Using Emoticons to Reduce Transactional Distance: Navigating the Contextual Complexities of COVID-19 Imposed Virtual Learning Spaces

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Abstract

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa has forcibly transformed higher education spaces. Without prior notice, universities have been plunged into a new trajectory where they had to adapt or lose the academic year. Institutions of higher learning have been continuously re-prioritising, and the universal strategy has been for institutions to scramble for online presence. However, online presence, that is, development of technical, curricular and infrastructural support to anchor online teaching, is not in itself a panacea to the myriad challenges of remote instruction. This chapter analyses the finer details of online teaching using Blackboard and WhatsApp online learning spaces. It interrogates the use of emoticons to reduce transactional distance in virtual learning spaces. We posit that emoticons bridge the gap and assist students in navigating the contextual complexities of COVID-19 imposed virtual learning spaces. Using multimodal discourse analysis as a theoretical lens, we problematise the idiosyncrasies and nuances of electronically mediated communication. In what we call COVID-19 settings and COVID-19 mode, students gravitate towards WhatsApp platforms where they can utilise emoticons to enhance their exchanges with the instructor and fellow students. The pervasive gravitation towards the use of emoticons to represent emotional and personality nuances as found in face-to-face interaction, is indicative of an

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inherent propensity to reduce the transactional distance in online learning. Students may become unresponsive due to the transactional distance online. Therefore, this chapter underscores the need to adopt and integrate social media platforms in contextually applicable situations in an effort to interface and harness their power in support of online learning in electronically mediated communication. The physical, emotional and psychological distance involved in online learning is potentially isolating, hence students prefer WhatsApp with its voice notes and video calls, in search of the immediacy, voice, face, emotion and humanity that assures authentic feedback. Using the student agency reflected in the use of emoticons in learning, we theorise the re-learning of what we term a Digital Dialogic Pedagogy to empower Transition Teams to implement online learning effectively. We posit that the humanity of emoticons mediates and closes the gap and distance between content, instructor and learner, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which humanity has been redefined.

Keywords: COVID-19, online learning, emoticons, transactional distance, Blackboard, WhatsApp, humanity, Digital Dialogic Pedagogy

1 Introduction and Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed higher education in Africa, redirecting the trajectory of universities. Universities, just like businesses, have had to adapt to the new normal in order for them to save the academic year. Online presence has been central to the adaptation process. Virtual learning, also known variously as remote learning, online learning and e-Learning, has been widely adopted in institutions of higher learning in non-emergency situations (Garrison 2016; Hoffman 2018), and recently, as a global response to COVID-19, despite scant research on the internal processes involved.

Institutions were rendered vulnerable by the COVID-19 pandemic after in-person, on-campus instruction was rendered unsafe and impossible by the declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020 (WHO 2020). To obviate a disaster precipitated by the unprecedented closure of institutions, online learning modalities had to commence at the start of the pandemic in South Africa. The pandemic scrambled priorities, and consequently, rethinking, realignment and recalibration of

values and priorities stopped being an option and became a necessity. COVID-19 spurred panic reminiscent of the Black Death in the Middle Ages. Unlike the Spanish Flu of 1918-1920, the Asian flu of 1956-1958, or Swine flu in 2009, COVID-19 triggered unprecedented solidarity, starting with social distancing with variations across nations, escalating to total lockdowns and shutting down of economies, as never before experienced globally.

Audrey Azoulay (2020), the Director General of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), is on record decrying the monumental disruption that educational institutions witnessed on a large scale globally. Due to the unprecedented disruptions, basic and higher education institutions had to shut down for the safety of all stakeholders, key of which is the student. Unexpectedly and inevitably so, institutions and individuals had to migrate their thinking from routine ordinary thinking to the COVID-19 mode, in which emergency decisions were made cautiously, as their impact was certainly set to change the course of history for all those involved. From the high echelons of educational administration, the promotion of online education has been an unequivocal decision (UNESCO 2020).

A number of universities globally such as Harvard, Yale, Cambridge and universities in South Africa were already utilising online spaces alongside face-to-face instruction prior to the COVID-19 emergency. However, research indicates that migrating entirely from traditional to virtual classrooms is a huge step that requires elaborate planning, significant fiscal and human resource investment, as well as concerted efforts from stakeholders (Picciano 2017; Yang & Li 2018; Filius *et al.* 2019; Bao 2020). Notably, online presence, that is, the development of technical, curricular and infrastructural support to anchor online teaching, is not in itself a panacea to the myriad challenges of virtual pedagogy. In the backdrop of inevitable COVID-19 induced migration of learning from brick-and-mortar, on-campus, in-person to virtual learning, this chapter analyses the finer details of teaching and learning in online spaces, particularly student-lecturer interaction in the COVID-19 crisis. It interrogates the use of emoticons as communication strategies to reduce transactional distance, which is a hindrance in virtual learning spaces.

Online learning, by nature, causes a sense of isolation, detachment and uncertainty. The limitation is in that while institutions grappled with the immediate need of transferring the physical orientation of learning space from brick-and-mortar to virtual in response to COVID-19, there are critical underlying issues that characterised the new normal, and yet were relegated to

the background. Issues pertaining to actual student learning, cognitive processing and learner variability in virtual classrooms became obscured. Institutions did not immediately focus on augmenting or transforming teaching; instead, they rapidly focused on changing the method of delivery, shifting from brick and mortar to virtual. Prudent as this reaction was, it has some inherent challenges. Foremost is what we observe to be the challenge of creating virtual schools before equipping the learners and teachers with the necessary skills and tools to navigate the available online spaces effectively for optimal intellectual development and positive learning outcomes, emancipation and social progression.

2 Literature Review: COVID-19 and Online Learning Spaces

UNESCO (2020) states that over 1,5 billion learners were affected by COVID-19, related institution closures in 165 countries. Both UNESCO (2020) and WHO (2020) acknowledge that higher education institutions have nowhere else to run to for relief and survival, except online. Thirty million learners across 3000 tertiary institutions in mainland China, Italy, Singapore and Iran, rushed to establish online teaching in the wake of COVID-19 (Bao 2020; UNESCO 2020). The same happened in South Africa, where higher education institutions migrated fully online, including those in spaces of rurality serving a predominantly marginalised population. To provide background on the question of online learning, we refer to a forecast report on internet connectivity in Africa. The report indicated that the unique facets of Africa, and the diversity of languages and culture, called on individual countries to develop targeted plans for online content development as opposed to consuming content from western markets (Adkins 2011). While lecturers are skilled in teaching and in classroom management, there is consensus in research indicating that they are not competent or trained in the design of effective digital curricula (CREDO 2015). A four-year study by the Stanford University Centre for Research on Educational Outcomes indicates that competence in instructional practices does not translate to competence in digital curriculum design (CREDO 2015). Furthermore, the background that flags issues of contention is that existing global trends of knowledge and skills transfer by institutions of higher learning have been criticised comprehensively. Higher education continues to gain notoriety for instrumentalising, professionalising, vocationalising, corporatising and technologising education

(Thomson 2001: 244). This gravitation towards a commercial academy has been criticised in epistemological and ontological terms (Bourdieu 1998; Dall'Alba & Barnacle 2007).

Technologising higher education comes with huge investments. However, immense investments in technology do not always result in pedagogically successful students (Stanford & Bowers 2008). According to several studies from the Community College Research Centre at Teachers College, Columbia University, low-income, academically underprepared and rural students fare badly in online learning (Capra 2013). While acknowledging that traditional face-to-face learning has its drawbacks, it is important to note that the nature and design of online course material seem to amplify the tedium associated with regimented learning. A huge workload resulting from online tasks simply fails to provide opportunities for social and cognitive engagement, critical thinking or evaluation, as there is inadequate guidance (Capra 2013). This is in line with the concerns of this chapter, in which students seek ways of reducing transactional distance to break out of the tedious and sterile online lecture note-posts, PowerPoint presentations, quizzes and superficial discussion forums.

A Times Higher Education (2018) survey predicted that by 2030, a significant number of prestigious universities will have migrated their courses fully online. However, comparing digital and on-campus, in-person and contact learning remains a source of much ambivalence.

Online learning has numerous benefits on the learner. Research done by Piciano (2017) indicates that students who are exposed to, and subsequently engage in online learning, tend to be intrinsically motivated to learn, are better organised self-starters and can initiate and complete tasks without supervision. However, amid these benefits there are challenges.

2.1 COVID-19 and the Digital Divide in South Africa

It is important to discuss COVID-19 in light of the digital divide in South Africa briefly. Reports on poverty and gross inequalities in South Africa indicate that approximately 56% of South Africans live on less than R41 per day (Duncan-Williams 2020). Access to information technologies largely depends on affordability. However, with the yawning gap between the haves and the have-nots, the unprecedented and unanimous gravitation towards online learning resulting from COVID-19 had inherent challenges. In the wake

of COVID-19, Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande was quick to indicate that no student would be left behind in the adoption of emergency online learning (Dlulane 2020). In tandem with the Minister's proposal of restructuring the academic calendar, Head of Universities SA Professor Ahmed Bawa also indicated that the underlying principle was that every student should have a fair opportunity of completing the academic year: no student should be left behind (Asma 2020). Cognisant of the digital divide in South Africa, UNICEF South Africa launched the #Love2Learn campaign to encourage learners to learn and be creative during lockdown (UNICEF 2020). Apart from the challenges of access, there lies a subtle yet critical challenge of an epistemological nature that we explore in this chapter.

While proponents of online learning present it as a seemingly straightforward and seamless process, the reality is that it is fraught with complexity. Although it is an undebatable and inescapable reality that virtual learning has been a lifesaver and a practical option in the COVID-19 situation (Mhlanga & Moloi 2020), it should, however, be noted that the process of online learning comes with significant costs on the user, in this case, the student, who is the fundamental stakeholder. Edmundson (2012), a Professor of English at the University of Virginia, stated that online teaching made intellectual life more sterile and more abstract than it already was. While this view may seem extreme and exaggerated, the reality is that for students to access online content, consume it, participate in online activities, they usually have to remove themselves from real-life relationships and situations. In the current COVID-19 situation, the students need to seclude themselves, in COVID-19 settings; they need to isolate in some kind of quasi-quarantine where there is total concentration, flawless connectivity and a conducive atmosphere to learning.

One logical assumption is that millennials, (also called the net age or digital natives) for whom the internet is more of a home than a medium, and for whom status updates are a way of life, find online learning satisfying. On the contrary, research indicates that online learning is impersonal and isolating even for the digitised generation. High rates of failure and attrition have been found to be a direct consequence of student isolation (Morris 2009). Although online teaching platforms have discussion boards, these are sterile, academic, and involve dry conversations coupled with a level of social anonymity offering limited opportunities for humane dialogue and reflection (Aragon & Johnson 2008; Duncan & Bartnett 2009). Evidently, the socio-emotional

aspect of student learning is neglected in the preoccupation with academic conventions that isolate the learner. Of the myriad limitations of online learning, we focused on interaction and communication as pillars of the entire learning process.

2.2 Emoticons as Paralinguistic Markers

The aspect of online interaction introduces the use of emoticons or emotion icons in learning spaces. Research into the history of emoticons indicates that emoticons started as text-based and the innovation developed into graphical emoticons. The term 'emoticon' was added to the dictionary in 2001 as official internet lingo (Warren & Macalpine 2014). The most common emoticon is the smiley face. Artist Harvey Ball created the first smiley face in 1963. The smiley visually looks like a yellow circular button with two black dots representing the eyes and showing the curve of a mouth. The artist created the smiley symbol for an insurance company that was conducting a campaign. The objective of the campaign was to raise the morale and spirits of its employees. As it turned out, the concept worked and the smiley became popular inspiring the creation of subsequent emoticons for various emotion representation (Tomic, Martinez & Vrbanec 2013). The smiley symbol was trademarked in 1968, in London. This original idea of the smiley face as a morale booster is quite relevant to this study, as we note that online learning is emotionally sterile in its academic endeavor and technical medium. Vandergriff (2013) advances the view of emoticons as affiliate strategies employed by communication participants to build rapport. In a similar thread of thought, Park *et al.* (2013) observe that emoticons are not necessarily limited to emotion specific references, but rather are in themselves representative of socio-cultural norms with varying meanings. Among the limitations of virtual learning, is the obvious challenge presented by the absence of non-verbal and paralinguistic effects such as body language, gestures, eye contact, gaze, intonation and word stress. These aspects are replaced by emoticon use as students strive for satisfaction and optimum benefit in their communication encounters with course instructors.

Online learning, like traditional face-to-face learning, depends on robust communication between technology, instructor and learner. The three constituents present a complex triad in virtual interaction in which we see multimodality and collaborative online learning in a dynamic interface. Following Kendon (2004), we view communication as an embodied, multimodal

system where the visual and audio modalities are woven and integrated intricately to convey meaning successfully. In essence, the non-verbal components of communication such as tone, pitch, gestures and emoticons, which we theorise as *digital gesticulation*, are integral aspects of speech and language itself (Bavelas 1994; Rossinni 2011). This perspective of the non-verbal or paralinguistic as important aspects of communication underpins our objective of theorising the re-learning of virtual classroom practice drawing from emoticon use in communication threads by students.

There is an ongoing debate surrounding emoticon use in formal learning spaces. Marder, Houghton, Erz, Harris & Javornik (2019) state that emoticon use is a double-edged sword, with the advantage of creating positive impressions and warmth amongst the students but also possibly risking the perception of the sender as incompetent. In their experimental study with university students evaluating university staff on personality and competencies depending on the use of emoticons in communication, Marder *et al.* (2019) conclude that the benefits of emoticon use far outweigh the perceived risks. Essentially, the rigidity around emoticon use in higher education, and hesitancy of staff in the adoption of this informal mode of communication symbolises the fossilization of prestigious linguistic norms (Berman 2006). In this chapter, we perceive emoticons as non-verbal proxies that approximate and simulate face-to-face communication, thus introducing an element of humanity into an otherwise rigid exchange.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The chapter is anchored on concepts of Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Online Collaborative Learning. Using Multimodal Discourse Analysis as a theoretical lens, we problematise the idiosyncrasies and nuances of electronically mediated communication. Multimodal Discourse Analysis is theoretically grounded on Systemic Functional Linguistics Theory that was developed by Michael Halliday. Multimodality is information exchange that is facilitated and realised using multiple sensing channels or modes. In essence, multimodality is a diverse concept that has been used broadly in teaching and learning. Jewitt and Kress (2003) view multimodality as an aspect of social semiotics whereby different modes of communication converge in a cross-cultural context. Further, multimodality is premised on the notion that apart from language, there are other semiotic systems that contribute to meaning making (Jewitt

2014). We particularly find this theory relevant for a study of online learning because it references and illuminates the multiple modes that are harnessed in the creation of online learning content such as on Blackboard. This implies that apart from spoken or written discourse, other modes are used, for example visual (images, still pictures, videorised content), audio (sounds, musical content) and visual in combination with audio, as in the context of power-point presentations with embedded video and audio. We draw from Multimodal Discourse Analysis in its insistence on the notion that human beings communicate and make meaning in a variety of ways (Jewitt, Bezemer & O'Halloran 2016). This implies that when students are learning, they utilise multiple modes to make meaning. Online learning is predominantly digitally oriented, automatically making use of the electronic, visual and audio affordances.

We also employed concepts of Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) (Harasim 2012) to support Multimodal Discourse Analysis. The two theories converge on the concept of collaborative conversations on a medium such as the internet. Collaborative learning interfaces student, teacher and learning material through a technological medium (Bates 2015). The OCL model allows for deep learning, communicative and conversation learning and spaces for knowledge construction. We are especially interested in emphasis on conversation and discussion forums, as it is in these that students seek connection, warmth, social and emotional validation as anchors in the learning process. Discussion is not to be considered as an optional or additional aspect to the mainstream curriculum, but rather as the fundamental element of learning (Bates 2015). It is through unrestricted discussion that learners develop, question and evaluate their academic knowledge. It is also in discussion that students tend to use emoticons to reflect their inner selves, emotions and psychological state, something that they could easily do using non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures and other body language in face-to-face interaction. The OCL model is underpinned by three concepts of the internet, collaboration and conceptual knowledge construction (Harasim 2012). Online collaborative learning supports student learning through creating knowledge by innovating and inventing and problem solving, as opposed to memorisation.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study were to:

(i) Explore and problematise the limitations of exchanges in virtual learning platforms.

(ii) Analyse the use of emoticons in reducing transactional distance in virtual learning spaces, particularly in the COVID-19 crisis.

(iii) Theorise re-learning through a Digital Dialogic Pedagogy to empower transition teams in virtual learning.

3.2 Research Approach

The study employed a qualitative approach in which a purposive sample of one WhatsApp group and one lecturer, was studied over a period starting from 26 March 2020, Level 5 Lockdown in South Africa to Alert Level 3 (20 June 2020). The study utilised a WhatsApp group for third years pursuing a degree programme in the Faculty of Social Sciences degree programme at a university in South Africa. The class was composed of 45 third year students and one lecturer (one of the researchers, who was a participant observer). The class migrated to Blackboard Collaborate, an online Learning Management System. We used interaction patterns of students and their lecturer on the WhatsApp platform as they discussed learning materials uploaded on Blackboard, with particular reference to emoticon use, as a point of departure in our theorising about re-learning to teach in emergencies.

4 Discussion

4.1 Possibilities Emerging from Emoticon Use

The gravitation towards online and WhatsApp platforms has to do with the possibilities of deeper interaction. Whenever students communicate in an academic setting, which is predominantly for learning, the overarching aim is to get as much meaning as is practically possible in an ongoing discourse event, exchange or conversation. Given the high stakes nature of higher education, students are acutely aware of what they are contending with: the expectations and merits of high achievement against the pitfalls of dismal performance. The question of grades, standing out enough to get distinctive grades and the nagging threat of losing government funding should expected standards not be

met, is a cloud that hangs over many students' heads in higher education institutions. Consequently, there are multiple underlying issues that prompt students' use of emoticons, ranging from social, emotional and psychological needs.

We grouped emoticons and word meanings in a manner that highlights emoticons that share common semantic contexts as clustered in close proximity. We isolated groups of emoticons and the subsequent themes that we perceived as important to the students. We assessed student engagement tendencies and noted the interaction patterns that emerged. The results demonstrate that while the meaning of emoticons varies, it is significantly similar for individuals within the same discourse community. We classified students' main reason for emoticon use as socio-emotional, which is the need for assurance, expression of gratitude, expression of humour and the need to share humour, need to demonstrate feelings of openness, appreciation and *ubuntu*/humanity. This relates to the key submissions of Multimodality that the meaning-making exercise of human beings is multi-level as well as multifarious (Jewitt, Bezemer & O'Halloran 2016). The table below categorises the ten recurring emoticons with the common and corresponding contexts accompanying each use.

Table 1: Ten Emoticons for Socio-emotional Expression

Description	Graphic	Student Interaction Context
Smiley/happy face		Response to confirmation that notes uploaded on Blackboard will be compressed and sent on WhatsApp for the benefit of those who failed to access or open the files. Used in greeting and signing off.
Sad frowning face		Request for clarification on a research task, seeking assurance on campus re-opening.
Laughing Face		Laughing at a fellow student, asking if they are ever going to complete their studies in 2020. Finding humour in adversity.

Crying face		Accompanying question of when students will receive zero-rated data; requesting for new academic calendar.
Confused face		Accompanying a personal narrative about challenges at home hindering access to uploaded research tasks. Sarcasm.
Applause		Response to lecturer's promise for audio lecturers.
Heart		As a signing off emoticon. Expressing appreciation.
Praying hands		Thanking peers or lecturer and thanking God.
Sleepy/dozing face		Expressing fatigue and boredom because of pressure.
Clapping hands		Grateful and thankful. Used in greeting and signing off.

The ten emoticons described above were selected as the most commonly used by students and their lecturer in the group chat. There are emoticons that are rarely used by students due to the norms of behaviour and the fixity of academic conventions stated earlier. Students attempt to express themselves while at the same time they are constrained by norms that force them to function in ways that can be perceived as agreeable and professional, and falling within the ethical limits of an academic setting. The findings indicate that emoticons are not as frivolous and casual as they may seem. They are expressive and pointed. They save time, space and face, something that interlocutors are weary of. When it would seem unbecoming and unprofessional and unacceptable to say, *I am smiling with joy and pleasure after receiving your announcement, notes,* a student simply inserts a smiley and an icon with clapping hands signaling gratitude. In a significant way, our findings contradict Bakir & Haji's (2019) findings that students use emoticons randomly without knowing the exact linguistic position for their use. Emotion

icons help to re-engage students, thus supporting and rebuilding relationships that can facilitate the setting of a firm foundation for them to be receptive to academic learning. Sharing social and emotional life through emoticons facilitates collaboration and co-creation (Harasim 2012).

From the conversations from which the emoticons were drawn, students had immense propensity for both the verbal and para-linguistic aspects of interpersonal interaction. As students were already confounded by the new normal of isolation, quarantine and lockdown, the use of emoticons in conversations fostered executive ownership of the learning process. It facilitated the social-relational aspects of learning. Going forward, we envisage a deliberate process where institutions acknowledge the enormity of the task of going virtual on a cohort that has previously been learning in a conventional classroom. This entails investing not only in masks and sanitisers, but also in intensive tooling and skilling through use of transition teams attached to departments in universities. Teaching the teacher on how to re-imagine content, connection, humanity and solidarity with students is a fundamental step of re-learning the art of inculcating knowledge and imparting skills through a screen to an audience whose presence and attention cannot be proven.

Online learning was always an additional latent aspect of the academy that was utilised as blended instruction, but not considered as a compulsory component of learning. However, fast forward to end of March to April 2020, after weeks of lockdown and social distancing among other strict COVID-19 pandemic-imposed restrictions and prevention protocols, institutions found themselves facing one possibility for the rescue of the academic year: online learning. While there are many categories and facets to online learning, the most common and attractive feature is that students, who are mostly post-millennials, can readily identify with the many dimensions, platforms and demands of virtual learning spaces. A good example is Blackboard, which is famous for its interactive and collaborative tools that allow lecturers and students to share and view content in multiple modes. A quick navigation within the Blackboard learning platform presents it as an elaborate forum with audiovisual and multimodal opportunities for learning whereby, text, PowerPoint, audio, video text; still images, sound and musical content can be shared synchronously and asynchronously. The multimodal and multi-semiotic nature of this particular platform allows users who have a web camera to benefit from mutual video connection. The visual and audio components add a rich texture to the learning experience. Our observation of the drawbacks of

online teaching at a time of great necessity to migrate online due to the need to reduce contact and halt the spread of COVID-19, is aimed at focusing a microscope on the inevitable gaps that exist concerning interaction in brick and mortar and online learning. Academia as a genre is disciplined and impersonal. In the COVID-19 mode of heightened uncertainty and distress, students gravitate towards online and WhatsApp platforms where they can utilise emoticons to enhance their exchanges with the lecturer and fellow students. For students in the sample who needed social, emotional and psychological support and mentoring, Blackboard represented learning content, while WhatsApp represented dialogue and communication. These feed into what Letseka, Letseka & Pitsoe (2019) describe as sustainable e-Learning.

4.2 The Paradox of Anonymity and Presence

The issue of reducing transactional distance is not one-dimensional. While it is true that students prefer having a noticeable psychological proximity to their instructor and by extension, their learning material, there is also a latent need for students to seek proximity to their instructors so that *they can be understood*. Therefore, lecturers *teach* their students and learn *from* them. It almost sounds clichéd, that you interact better with an individual if you understand them, you understand better if you have an opportunity to learn. Therefore, the need for the learning to be bi-directional does not diminish in the student and the instructor, although certainly, opportunities for this to happen realistically are diminished exponentially by the nature of the virtual forums. The faceless and anonymous sense of online learning is detrimental to both the learner and instructor socially, emotionally and academically. The presence of both can be facilitated by strategies that seem to ignore the conventions of academia as a genre (Marder 2019; Berman 2006).

In a communication event or discourse event with addressor and addressee, an emoticon reflects the addressor's emotions. Emoticons lubricate communication and simulate traditional face-to-face communication by giving an impression of closeness that resembles direct communication. The craving for the holistic nature of traditional face-to-face communication and the concept of *Ubuntu/*Humanity can be said to influence communication patterns of individuals in virtual spaces in the South African context. In an attempt to sound more human, individuals seek and explore opportunities to be human-like, to appeal to the receiver of the message. Drawing from Kendon's (2004)

classification of gestures used in communication such as hand and arm movements, we conceptualise a broader paralinguistic cluster of non-verbal and digital aids that form a constellation of communicative toolkit in the virtual classroom. Table 2 is a summative representation of the nature and functions of emoticons as digital gestures that we adapted and developed following Kendon (2004). The representation was influenced by the leads in student communication threads on WhatsApp.

Table 2: Nature and Function of Emoticons as Para-Linguistic Markers Adapted from Kress (2004)

Nature	Function
1) **Iconic**: they represent concrete objects and events.	1) **Referential**: they are part of the referential content.
2) **Metaphoric**: they represent abstract ideas.	2) **Pragmatic**: they show the attitude of the speaker towards the content and indicate how content is to be interpreted.
3) **Beats/Rhythm**: they represent repetitive gestures that usually mark the discourse flow.	3) **Interpersonal**: they regulate interaction.
4) **Digital Deictic**: they point to something.	4) **Cohesive and Coherence**: they connect thematically related but temporally separated parts of discourse.

5 Student Wellness and Authentic Learning: Towards a Hybrid Online Learning Model

The concept of social emotional development is crucial in all learning despite mode. While virtual spaces have always existed and been used for several social and educational and business purposes; in an alarmingly rapid turn of events, COVID-19 inevitably transformed the virtual space into a space of refuge socially and educationally. Families in isolation, quarantine and subsequently lockdown depended solely on chats, video and voice calls for interaction on various social media platforms such as skype, WhatsApp, Instagram, while businesses and other institutions harnessed the power of Zoom® conferencing and webinars to keep business going. Instantaneously, virtual

became the new rendezvous, playground, classroom and home. We posit that the abrupt transformation of digital spaces plunged students and lecturers into an unconventional territory with extraordinary circumstances, thereby calling for frontier thinking. We conceptualise the erasure of boundaries between classroom, playground and home. Just as the digital classroom's walls are arbitrary, invisible and abstract, also viewed as non-existent, we theorise around the incorporation of every available tool that can be harnessed and channelled towards giving students a neat balance of epistemic access, academic mastery and social emotional development. Social and emotional learning can only be possible if and when we harness available resources to interface, merge and integrate the social, emotional and academic aspects to maximise the student experience. While this may seem to be an act of deviating from the priority of the academy, which is positive learning outcomes, research indicates that students fare better when their social and emotional needs are met. Employability of graduates with a high emotional quotient is also high as opposed to the employability of those presenting with a low quotient.

The reality with students coming from rural areas is that inequalities automatically bind on them by the nature of their geographical location. There are inequalities that are inherently associated with being born, raised and educated in a rural province. In deploying learning tools, it is crucial to be cognisant that we are catering for a diverse cohort, unique in its demographic composition - some coming from broken homes, others from economically vulnerable circumstances where arguments start over slices of bread, conflict consists of food parcel distribution squabbles. These inequalities, however difficult to imagine, determine the ability of a student to fit in a socially sterile online learning environment. As we have relocated from our potentially COVID-19 unfriendly and germ-friendly crowded hallways and auditoriums, lecture theatres and classrooms to the sterile digital spaces, we should be weary of conducting sterile classes that have no resemblance to humane interaction, thus leaving students with an unrelenting hunger for a social and emotional connection to trigger cognitive processing. Emoticons have the capacity to dilute sterility and disturb convention, creating a new, hybrid model of learning.

5.1 Theorising Re-learning

5.1.1 Digital Dialogic Pedagogy: Filling the Social Abyss in Online Learning

Online learning has an element of anonymity, with the lecturer just speaking

to no one in particular. The monologue that characterises most online classes is what prompts students to seek opportunities for what we call dialogic interaction through emoticons. Giving a human face to the intellectual pursuits and otherwise abstract academic content closes transactional distance. There is the risk of fracture and absence of the thread that connects interlocutors in a discourse event. While Blackboard tries to close this gap in a fashion similar to Zoom webinars where individuals can chat back, raise hands, and have their microphone unmuted so that they can speak out, there are still gaps in synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning that can only be filled by face-to-face communication. Anything resembling face-to-face interaction remains exactly that, something that resembles but is not the original. Lacking is the warmth, proximity and humanity of the exchange that allows empathy, learning and collaboration at a level that is unmatched. What these applications and platforms can do is to attempt to bridge the gap with the acknowledgement that we should not expect them to replace face-to-face communication. In multimodal style, the emoticon then stands out as giving face and emotion to the interaction and the interactants in a dialogic manner that allows dialogue to influence discourse. The e manner in which students visit a lecturer for one-on-one consultation after a mass lecture - seeking affirmation, recognition and erasing the anonymity associated with just being one of the 100 students in the auditorium, is the same approach in reducing the transactional distance through the use of emoticons.

5.1.2 Reflection and Re-learning from Inequality

To understand better the urgent need for re-learning at national, institutional and faculty levels, we reflect on the implications of embracing emergency e-Learning in Africa, particularly in post-apartheid South Africa. For Farhadi (2019), to normalise online learning, also referred to as e-Learning, is to normalise a form of education that is best known for maintaining the evident structural inequalities, namely, race, class and support. In comparison with our case of institutions in rural spaces of post-apartheid South Africa, embracing online learning wholesale at the hurried speed of COVID-19 impositions is akin to epistemic exclusion, something that students have been fighting against since 1976. It is important to note that flagging issues of concern regarding online learning is not condemning this learning option and the myriad positive benefits it brings in its wake, but rather it is an attempt to highlight the importance of taking all the factors, albeit minute, into consideration, for the

benefit of the positive learning outcomes for the students involved. The notion of re-learning spills into design of learning content. In the design of online teaching material, it is fundamental that the instructor masters two components. First is the internet technology to be used. It is crucial to have a clear knowledge and to learn the nuances of the learning platform of choice. Second is the student population to which the learning materials are directed. Without adequate knowledge of the audience demography and geography, it is not possible to design context-friendly, context-responsive and globally relevant learning activities that can facilitate conceptual knowledge acquisition and construction in line with Harasim's (2012) concept of Online Collaborative Learning. For online learning to accommodate the epistemological positions of faculty and instructors in all disciplines, there is need for a high level of technical knowledge and skill in online learning management systems.

Reflecting on the thousands of students who feel disenfranchised due to lack of supporting pillars to online learning, we question what the barriers, marginalising tools and inequalities are, that are directly or indirectly, consciously or subconsciously reified when crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic leave individuals in nostalgia. It is common for human beings to idealise nostalgia of the past, a past that was not perfect, but was in several ways better than the present. A past that was normal with its struggles compared to the new normal that is confusing and potentially exclusionary in nature.

The experience of online learning has its lights and shadows. Insights emerging from the theorisation of the online learning space have to use as a point of departure a deliberate obsessive preoccupation with the idea of the student as the fundamental stakeholder. There arises a notable fragility in the process of learning due to dependence on technical, infrastructural and structural issues. Thus, to access online learning, students on the one hand have to contend with precarious connectivity, low network coverage, low bandwidth and declining attention span. Online spaces have the challenge of placing individuals in isolation bubbles, ideological boxes in which they encounter ideological obstacles that militate against the objective to learn productively. On the other hand, lecturers are consumed in the academic monologue, a conventional norm in the academy. What they need to unlearn is monopoly of knowledge and of the academic ownership of the entire process and re-learn collaboration, collectively address problems creatively and co-create solutions.

As hyperconnected individuals, students live in a digital bubble. The paradox of hyperconnectivity is that it isolates individuals from their signify-

cant others. The implications for university students who are seeking meaning in education is that they need to learn how to navigate this alternate virtual reality. Consequently, the learning has to start with the handlers of the reigns, that is, the teachers and instructors. There is need for re-learning the navigation of virtual spaces for purposes of helping students construct and acquire as much meaning as possible for positive learning outcomes.

What the COVID-19 state of emergency has done in South Africa, and elsewhere in the world, is to prompt government through individual ministries and departments, to introspect and ask critical questions about the status quo, how things are done and what can be done to improve the quality of education, quality of life and health of the population. A quick assessment of the events that immediately unfolded when COVID-19 hit southern African shores indicates that the greatest challenge that COVID-19 has had was on changing how we think, perceive and cognise as a people. Normal day-to-day thinking patterns were transformed into what we term COVID-19 settings and the COVID-19 mode, in which new ways of looking, seeing, listening, hearing, thinking and expressing became the new normal. In true COVID-19 mode, traditional ways of perception were set aside to give way to adoption of new and sustainable ways of interaction. Unlearning of habits and processes had to be done within the blink of a terribly short space of time. In their place, re-learning and baby steps of new definitions, protocols, implications had to be done swiftly. In this case, re-learning was not a choice or alternative, it was an executive survival decision of not only staying afloat but also staying alive.

6 Conclusion

The examination of emoticon uses in learning spaces revealed some profound insights about how humans interact despite the existence of chains and limitations of formality. Essentially, emoticons provide a safe space for the expression of emotion in an otherwise strict and tabooed environment such as academia. The use of emoticons helps interlocutors to introduce a humane and social component in academic interactions as the boundaries between social and academic become temporarily blurred. The findings indicate that emoticons are not as frivolous and casual as they may seem. They are evidently expressive and time-saving.

We believe that the findings of this chapter can facilitate the design of inclusive learning tools and contribute to re-learning toolkits, transition team

skillsets, and transition pedagogies. These can together form crisis methodologies that implement the important aspects of student communication needs and strategies, cognitive processing needs that humanise online education and bring it closer to the learner. Just because we are in the age of machines and artificial intelligence, does not mean that student needs and socio-emotional support have become obsolete. We posit a continuous process of embedding and integrating that which works for students into the existing curriculum, before, during and post-crisis.

Now that the immediate rush to migrate online has receded, it is an opportune moment to examine the new status quo and seek opportunities for re-learning new and previously overlooked idiosyncrasies and unimposing features of student engagement and lecturer limitations. Perhaps what we thought we knew about online learning needs to be re-examined to include not only setting up the technical infrastructure but also to re-learn how to foster maximum and effective student engagement for optimal use of online learning resources. We posit that the humanity of emoticons mediates and closes the gap and distance between content, instructor and learner particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic in which humanity has been redefined. Findings from this study can help us reflect on online course facilitation strategies and re-learn effective methods of drawing students in, validating their humanity and identity, while keeping them interested in learning.

6.1 Future Pathways on Re-learning

COVID-19 school closures triggered a ripple effect in higher education forcing all stakeholders to restart, re-strategise, reinvent and indeed re-learn how to navigate the only available space to interact safely without spreading the Corona Virus and jeopardising the lives of many in the process. The only available space; the digital, virtual or online became a safe space for learning interactively and collaboratively. Brick-and-mortar structures have been swiftly replaced by virtual classrooms. In the same manner that the corona virus has been described by the World Health Organization as a novel virus; we perceive the process of migrating hastily and completely in majority of cases to online learning as a novel event in the history of basic and higher education not only in South Africa but globally. Subsequently, all stakeholders involved are not requested to adapt, but are constrained by the meagre spectrum of available choices and compelled to utilise virtual spaces for learning. This

implies experimenting, venturing into unknown learning territories, trying and not being afraid to fail, and taking risks. Previously a preserve for the ICT personnel in departments, faculties and institutional units, navigating learning platforms such as Blackboard and Moodle is now a prerequisite skill for faculty and university instructors as it is the methodology in sync with COVID-19 prevention protocols.

The concept of re-learning is crucial and inevitable. The mere acknowledgement that the future has suddenly become the present implies that numerous awakenings and adjustments need to be forged. Higher education professionals need to deliberately, yet swiftly deploy toolkits through transition teams that can train staff in digital learning. Advances in technology in the education space mean that there is much more to be done online apart from posting material. Teaching in real time, posting pre-recorded material for retrieval at a later date, real time collaboration, discussion, video feeds, utilisation of chat rooms, and virtual assessment, are available online at a cost. Summarily, a direction that institutions were moving towards, at their own pace, dictated by their individual contexts and resource constraints, has been drawn up and cast upon the institutions abruptly in the present. Higher education institutions essentially woke up to find themselves in the future without a global positioning system. Therefore, without strategic learning, unlearning, and re-learning for the sake of survival, much disorientation will be experienced. Targeted re-learning is vital for stakeholders to regain and maintain balance after the initial shock of being plunged in a new context and technological jungle.

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