminder of 'others' and not just the 'self'. The COVID-19 pandemic has already questioned man's sovereignty, and reducing the potential that this holds is to recollect the human essence in a digital divide quickly.

Support for the premise that instructors can lessen transactional distance by developing dialogue and structure that match learners' needs and abilities to be autonomous comes from Daniel (2020). According to him, instructors concluded that when learners receive guidance through a high degree of course structure and dialogue, there is a low level of transactional distance. However, the distance within social distance in the pandemic is reduced with the online experience because it offers another reasonable dimension that advantages the humanities. Broadly, such distance learning practices significantly reduce expenses related to transportation, lunch money and course materials. With recent taxi fare increases announced in South Africa and a 30% unemployment rate, there is a great need for a creative synergy of online learning with humanities pedagogy and curriculum structure. The questions that must be asked are: how do we maintain personal connections with vulnerable students in an era of lockdowns and social distancing, and how do we approach equity issues and prepare instruction for diverse learners on online platforms?

3 Learning Online in Lockdown: COVID-19 and the Humanities Curriculum

Synchronous and text-based asynchronous learning have emerged and are commonly used in online courses, especially in the context of lockdown in the COVID-19 pandemic (McBrien, Cheng & Jones 2009). However, it can be challenging to maintain student engagement in text-based discussions week after week; these discussions can get tedious and monotonous over time (Lane 2011). As noted by Dewey (1998), text based learning is content-driven, thus making it teacher-focused instead of student-centred. Learning online in lockdown isolates students' learning senses, like intuition, emotions, spontaneity, and concentration. Thus, this challenges the humanities' approach in learning as it relates to its assessment and learning outcomes.

The humanities approach to teaching and learning is centred around problem-based learning, reflection, dialogue, and engagement. Problem-based learning (PBL) starts learning with problems for students to solve, discuss,

and dissect. It is considered a professional preparation strategy that is multi-faceted and cross-disciplinary. With PBL, students learn concepts, theories, strategies, terms, and paradigms to assist them in finding solutions (Hoffman 2011).

We argue here that learning online and in the context of lockdown disrupts the contextual humanist approach to learning. Learning in the context of physical isolation removes the possibilities inherent in the humanistic approach to education. According to Freire, learners must understand their reality as part of their learning activity. However, lockdown makes it difficult to inter-relate with reality (Gerhardt 2000). For Freire, the individual must form himself rather than be formed (and online learning forms an individual within the strictures of virtual beings than human beings). Therefore, two valid points emerge from the argument on the imperative of learning online under lockdown conditions, paradoxical to the humanistic approach to learning. The first is that learning online enhances self-directed learning, thus encouraging individual reflection. However, learning online in the context of lockdown enhances self-directed learning but allows the learning process to be isolated in the context of text and content. Secondly, when COVID-19 abruptly shut down in-person teaching, there was a natural rush towards synchronous video. However, informed by the experience of teaching blended and online courses and prior research (Lowenthal *et al*. 2020), we argue that using asynchronous video could be a way for the humanities to maintain connection and engagement with students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students can actively participate in the asynchronous video discussions and appreciate the ability to see and hear their instructors and peers conveniently.

Engagement Theory calls for learners to be actively engaged in meaningful tasks for effective learning to occur. Dewey thought that effective education came primarily through social interactions and that the school setting should be considered a social institution (Flinders & Thornton 2018). He considered education a "process of living and not a preparation for future living" (Flinders & Thornton 2018:35; Gutek 2015). It requires all learning to have three significant characteristics: collaboration, a problem-based approach, and authenticity. Dewey has been recognised as the father of progressive education for more than fifty years, advocating social learning (Slaughter 2009). Although his ideas have looked very different, they promote student engagement in classrooms through technology, especially in online learning and social distancing.

On the one hand, as noted by Slaughter (2009 :16), "our world today has become the electronic world"; technology is now the driver of the social lives of students, and its use is an effective way to promote student engagement, resulting in a passion for lifelong learning. On the other hand, teachers are responsible for providing a new level of relevant, effective, and socially engaging instruction for students (Flinders & Thornton 2018). Using tools such as cell phones, texting, instant messaging, chat rooms, and wikis, teachers can instruct students using the tools they are already comfortable with to effectively disperse information and academic content (Slaughter 2009). By designing instruction to meet the social needs of students through the use of appropriately aligned technology, Dewey's social learning theory is evident in these classrooms.

Therefore, Dewey's theory is eclectic in orientation, advocating a multi-disciplinary approach to optimise learning. It is also an appropriate theoretical foundation for the humanities, especially during lockdown and online teaching and learning. However, for meaningful engagement to occur, Chickering and Gamson (2007:17) provide seven principles based on good practice: It,

- encourages contact between students and faculty,
- develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,
- uses active learning techniques,
- gives students prompt feedback,
- emphasises time on task,
- communicates high expectations,
- respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

We suggest that modelling these principles onto online learning in the humanities makes for exemplary pedagogy.

Purely lecturing, in which the implicit assumption is that the students are empty vessels that need to be filled with knowledge, is inappropriate in the online setting. Much more can be gained from a highly interactive environment where students can exert some control over their learning and co-construct meaning within a collaborative framework. This portends a sustainable humanistic pedagogy combining both online and practical learning regulated by institutional frameworks and national guidelines.

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET 2020) has committed itself to support higher institutions, including the humanities, to go online. According to the task team report:

> As a department, we are engaging with all our universities and colleges on pursuing online learning modalities where possible, whilst also looking at the possibility of using readily available study guides for the trimester and semester programmes and a structured catch-up programme for the annual National Curriculum (Vocational) programmes (DHET 2020).

The task team's report also aims to ensure that the academic session of 2020 is completed online to avoid an entirely disrupted year. The impact is that there would be a loss of quality and trust between lecturers and students (Bach, Haynes & Smith 2016). According to Bach *et al.* (2016), the focus would be on fulfilling the academic calendar at the expense of humanities curriculum disciplines like drama, arts and culture, performance studies, teacher education, and other arts that require practical demonstrations as a teaching, learning and assessment process. The humanities must quickly reconsider its approach in view of the regulations to confront this challenge by integrating mixed methods and a blended approach of teaching and learning to meet the imperative. Platforms such as Zoom serve as mediated platforms to bridge the divide.

4 The Zoom Platform and its Impact on the Humanities Curriculum during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Higher Education

Zoom is a web-based video conferencing or media platform that allows users to meet online to collaborate on projects and share or annotate one another's screen (McBrien *et al*. 2009). The platform has played a mediated role in the COVID-19 pandemic as an online teaching and learning platform across higher education institutions in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. The humanities serve as a wonderful, fertile ground for developing online education because of the multiple venues to present content. For example, in a fine arts course, virtual tours of museums and other cultural venues assist students in learning about artistic forms and presentations. The staid, written

form of the traditional classroom can give way to audio clips played over Zoom. Speeches by Nelson Mandela, for example, when viewed in context, are much more graphic, imparting a sense of occasion and patriotic drama. Zoom can also serve as a medium of decolonisation. For example, students can appreciate body language, the nuances of pitch, rhythm and audience participation in oral folk tales, traditional songs and verse.

With Zoom, the written text, in this instance, transforms into verbal art. Other modes include audio lectures, videos, animation, simulations, music and sound clips, visual graphic presentations, and virtual tours.

As noted earlier, the humanities must take from the new experience brought about by COVID-19 that online learning can accelerate self-directed learning. Hence, new pedagogical approaches would require a sharp transition from surface to deep learning. Therefore, we suggest that the humanities use a conversational style combined with a rigorous academic approach. This conversational style will compensate for any feelings of remoteness and make online learning an exciting forum in which real people converse about mutually fascinating ideas. The initial challenge for classroom instructors is translating their teaching methods into an online environment. Lane (2011:19) observed, "Professional development thus takes on a different direction for online instructors". In addition to attending conferences and reading articles in their discipline, they must "attend" and "read" the web to become accustomed to their new classroom. This "serious play," the time spent exploring the web, trying out programs and websites, is done with teaching in mind. For example, collecting articles and blog posts in their discipline can create a convenient list of resources while also providing the experience of social bookmarking, which students could do as part of the class (Lane 2011). These approaches will reduce the distance in the social distance in humanistic studies and recreate a new culture for university academics by guaranteeing some sense of trust for learning to thrive in a post-COVID-19 era.

Therefore, for teaching and learning to take place effectively in a socially engaging atmosphere using Zoom and other online platforms during and post the COVID-19 pandemic, instructors and educators should adopt a blended teaching and learning approach. However, one crucial and reoccurring factor affecting the success of blended learning is students' sense of belonging to a community of learners. It can be addressed by involving and assigning students to mixed ability grouping/learning sets to work on online tasks, which may encourage peer learning due to the nature of ability grouping

(Su 2020). Additionally, academics need to be present in the learning journeys of students. This does not always need to be synchronous and may involve activities such as engagement with students' contribution to the online tasks and providing regular office hours either virtually via Zoom or in-person (if circumstances allow).

It is imperative to note that in designing and implementing a successful inclusive blended online learning that is useful for the humanities curriculum, the university needs to consider: support for students with LSP, the digital divide, student and staff digital literacy development, the nature of the degree subjects and level of learning, availability of the online learning resources, and a review of existing course assessments for online delivery (Mazuro & Rao 2020). Furthermore, suppose educators decide to adopt blended learning or complete online teaching for the new academic year post-COVID-19 era. In that case, course-level preparation may need to start earlier to adopt a more proactive rather than reactive pedagogical approach for a successful online experience, especially for the humanities curriculum.

So far, we have achieved three things. This paper discusses the COVID-19 pandemic and how it impacts the humanities curriculum. It further discusses the humanities curriculum and how the digital age and the COVID-19 pandemic redefined human activities, thus impacting the humanities curriculum. The impact of social distance and lockdown was also discussed in terms of how it impacts the humanities. A discussion followed on Zoom as a platform for online teaching and learning and its impact on this curriculum. Therefore, the chapter draws upon the discussions in the sections of this chapter to make three recommendations.

5   Recommendations

Firstly, university lecturers must serve as good facilitators: by encouraging discussion through empathy and careful listening, by showing expertise to stimulate rather than overwhelm students, by maintaining authority in the class over issues such as proper conduct and deadlines of submissions, and by being a socialising agent with connections to the broader academic community.

Secondly, with the massification of education, the pandemic might be the impetus to embrace the future boldly. The future of the traditional university, logistically, is in doubt. With the advance of modern technology,

educational institutions are changing how they teach and learn. Given the sheer numbers, increasing costs and scale, the modern university will most likely be an online university with a global reach, which would signify a paradigm shift away from élitism in education to genuine democratisation. The pandemic must be a bedrock to build affordable, quality online education for a global citizenry.

Finally, we flag the issue of cyber security, which has exposed the vulnerability of the Zoom application. End-to-end encryption is vital to ensure privacy and the integrity of online learning. Offensive imagery and slurs, known as Zoom bombing, have disrupted virtual classrooms, and the problem persists; it deserves attention.

6   Conclusion

The very nature of humanities studies demands social interaction, the sharing of ideas and collective interaction with people. The Zoom platform and other learning technologies allow lecturers to create rich experiences in their online classes and ameliorate the isolation inherent in remote learning.

The universities' willingness to provide tools and reduce the digital divide in South Africa attest to their view that online learning is about more than just technology; it is about offering support to those who teach and those who learn. This assistive mindset is critical to our short and long-term recovery from the pandemic's adverse effects. The essence of online learning should be focused on providing flexibility and accessibility to all within higher education institutions, enabling students to reach greater heights and not be limited by a predetermined set of circumstances.

This global pandemic has taught us that the importance of online flexibility is critical for the sustainment of education and our overall well-being. We should all take this time to assess the disciplines in the humanities and look for innovative and strategic methods to advance deep learning and re-purpose the curriculum to synchronise with the possibilities of online technology. Opening our minds while our doors remain closed will provide deeper, immersive learning opportunities as we embrace the future. Finally, teachers, researchers, and theorists must reconsider their foundational understanding of what counts as pedagogy in the humanities in the light of the affordances of the virtual classroom and the pandemic.

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