

# Access, Acclimatisation and Attitude: Negotiating Postgraduate Education Online

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## Abstract

This chapter constitutes a practice-led research approach reflecting on the experiences of lecturers and students in embracing an online mode of delivery using the Zoom® platform to deliver a module, ‘Higher education: Context and policy’, a part of a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education. The chapter draws on these reflections on, in and from practice, to generate a set of theoretical possibilities. These possibilities culminate in alternative, sustainable, future higher education pedagogies. Rather than adopting absolute and certain answers related to teaching and learning in higher education, the chapter acknowledges pedagogies of uncertainties as the new desired normal. The module provided an opportunity for the lecturers and students, who are themselves lecturers in rural universities and a private university from different disciplines, to open themselves to developing competences that embrace an unfamiliar technological pedagogical strategy using an array of digital tools. It revealed that lecturers in higher education already have resources which have not yet been fully activated. The context allowed us to search for creative, innovative and provocative ways of delivering the five-day block module and paved the way for the students to design and deliver courses for their own students in the context of a continued lockdown.

**Keywords:** higher education pedagogy, accessibility, acclimatisation, attitude, online modes of delivery

## **1 Introduction**

The interest in ‘reflective practice’ has dominated the field of educational research for at least the last sixty years, since it is considered crucial to the activation of professional development of teachers. However, the tradition has earlier historical roots as it underpins an examination of all forms of formal and informal education as a cultural preparation for participation in a wider social system. Leitch and Day (2006) caution that distinction needs to be made by casual ‘reflection’ and ‘reflective practice’, the latter being a deliberative form of research activity. They refer to the seminal work of Dewey (1933: 12), who defined reflective thinking as embodying a ‘number of phases in thinking, i.e., a state of doubt, hesitation and mental difficulty in which thinking originates, followed by an act of searching or inquiring to find material that will resolve doubt’. This has inspired the later coining of the term ‘the teacher-as researcher’ popularised by Stenhouse (1975), whose work was extended by other theorists like Schön (1983). Schön popularised the notion of the ‘reflective practitioner’, showing how thinking and action are intertwined discursively. Later theorists (Carr & Kemmis 1986) suggested that teaching action should be centrally linked to the agendas of developing greater social justice in the acts of designing and delivery of pedagogies. These traditions challenged dominant notions of scientific research being confined to a theory-led agenda of testing hypotheses of pre-existing theoretical worldviews. Instead, they celebrate the value of the researched reflections from the world of practice informing the development of theoretical interpretations. This has led to some arguing that this alternative constitutes a ‘practice-led’ agenda that foregrounds the quest for understanding ‘relational knowing’ that underpins the interactivity across specific groups of participants in specific practice conditions (Richardson 1994; Bell 2009; Smith & Dean 2009). It emphasises the interest in addressing the immediate needs of practitioners through more in-depth understandings of themselves as a form of staff professional development.

This chapter presents an example of practice-led research that aims to locate the specific context of myself as a lecturer in higher education, grappling with the onset of the outbreak of the global pandemic of COVID-19. It aims to show the relational knowings that were discursively produced as I interacted with my postgraduate students.

This chapter reflects on my recent relocation into the field of Higher Education Studies within the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in Durban, South Africa. It draws on my reflective experiences of engaging with a postgraduate programme targeting the development of early-career academics, the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (PGDipHE). This programme focused on a capacity-building qualification to prepare practising professional lecturers at a range of South African universities. Many of these lecturers were from historically disadvantaged institutions and served as teachers of undergraduate studies, while a few were in more administrative senior positions in university governance structures<sup>1</sup>. The programme provided the means to examine how I engaged with the design challenges of the curriculum in postgraduate studies, primarily when my own technological literacies were restricted to the use of emails and online mediations of written textual material produced by my doctoral students. My postgraduate pedagogy had been relatively focused on the supervision of thesis development, whilst the new PGDipHE warranted that I again become more present as a teacher/facilitator of interactive learning<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless, my interactive competences as a teacher were engaged in my delivery of postgraduate cohort seminar models of supervision, and I drew generously from these experiences.

This chapter reveals that the new normal environment has exposed many doubts and fault lines that already existed within higher education pedagogy, but have not yet been tackled. It reflects my search for materials that will assist in resolving doubts about the kinds of actions and strategies adopted by both my peers and my students as they too prepared to grapple with practical action as teachers in higher education during COVID-19 times. Many of the past practices continue within the present COVID-19 times. My reflections examine how the lecturers responded to the coinciding of the commencement of their module with the national lockdown, which imposed social restrictions and limited movement. The module was entitled ‘Higher education: Context

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘lecturers’ to refer to the ranks within the university system, but the term ‘students’ when referring to them as participants in the PGDipHE. I refer to my own role as the ‘teacher’ of the module.

<sup>2</sup> I do not discount that supervision is a specialist form of teaching and learning since promoting doctoral learning is indeed a form of pedagogy (see Samuel 2018).

and policy’ and it was designed to reflect on the current challenges and opportunities to activate a critical examination of discourses in the sector. It commenced in early March 2020, before the official lockdown. In anticipation of forthcoming restrictions on students travelling from their provinces to the UKZN campus site, it was decided to utilise online delivery<sup>3</sup>. The lecturers/students were at that stage still able to access their university offices where computers were available. With the formal promulgation of more stringent social distancing mid-way through the module, new modes of delivery into their homes had to be designed.

How did the students embrace the shift to alternative pedagogical modes of delivery? What forms of acclimatising were needed, and why were these orientation sessions required? How did this new pedagogical mode influence their attitude towards their roles and responsibilities as higher education curriculum specialists and designers of their own pedagogy for future practice? Amidst all these concerns was how to deal with the vulnerabilities not only of the students (in this case, lecturers), but also of myself as a lecturer/teacher of this new mode of delivery.

I recognise that the stabilisation of the academic programme in the wake of the Corona-19 virus (COVID-19) has prioritised delivery of the undergraduate curriculum. This is understandable given that the majority of students in the post-secondary education system are located within these foundational Bachelor degrees or certificate/diploma courses. An online technological solution has become the uniform response, and students’

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<sup>3</sup> It may be argued, therefore, that the mode of delivery reflected on in this chapter does not constitute a sustained design of online pedagogy as is normatively characteristic of designated open and distance learning institutions that use online learning as their prime modality. Instead, the UKZN delivery of an online strategy could be interpreted as an ‘emergency remote teaching pedagogical intervention’, one which (un)consciously embedded degrees of temporality contingent on the duration of the pandemic and official governmental lockdown policies. However, in the reflective engagements with students in the PGDipHE, many expressed the convenience of the new ‘abnormal mode’ since it obviated costly travel and accommodation expenses related to face-to-face delivery. Their hints were directed towards the new modality becoming a preferred modality, despite UKZN being largely a face-to-face institution.

readiness to cope has preoccupied the focus of course designers and managers. I agree with the agenda directed towards the challenges of confronting students who are unable to access the new technological highways. The worlds of the majority of South African students are restricted by the constraints of poverty and digital dis-connectivity that have yet to be addressed in a highly fragmented social system (Maringe 2017). More than twenty years of democracy in South Africa has not alleviated apartheid class divides, and most working-class and unemployed people remain on the fringes, as spectators of the middle-class educational stage.

However, this chapter cautions that uncritical use of digital modes might merely reinforce the habituated models of knowledge engagement of the past as the new technological strategies run the risk of reinforcing old routines. It challenges whether our benchmarks for higher education are indeed being set too low. I argue that these risks do not only reside amongst the student population, but also within lecturers themselves. Lecturers, too, are not necessarily fully embracing their theoretical, pedagogical responsibilities of introducing the next generation to imaginative new worlds. They are also restricted in their expertise in ‘accessibility’ to new technologies and pedagogical knowledge-development modes of higher education. A further serious concern is that lecturers’ theoretical understanding of the rationale for ‘higher education’ practices and actions, is often lacking.

This risk is further accentuated when one engages with the more complex curriculum expectations of postgraduate studies and the research endeavour. It is for this reason that this chapter focuses on the postgraduate sector. Pedagogies in this sector need to go beyond dealing with received bodies of knowledge to promote the development of knowledge-making, where students become critical knowledge-constructors that draw inspiration from a range of resources. The need to forge broader networks to find meaningful joined-up thinking across a variety of sectors, is the hallmark of the postgraduate project.

In COVID-19 times, the range of participating partners has been brought into much sharper relief. Diverse sectors (perhaps previously distanced from one another) have been coerced into reimagining their modes of engagement and mutual collaboration. This has revealed that latent expertise and liabilities reside in government and institutional structures, amongst scientists and professionals, across both learners and their teachers, and in dialogue with technical providers, network operators and their consumers. A

new normal is being created in the ways in which publishers, the media and their readerships are interacting to produce and respond to new knowledges and their creation. Amidst the striving towards a ‘new normal’, there nevertheless resides a fresh environment of vulnerabilities, uncertainties and insecurities amongst many partners. Ritualised habits of past routines of higher education delivery are unlikely to remain unaltered. Moreover, disciplinary boundary crossings are likely to become the sources for inspiration to sustain the future. A shared collaborative effort across these different experts is likely to ensure viable prospects when these so-called adversities are more consciously embraced (Kim 2020).

This chapter foregrounds three main concerns about the conceptualisation of *accessibility*, emphasising *acclimatisation* towards the new normal, and finally, a view on shifts in *attitude* to sustain quality higher education pedagogy. Although intertwined, I will explore these constructs individually to demonstrate the complexity of negotiating change in higher education, which has been accentuated by the COVID-19 context. I argue that current preoccupations have been about how students access the forms of technological modalities, without due diligence to how they access deeper theoretical conceptions of the substance and agenda of their education involvement, especially at postgraduate level. This has warranted that my pedagogical practice acclimatises students to greater self-directed, autonomous learning, the hallmark of higher education generally, but more specifically of postgraduate students who are themselves lecturers in higher education. The third concern of attitude is not just a mental reflective predisposition, but a theoretical reconsideration of how we align ourselves to the new era of ongoing technological revolutions which will usher in new directions for managing dialogue across multiple stakeholders. I argue that these resources exist latently but are not yet fully activated.

In line with the tradition of practice-led research, I first present my reflective engagement on my pedagogies with my students. Thereafter, I draw on what emerged as recurrent themes across the data harvested. I close the chapter drawing on the theoretical work of Harriri (2018), to synthesise the chapter towards re-imaginative dispositions that university academics could consider. This pattern reinforces the practice-led agenda of reflection on past practices, in the present processes of teaching practices and the exploration for conceptualising future practice. Harriri (2018) argues that the Technological Revolution (like other major revolutions in history) will introduce the norm of

perpetual instability, transience and uncertainty. One can hardly expect a return to stabilities. Harriri suggests that our new normal will be an era of short-lived, multiple, never-ending revolutions, as knowledges repeatedly become outdated and updated frequently. What are the implications of such a philosophical worldview for students and lecturers of postgraduate studies? The generation of the discursive questions at the end of each section of the chapter is to demonstrate the syntax of academic staff and professional teacher development discourses that could characterise our reflections on pedagogical higher education practices.

## **2 On Accessibility**

Blewett's (2015) doctoral study, which explored alternative modes of using digital social media technologies in teaching a course on Computer Studies at the undergraduate level, pointed out that technology itself is not the solution to alternative critical pedagogies. An essential resource within alternative modes of delivery is the teacher herself as an agent of learning/teaching. She is the mediator of the relationships between the propositional content of the curriculum and the learners' (sometimes similar, but more likely divergent) worlds. The form of mediation the teacher activates serves as a network between the learners' existing prior knowledge, the intended worldviews of the teacher and the targeted curriculum. No doubt, much more than the intended curriculum is learnt through these interactive processes, and many unexpected and hidden learnings are fostered within this engagement. Simultaneously, a covert curriculum is also produced by what teachers choose to silence (intentionally or not) from the overt formal curriculum (McArthur 2015)<sup>4</sup>. This scope of the educational enterprise challenges the overly rationalistic fixation with predetermined specifications of targeted outcomes. Instead, it allows for the flexibility of all actors co-constructing the agenda of experiential learning and teaching. The act of teaching thus becomes a continuing kaleidoscope of learning and re-learning for both the teachers and the learners/students (Dhunpath *et al.* 2019). Teachers and technology provide opportunities, but learners are responsible agents in their personal growth and development.

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<sup>4</sup> McArthur (2015) problematises the limited notions of higher education curriculum within the context of Information systems lecturers engaging with teaching postgraduate research methodologies modules.

This argument suggests that pedagogy using technology is no different in its rationale to the usual face-to-face pedagogies, which accentuate the need for the teacher to be seen not merely as a deliverer of content. Simultaneously, the pedagogical moment embraces the need for learners to take ownership of the sending sources and to assert agency over the curriculum. The role of the learner is a crucial ingredient in the quest for critical education. Passive education is not the intended hallmark of 'higher education'. The teacher and learner are thus engaged in an exchange of differing worldviews as they come to negotiate the contested nature of quality education.

Within this worldview, the process of knowledge-making (selecting, re-selecting, re-ordering and re-purposing) is the constitutive purpose of higher education pedagogies. Unfortunately, in the rush towards the delivery of continued operations within higher education under the present pandemic conditions, there seems to be a jettisoning of the theoretical agenda and rationale of the knowledge-making enterprise of the higher education system. The delivery mode of transfer of the knowledge content takes priority over lecturers' expected mediation of the targeted content and goals of the curriculum. This foregrounding of whether students are able to access the targeted new form of technological modalities is perhaps driven by the concern (described earlier) about the inequities of opportunities for varied members of the South African society. Clearly, not all students, coming from various class, race or geographic settings, have the same degrees of (physical or technical) access to the internet which serves as the backbone to the new modalities; nor do all students necessarily possess the technological hardware to access the alternative modes of the new pedagogical strategy.

However, the lecturers/students in my specific group of the PGDipHE were not necessarily in the category of those unable to physically access the hardware. Their challenges were related to the stability of internet connectivity within their workplaces or homes, and the relative uncertainty that possible electrical power cuts may have on their participation. However, matters of accessibility cannot be restricted to modalities of operation; they should include how the students oriented themselves to gaining entry into the theoretical/conceptual mode of engagement with the propositional content of the modules. This had a dual effect of challenging my pedagogy as the course facilitator, as well as activating reflection by the lecturers/students on their preparation for the future roles as facilitators of their education pedagogies in the future. How are teachers/lecturers systematically directing teaching-

learning processes towards the achievement of the targeted exit attributes of the curriculum? How are these exit attributes themselves opened up for scrutiny in the act of pedagogy? This warrants a shift in the interpretation of the founding role of university lecturers as professional academics. In principle, it is possible that resourceful mediators of teaching and learning will utilise any form of pedagogical technology (digitised or not) to activate in-depth critical knowledge. Moreover, this was the subject content of the theme of the module focussing on the specific contextual landscape of higher education and its policies.

The lack of clarity of the purposes of the higher education enterprise fuels a fetish with technological modes, which come to dominate the discourses of what constitutes an effective new lecturer. Surely it entails being more than one who is responsible for uploading material on digital platforms for one's students? This restrictive misconception merely ensures passive accessibility of students to the already-constructed worldview of the teachers/lecturers. It is indeed nothing more than the traditional approach of 'banking education', which Freire (1972) in his seminal work, proposed was a form of disguised oppression in the name of education. This, Freire argued, is a subtle subjugation to existing hierarchical relations that foregrounds the sender of the message rather than the dialogical interactivity with received bodies of existing packaged worldviews<sup>5</sup>. More profound quality education involves conscientisation about the message, the medium and the mediation. Harari (2018) argues that, especially in the context of boundary-crossings between a plethora of disciplinary contexts, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary disruptive knowledges are likely to activate the new frontiers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (more on this later). Higher education should, therefore, be directed not towards preservation of disciplinary knowledge enclaves, but an exchange, migration and borrowing across previously bounded worldviews. This includes the curriculum being a mediation of the enculturated notions of self and others, one's own and others' prior cultural worldviews about matters such as race,

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<sup>5</sup> Mignolo (2011) further emphasised the skewed epistemological content of these received bodies of knowledge. He argued that as academics adopting an agenda of redressing social inequities, there was need for an epistemic disobedience towards knowledge hallmarks that are constructed exclusively in western thought. An interactive critique of knowledge sources and their origins constitutes the agenda of higher education.

religions, gender and sexualities (Nadar & Reddy 2016). Therefore, material uploaded onto technological platforms cannot be limited to digestible chunks without a careful challenge to activate students' critical questioning of the knowledge-making enterprise. My concern as a reflective practitioner was about how these lecturers/students were indeed engaging with accessing the knowledge system beyond the restricted confines of distinct disciplines, and whether they were expanding their access to alternative interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary epistemologies. This has serious implications for how technological modes are being utilised to enable such interactivity. It is the teacher, not the technological mode itself, that drives quality education.

The delivery of the PGDipHE highlighted for me that many of the lecturer participants who were engaged in this academic staff development capacity-building programme had themselves not deeply challenged the conceptions of their roles and responsibilities as educators within the university system. As lecturers, there was a tendency to transfer the source of the challenges of their own previous (before COVID-19) pedagogies to students. A deficit discourse dominated their early reflections during the course about what constituted significant challenges in the higher education system. The lecturers framed students as not deeply engaged with the material of their course content. They suggested that many of their students did not see the project of higher education as intrinsic to deep learning. Most students, they reflected, were focused on the superficial requirements of how to gain positive grades on their assessments. Instrumentalist certification rather than educational achievement was seemingly their preoccupation. Moreover, the lecturers commented that their students tended to attend lectures infrequently, which they sometimes attributed to the inadequate physical resources of lecture halls unable to accommodate the massified enrolment of students in their modules.

Disappointedly, the lecturers/students reported that their dominant modes of delivery adopted within their pedagogies resorted to a 'front-led delivery of content'. This continued to produce passivity amongst their students who transferred the responsibility to the teacher/lecturer to 'deliver the goods' and moreover, deliver the strategies to show them how to pass this module. Arguably, the lecturers absolved themselves of responsibility by concluding that the solutions to quality education resided outside their control. This reinforced the view that current pedagogical practices were not allowing their own students to gain access to deeper epistemological pursuits and the

creation of new knowledges. Instead, their students, via the selected pedagogy, adopted largely passive consumerist absorption roles, conceiving themselves as recipients of pre-packaged bodies of knowledge. This was not access to forms of ‘higher learning’, and is seemingly paradoxical, especially in the context of the strong resistance to the imposed ‘colonised curriculum’ around which student protests of the early 2000s rallied. The reflective and doubtful question remains: were these passive pedagogical constructions directed by students alone, or were lecturers also complicit in the delivery of these kinds of truncated access to higher learning?

This fixation with mastery of codified existing disciplinary pieces of knowledge is perhaps related to the specific undergraduate modules in which these PGDipHE lecturers were engaged. For example, there was a belief that the Accounting disciplines were founded on universalist uncontestable epistemologies. There were some flexibility in how conceptions of trauma were being identified and managed in Community psychology, whilst Music education and Film and Theatre studies hinted at the need to expand the boundaries of imagination and creativity. Surprisingly, a strong push for accountabilities and performance-driven assessment of (school) learners was noted within the discipline of Education. Nevertheless, all the lecturers were preoccupied with the formal assessment achievement of their students. During the module, they retrospectively queried the overly formalised competences of their own curricula, questioning where and how ‘soft skills’ such as social and professional interactivities were being developed. They defended their curriculum delivery as related to the early undergraduate courses, where the emphasis was seen as creating the foundational platform of baseline knowledge for further, more robust critique and engagement at a later stage. However, the lecturers’ take was that undergraduate courses were not necessarily about engaging in the knowledge-making epistemological enterprise. It is thus likely that they would perceive effective lecturing as limited to the commodified packaging conception of knowledge. Ironically, they were able to rhetorically profess the overarching, more sociological mandates of their own institutional missions and vision, which invariably declared more all-encompassing social and critical citizenry agendas.

So how different is the new mode of online pedagogies likely to be with respect to challenging the boundedness of knowledge? Seemingly, both students and their lecturers are locked within a superficial mode of ‘higher education’ of transferring received bodies of knowledge, and expedient ways

of ensuring that students pass through the module assessment hoops. This is reinforced by the performativity culture that monitors the quality of a lecturer not on deep, quality engagement with the content of the curriculum, but mainly via the throughput rates of their students.

‘Accessibility’ therefore suggests a deeper epistemological consideration than merely a matter of having entry to mediums of teaching and learning. So, what acclimatisation to deeper forms of pedagogy, roles and responsibilities were needed in this particular programme with which I was engaged as a teacher of the PGDipHE? What capacity-building of lecturers was required?

### **3 On Acclimatisation**

This section foregrounds the range of acclimatisations that I had to engage as a facilitator of the learning/teaching project. It included my own preparation for the course, the pedagogical activities designed before and during the module itself, and the attention to negotiating students’ own personal and public technological literacy spaces. Simultaneously, acclimatisation away from dependency to autonomous learning responsibilities amongst students was being co-produced.

In preparation for the delivery of the module, I chose to attend a series of *staff-capacity development programmes* which UKZN was offering towards acclimatising lecturers to embrace online, digital flexible blended learning approaches. I attended courses on Zoom technology, the use of Moodle in more interactive pedagogies, and the redesign of alternative assessment strategies online. These expanded my confidence as a learner of alternative models of delivery. Being put in the role of learner allowed me to experience first-hand the kinds of vulnerabilities I had to address as I embraced new learning and teaching modalities. I consciously chose to draw on my pedagogical and curriculum design experiences to harness the technological potential of these new digital means. I realised that I also had to incorporate this kind of acclimatisation and harnessing of my PGDipHE students’ potential.

As part of the university’s suggested phased roll-out (acclimatisation) towards alternative modes of delivery, I chose to set up a *pre-course orientation programme* amongst the participating students in the module. This entailed a half-day orientation to the Zoom platform as a mode of delivery in what was then only a potentially temporary divergence from the normal delivery of the programme. In the orientation programme, I dealt with the Zoom

platform and its logistics of how to engage interactive participation. Perhaps this introductory curriculum strategy suggested my complicity in foregrounding the mode of delivery rather than focusing on the pedagogical interactivity. Therefore, in the acclimatisation session, I consciously emphasised the need to target engagement with reading and preparing for the interactive planned sessions in the forthcoming curriculum. I chose to simultaneously acclimatise the students to show multiple forms of mediation amongst themselves, and I would be a central feature of the curriculum interactivity.

A week before the orientation workshop, I shared links to YouTube video material on how to use Zoom so that participants could experiment with the technology before the session. I encouraged them to try the technology with their peers. I ensured that all features of the technological platform's interaction, which I had planned as part of the module programme, could be experimented with by each of the students. Each had an opportunity to learn 'to play with the technology' as a form of acclimatising. This included matters related to sharing presentations, using the audio and video features, and about the chat and reactions responses. I drew these orienting features from my participation in a recent Zoom online teaching workshop held as part of academic staff development. This was a technical orientation. I consciously chose to foreground that almost all of us, including myself, were using this new form of technological delivery for the first time, and that we were all likely to be able to learn the technical processes together. One of the students was already familiar with the Zoom platform, and he assisted as a 'teacher of the new technology'. This enabled the collaborative sharing of prospective learning/teaching responsibilities. (Unfortunately, shortly after that, he had to be hospitalised and was no longer part of the teaching/learning five-day programme. We all had to learn together as novices.)

A surprising concern confronted me early on in the delivery of the course module. My first attempt was to try to communicate with students using their official student email account addresses. Despite communication via email on these addresses, there was a limited response. It appeared that the lecturers/students did not habitually choose to engage in this anonymous institutionalised form of email, preferring to be directly contacted via their personal emails. This suggested that the lecturers were not comfortable logging into the UKZN website, activating their email accounts and setting up their interactivity with the communication networks therein. How was the intended

Moodle platform going to work, since the UKZN platform is directly linked to student email accounts?

I had to resort to WhatsApp communications to activate new personal email accounts, which immediately enabled interaction with me. I ascertained at this stage that all the students (i.e., the lecturers) were linked into social media networks. Setting up a WhatsApp group based on telephone contacts to communicate with the students was far more effective than using student registration numbers which automatically generated a unique UKZN student email address. Changing the strategy suggested the expectation that as the teacher, I had to make a conscious effort to connect to their technological, social world and literacy practices (Gee 1999). Overall, there was a preference for WhatsApp immediate communication rather than email communication.

This appears a trivial reflection, but it suggested that students were transferring the onus of ‘delivering messages’ onto the lecturer/teacher. Lecturers were expected to deliver learning at students’ most comfortable convenience. I complied, knowing how difficult it was to establish interactivity under the insecurities surrounding the COVID-19 context. I also became aware that students were making a distinction in their preferences between being identified ‘personally with a unique identity’ rather than merely as ‘a student number’. This opened me to the need to critically examine the *technological literacy practices* of my students. What choices of technological interactivity were students making within varied contexts, messages, audiences and purposes (Tour 2017)? (An aside: this helped me understand why for many years, my own undergraduate students ignored student email messages, which linked them to the Moodle websites of their modules. Very few chose to access the Moodle site that served as their repository for the course materials at that time<sup>6</sup>. Instead, they wanted me to spell out in person in the lecture hall, what must be done to engage with the course material.) Personal social interactivity was prioritised over the anonymous institutional identity (Barton 2017).

The intended module was a *week-long programme* consisting of several lectures and workshops which were designed to produce interactive learning amongst the learners. The input or interactive sessions lasted

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<sup>6</sup> I now also recognise that the level of interactivity of those former undergraduate Moodle sites, shared across numerous facilitators, lacked degrees of interactivity with students. They were instructive rather than pedagogically dialogical.

approximately one to two hours each, interspersed with section breaks for collaborative engagement, reflection and discussion. In the midst of the second day of the planned intervention of the programme, the official lockdown and restrictions on all access to workplaces were announced by the national authorities. This yielded a new challenge I had hardly anticipated. Firstly, we postponed, at the request of the students themselves, the following two days' delivery of the programme, and rescheduled it to allow them to prepare their homesteads for sanitation, isolation and social distancing. Many of the lecturers immediately confessed that they were nervous about the use of personal home computers or laptops to continue with their online pedagogical mode of delivery. They initially declared reasons such as poor connectivity in their localised rural areas.

It appeared to me that the lecturers were not accustomed to working on their personal computers within their homes. Most demarcated a clear separation between *work issues*, for which they used official university computers, and *home issues*, where they used home technological apparatus for personal and social matters. They raised the issue that they were not sure of the connectivity restriction in their homes, because they hardly used the computers at home for work-related academic issues. Given the urgency to vacate the campuses at short notice, these lecturers were not able to take their university computers home. This caused anxiety in terms of how they would access the planned new delivery unless they addressed issues relating to their technological apparatuses and practices at home. Surprisingly, within a short period of two days, all the students were able to activate the necessary logistics to reconnect to a home delivery mode. What changed to re-acclimatise them?

I raise these operational details on a matter of principle, rather than one of logistics. There appears to be a mindset about the *demarcation of space* where academic work is undertaken. Clearly, for many of the lecturers/students, affordability of separate technological devices within their office (perhaps paid for by their employers) and their personal computers at home (possibly paid for by themselves) was not the issue. I was indeed surprised because my own academic work responsibilities often spill into working long extended hours on many 'university work-related matters' (marking, preparing, supervising) in my home environment after so-called working hours, and on weekends. I was surprised that the demarcation of work hours and personal hours was much more clearly bounded in many of these lecturers' worldviews. Could the issue relate to the technological literacies practices of family mem-

bers and their use of computers? Who could use the home computer and for what? When? How? Why? How was this use negotiated within the home environment? This presumes that one had to account for a range of participants who were likely to seek access to the computer within the home environment.

It emerged that the issue was not about whether there was access to the internet within their home contexts: it was that there were *habituated practices* about where work issues were to be engaged. This is perhaps an over-generalisation to make the point. Each specific home and family context, and personal access to computers needs further exploration.

Interestingly, throughout the interactive continued programme, I became aware of how the merging of the *personal and the public space* that the new pedagogical platform activated, interfered with the lecturers' degree of comfort. They initially reflected some degree of anxiety when the Zoom camera was able to access sounds from their personal spaces such as family interactions, neighbours talking, dogs barking and the like. This pedagogical mode was thus a coerced invitation into their everyday personal worlds, something that perhaps is usually disconnected from the public spaces of academic work. Not all were comfortable with sharing this degree of intimacy.

For me, acclimatisation is thus not merely restricted to knowing how to manipulate the technical, operational world of the Zoom platform we were engaging. It included exposing one's personal self within the pedagogical self. The negotiated technological literacy practices of lecturers at work, at home, and with their family members, need much more detailed analysis and exploration. Over time, I became aware that there was more relaxed interaction as the focus shifted from the contextual spatiality of the environment towards an *interactive pedagogical spatiality* of the programme. This became evident on one occasion when the peer group challenged one of the music lecturers to begin the class by rendering a musical song. By day four, he willingly conceded, including setting up his electric piano to accompany his songs. There was much satisfaction in the group who joined in the singing. This felt like a creative outlet for the release of the pedagogical anxieties of participating in this module.

Another acclimatisation occurred in this process of the new delivery mode. Students became increasingly aware of how much *self-preparation* was needed before the commencement of the lecture/workshop. The design of the module programme used the principles of the 'flipped classroom' (McLaughlin, Mary, Roth *et al.* 2014), where students were expected to read and engage

with materials in preparation for the classroom face-to-face activity. This pedagogical strategy included a blended form of asynchronous learning and synchronous pedagogy/teaching (Rowe 2020). Therefore, it was expected that students engage at their own pace with the targeted material outside the regular time slot of the face-to-face synchronous contexts (Bergmann & Sams 2012). For example, they were expected to read and deliver their responses to the YouTube videos links on their course outlines. If prior preparation was not done, they were not able to engage in any depth.

In addition, the students were expected to make a *selection of reference materials* to demarcate a possible target for a particular assignment topic. One of the module assignments was to develop an action research learning intervention to address a perceived problematic area of their pedagogy in higher education. The workshop input session briefly recapped what an action research cycle entailed. However, more emphasis was placed on the students themselves talking about the problems they had chosen to focus on, and verbally engaging with their peers about the intervention strategies they would likely adopt, as well as how they would monitor the action cycle progress. The course content was being ‘delivered’ by the inputs of the students themselves.

Similarly, an interactive workshop was conducted online to assist in developing an academic poster for a conference outlining a key challenge of realising the goals of their institutional mission and vision in relation to their specific disciplines and positionalities. This entailed a pre-session of asynchronously watching a YouTube video on designing an academic poster. Thereafter, in the Zoom platform space, the students gave an oral presentation of their posters in a simulated conference. The conference audience consisted of the students participating in the programme which engaged in interactions and posed questions. After the session, the students were able to redesign their submitted posters.

In my view, what these different pedagogical strategies activated was not much different from what would have usually been presented had the course been delivered in a face-to-face pedagogy. Nevertheless, it meant that students had to first overcome the fear of using the online technological, operational devices before they could concentrate on the quality of interactivity between peers and the lecturer. Over the week, they become more familiar with the modes of delivery. The lecturer plays a pivotal role in ensuring that the focus is on the quality of learning, not the modes of technological delivery, or simplistically on staged performances of academic activity.

On the penultimate day, an interactive interview was conducted between myself and the quality assurance director at my institution. Besides foregrounding the content matter about the scope of quality assurance and promotions systems in the higher education sector, this interview aimed to demonstrate the kinds of reflective interactions between an academic (myself) and the representative from the institutional administrative sections. By this stage in the programme, students were a lot more acclimatised to the levels of interactivity required in the module delivery, even using alternative technological modes. Both presenters of the interview were impressed with the levels of interaction that mediated how students participated in the course. What this required was several pauses in the lengthy interview to allow students to intervene to ask for clarity. The interactivity aided by the Zoom platform allowed them greater ease of ‘interruptions’ and ‘disruptions’ when issues were not apparent, or even when they disagreed.

The hidden message was that *senior administrators of the university could be engaged with dialogically*. As a facilitator, I mediated the kinds of modes of asking questions of the interviewee. The platform allowed students to repair and correct their forms of engagement and questions, allowing for a great deal of acclimatisation of how to be active participants in their own learning. My personal reflection is that this technological platform indeed produced more significant levels of interactivity than if the interview had been conducted in the normal face-to-face pedagogies. The latter has conventions of politeness and adherence to time-bounded formats of inputs. The technological mode allowed for far greater interactivity and perhaps more appropriate levels of engagement by the students. Compliments are due to the quality assurance director who welcomed the interactive, contested and probing pedagogies.

My overall view is that the pedagogical space became progressively more relaxed as the focus shifted from the technology towards foregrounding interest in learning deeply from the interaction of the learning/teaching moment. Students were present not merely to mark the attendance register. Over time, they acclimatised into the ‘technological space’, *not only as a performance space where one was being assessed*. As the facilitator of the teaching project, I drew on my personal experience of noting that all learners choose to drift in and out of participation (for a range of reasons). My role as the host of the platform allowed me to ‘haul them back into the classroom interactivity learning mode’. This meant that students tended to be more alert since they were unlikely to predict when I would choose to ask them for their

opinion on a particular matter. It reinforced the comment made here that the principal-agent that activates quality learning is not the technology alone, but the teacher, who is the mediator of that technology with his or her learners.

In summary, I learnt several conceptions of what acclimatisation meant. As the facilitator of the new model of pedagogy, I had to consciously embrace the responsibility of learning new technological modalities as a form of self-staff-development. I had to engage with a conscious orientation programme to induct students into the latest modalities, especially allaying their own fears of the lack of technical expertise as a learning barrier; the focus of such orientation was to shift emphasis from the form of delivery to the purpose/substance of the interactive engagement needed in higher education postgraduate learning. I had to become familiar with the range of technological literacy practices of the students, especially understanding their preferences for the specific and more personal (e.g., WhatsApp), rather than institutional modes (Moodle platforms). I had to consciously alter the pace of delivery to allow for technical disruptions ushered in by poor interconnectivity and power cuts, and embrace a diverse range of technological modalities simultaneously. This included responding to shifting national policy regulations demarcating systemic policies and operations which activated lengthy hours of preparation, negotiation and renegotiation of the plans using multiple technological modalities. I became acclimatised to how lecturers in higher education (specifically the students of the PGDipHE) had demarcated notions of the spaces where ‘official university work’ is conducted, establishing clear boundaries between ‘office work’ and ‘home work’ spaces. I became more familiar with how the new technological Zoom meetings modes blurred the boundaries between the ‘public space’ of the classroom and the ‘personal spaces’ of everyday home activities, and that the new modalities were not always invitational spaces sometimes impacting on producing anxieties. I became aware of how students need to be consciously stimulated to become ‘active rather than passive pedagogical agents’, developing autonomy and agency for their own learning. I overtly challenged students that the technological space was not a ‘performance space for assessment alone’, but a space for engaging the quality of learning and creation of new knowledges. I believe that the interactive space allowed students to re-imagine the possibilities of interactivity between students, lecturers and managers at the varying levels of the institutionalised higher education system. All of these acclimatisations yielded for me a view that the new mode of delivery probably

activated deep epistemological reconsiderations of the higher education learning, which was particularly relevant for this group of postgraduate students. Thankfully, the external moderator of the module commended the degree of interactive support afforded to students and the organisation of the pedagogical module to achieve its declared outcomes.

I now turn to the matter of the shifts in attitude that are required when engaging the new normal.

## **4 On Attitude**

I am concerned that many of my lecturer peers seem to approach the shift towards new forms of pedagogy as a temporary measure to deal with the COVID-19 times. There is an underlying assumption that there will be a resumption of the old normal. The attitude is one of present fatalistic abandonment to a forced pedagogical approach which they will soon abort, 'once the doom is all over'. However, I am inspired by the work of Harari (2018), who cautions that the advancements in knowledge systems, especially the link between biotechnological knowledge and technological computational, algorithmic analysis, are rapidly likely to usher into the new world a permanent state of revolutions. He skilfully argues that many present-day occupations will possibly soon become irrelevant as non-human computers, drawing on Artificial Intelligence (AI), are able to know us humans better than we know ourselves. He suggests this is anathema for the liberalist who believes in the transcendence of the individual self, and has a mistaken belief (his argument) in their innate ability to know and make the best selective choices for themselves. Algorithmic predictions will be able to make more reliable conclusions about individuals' preferences with regard to products, people and perspectives.

AI systems will be able to alert humans to the prospect of predictive diagnostic ailments even before the individual reflects an overt symptom of the impending disease which directs them to a health practitioner. This will radicalise whole sectors which have built up edifices of professional practices that rely on 'the knowing self'. For example, doctors will become less relevant, as AI will be able to make more accurate predictions about our physical well-being. Similarly, Harari (2018) argues that many other occupations will become irrelevant and that there would be a need for individuals to reinvent themselves, as has been characteristic over the history of time following the

aftermaths of major worldwide revolutions. He argues that, when the foundational rationales around which society are restructured, this activates a need for a wide-scale reimagining of many occupations.

The new revolutionary era is, however, not likely to stabilise and endure over long periods of time, as was the case in the Agricultural or the Industrial Revolution. Instead, the new Technological Revolution is likely to activate a series of exponential catalytical revolutions in short bursts of time and spaces. It is likely that information networks (where available) will relatively easily permeate geographic boundaries to introduce ever-changing, perpetual demands and inputs on new knowledge globally. Potentially, the knowledge produced in 2020 is likely to be outdated by 2025. In turn, this new knowledge will become obsolete five years later. Who knows what 2050 will look like? We can imagine that it will be fundamentally different from what we have today.

This will escort onto the world stage a need for new reinventions in continual re-imaginative potential. Furthermore, Harari (2018) argues that the distance between higher education systems, the marketplace and parliament will become increasingly closer. The knowledge system that is being produced within the university structures of higher education is likely to be increasingly influenced by demands presented by broader social networks. Increasingly, governments will expect that knowledge systems service their agenda. The marketplace will also make increased demands on university systems as the ‘products’ of the university need to find employment to service the need to design new goods and services to keep abreast with new expectations and repeated knowledge explosions. Whether or not the scientific knowledge enterprise will be compromised in this agenda, remains a moot point. It may be argued that university autonomy and scientific knowledge production have never been independent of the forces of the powerful, whether of the religious authorities or the captains of industry. What this entails, is preparation for an *attitudinal strategic rethinking* of the relations of collaboration between multiple stakeholders, especially universities, which usually guard their independence jealously.

This has further implications for the attitude that lecturers themselves have towards the knowledges that they presently defend, curate and preserve. Knowledge systems will likely be even more transient and responsive to these multiple agendas in a rapidly evolving era. A new attitude towards a *plurality of discourses* will be expected as university knowledge producers will need to

question their ethical role in how they share their knowledge, develop their research agendas, and contribute to the quality of society they wish to uphold.

Harari (2018) is suggesting that the new normal should introduce a new attitude towards knowledge. The rapid expansion of technological systems is likely to raise further questions that have not yet been thought about. Similarly, professions are likely to be created that have not yet been conceptualised. There will be an increasing need to question why students should be required to enrol at universities at all, when new technological inventors and programmers could draw their competences elsewhere through less formalised institutional processes. These new technologists are likely to be the cutting-edge Game Changers. He suggests that it will be critical to developing amongst higher education students a prospective disposition towards the knowledge systems with which they engage. Students should be introduced to existing bodies of knowledge as mirages, which shift continually as we move our perspectives and positionalities. Uncertainties will lead paradoxically to increased interest in finding more significant levels of predictabilities. Hence, Harari predicts the possibility that technology and AI are likely to have an increased presence in knowledge-making enterprises both outside and within higher education.

University lecturers will need to instil amongst learners/students how to make ethical choices which serve the best interests of the broader social system, not in narrow individualistic supremacies of rampant profitabilities, partisan, nationalistic and/or politically expedient ways. The new students should be aware that as human beings, we have the potential to make 'big' choices amongst the available expanding bodies of knowledges. The challenges of nuclear war and global climate change are critical meta-level global crises that the international community should be addressing. However, the present context is still preoccupied with old century values of nationalisms and ideological differences. There is a need to develop an attitudinal mind-shift towards developing ambassadors, not careerist occupations. One ought to be preparing university students to establish *agendas of ethical and global proportions*. A further challenge is perhaps how we interpret the COVID-19 pandemic. A competitive comparability regime currently prevails, where each nation/ geographic provincial context is defending its own borders. Where are the *global champions of collaborative interactivity* referred to in the introduction to this chapter?

This *philosophical recommissioning of mindsets* allows university

lecturers to develop broader conceptions of whose imperatives about knowledge engagement currently drive our higher education systems. It suggests that we cannot be limited in our preoccupation with mundane matters of, for example, assignment handing-in modalities, administrative regulations and controls, managing large classes, and the massification of the education system. These operational considerations have their place, but cannot be our primary agenda. Our preoccupation, as higher education specialists, should ascend into larger forces of a meta-analysis of our current routinised operations. Our education system has always embraced degrees of distance between the world of yesterday and the world of the future. Indeed, the immediate plan is to harness a collective attitude shift about our roles and responsibilities as higher education specialists. We have to re-imagine how we negotiate our relationships with broader social systems, the marketplace and parliament. We need to work with how transitory our own knowledge systems are, especially as they become increasingly outdated and updated.

## **5 Closing Comments**

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown have indeed caused a revolutionary destabilising of the routines of our everyday world of university education. It has assisted lecturers and students in reassessing the values we hold dear and allowed us to re-question the foundational principles which underpin our practices. It has allowed us to (re)learn our teaching. On a mundane level, it has required that university lecturers find a balance between the technology, their pedagogy and the content knowledges of our present times. On a more profound level, this operational world will soon become unravelled by the dawn of a future era of multiple uncertainties and pluralities of technological revolutions. We are learning about our beliefs about knowledge, about our levels of under-preparedness to tackle the new world of a technological revolution. But we have to re-educate ourselves to tackle what to do when we do not know what to do. Subtly, yet forcibly, the world has come to question whether our defensive borders can easily be eroded as the new viruses of change need no official passports for travel. We migrate into new ways of being confident that we are uncertain, and we do not know the future. Our disciplines, our knowledges of defined cultures, races, sexualities, nationhoods will all come to be reconfigured. Nevertheless, we know that our disposition to find forever-new-ways-of-being will be our legacy for

generations to come. Our success will not lie in whether we graduate hordes of existing graduates, or how we prop up our nationalistic or disciplinary pride or geographed xenophobic or culturally-bounded prejudices. It will be if we can produce ethical beings who champion the cause of global imperatives. New opportunities await our efforts.

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