COVID-19 and *Currere*: Looking Back and Going Forward

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Abstract

The massification of higher education in the late 1990s in South Africa signalled the need for concerted efforts towards implementing dual modes of teaching and learning. Studies on mass higher education indicate that, while massification is driven by a social justice agenda, the increasing student enrolment and the low staff numbers require augmented technological and innovative ways of teaching and assessment. While higher education institutions have been engaging in this discussion, COVID-19 has become the catalyst towards pushing institutions to move beyond even blended approaches and to utilise online teaching and learning. We argue that the push towards blended or complete online learning is not new – this remains old wine in a new bottle. Pinar's four reflective stages of *currere* are useful to assist in explaining how our personal and institutional histories as academics are central in responding to the need for new ways of conducting teaching, learning and assessment. Drawing from Pinar's framework, this chapter seeks to examine the missed opportunities during massification, explore aspects that might have obstructed response to these opportunities and argue how they can be seized in the time of COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, massification, *currere*, blended learning, online learning

1 Introduction

The massification of higher education institutions (hereafter HEIs) in the early 1990s signalled in South Africa the need for concerted efforts towards implementing dual modes of teaching and learning. By massification, we mean the increase in the enrolment of students that are accessing higher education (Mohamedbhai 2014). Ensuring access to higher education for persons of all races and from all socioeconomic backgrounds was a national social justice call, heeding constitutional rights, and redressing the injustice of the apartheid system (Bill of Rights 1996; DHET 2001). Consequentially, increasing access to higher education placed increased demand on HEIs for new pedagogical and learning methods to support students and their diverse needs. Massification, though challenging to HEIs, was an opportunity to genuinely explore and integrate online teaching and learning (asynchronous) with contact teaching and learning (synchronous), creating a model of teaching and learning known as blended or hybrid teaching and learning, which has been adopted by various international institutions (Garrison & Kanuka 2004). The adoption of this approach has been observed to result in improved student outcomes; satisfaction, and positive experiences for academics and students alike; flexibility, accessibility and convenience that reduces location dependency and time constraints; environmental, technological and cost efficiencies and the potential for the establishment of new revenue sources that are not possible through contact teaching (Selim 2007; Coskuncay & Ozkan 2013; Graham 2013). The positive effects associated with the approach would have served as an effective response to the demands that were leveraged by massification. While this approach has its strengths, it also has some limitations. Amongst others, these include heavy workloads for instructors, with setting up and creating content for online platforms, and difficulties in maintaining an online presence, especially when chats are rapid and there are multiple voices and challenges in engaging and supporting isolated students (Gillet-Swan 2017). The insurgence of COVID-19 has amplified the significant gaps that were left from the inadequate implementation of blended learning in HEIs.

To curb the spread of this global pandemic, unprecedented containment and mitigation strategies have been enforced in the form of national lockdowns, which restrict the operations of non-essential services, the closing of borders for non-essential travel, and the promotion of various health and hygiene measures such as handwashing, respiratory etiquette, social and

physical distancing (Bedford *et al.* 2020). In line with these strategies, from about mid-March, South African universities shut down their doors in an attempt to curb the spread of the virus and to flatten the curve. The impact of these has necessitated for the need to conduct work remotely through online platforms, in context where they had blended learning, they are now limping on one foot— online remote teaching.

Globally, some universities have fully transitioned to online learning and are continuing with the academic year. Though it is challenging to have contact teaching removed, we believe universities that optimally integrated blending learning before COVID-19 are better positioned and will be able to survive this global catastrophe. In South Africa, online platforms for teaching and learning have existed in our universities for many years, as universities have adopted Learning Management Systems (LMSs), such as Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Moodle), Sakai, and Blackboard as part of their enhanced learning experience provided to students. However, the optimal use and functions of these LMSs has not been fully explored (Ssekakubo, Suleman & Marsden 2012). The under-usage of LMSs has left academics and students not being fully acculturated to their use. Other challenges include students not having laptops and the significant costs associated with data internet connectivity issues (Chobita 2017). The anxiety and stress associated with calculating how the world and higher education will look after the threat of COVID-19 has dissipated, triggering us to wonder what will remain in the aftermath (Dennis 2020). As a result, the sudden need to switch to online teaching and learning has brought the academic community into a state of disarray, and has left leaders and stakeholders of HEIs in search of extenuating solutions to salvage the academic year. This is because traditional contact universities are not up to speed with online teaching and learning, and both staff and students are not well versed in how to conduct university business in the distance mode (Guardia 2016; Maringe 2020).

In this discussion, we seek not to portray blended or online teaching and learning as the best approaches. We are aware of some of the limitations these approaches may have. What we argue is, rather, that in this moment of urgency, where the current proposals are recommending online teaching and learning as a way to resume academic activities, it would have been less challenging to migrate to this approach had we cultivated and acquired the skills prior to this stage. We draw from the *currere* framework, a social reconstructive theory by William Pinar (1994; 2004), in framing this chapter,

using his four reflective stages; regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical. Firstly, through the stages, we look at the past and re-examine massification in terms of how it unfolded, and its consequences. Secondly, we will look forward to an imagined future and explore how this might be shaped. Thirdly, we will interrogate different aspects that might have prevented the rolling out of the blended learning approach and from these extract lessons that we may use to respond to COVID-19. Lastly, we will look at what can be done as we face the current scourge of the pandemic.

2 Regressive: A Glance of the Past

The regressive stage entails taking a step back, re-visiting our histories and experiences (Pinar 2004). In doing so, we take a glance of the past by looking back at the first monumental historical turning point in higher education post-apartheid. We return to the early 1990s, at the beginning of South African mass higher education. Higher education student enrolment in 1994 was approximately 420 000; this has subsequently increased to 1.1 million in 2014 (Habib 2019). Unlike the United States of America, which was organisationally and structurally ready for mass higher education long before it started in their context (Trow 2000), the challenges relating to mass higher education were compounded in developing countries (Hornsby, Osman & De Matos-Ala 2013). South Africa, a developing country, inherited a highly unequal higher education system from the apartheid government. According to Mohamedbhai (2014), there was a need to increase access to higher education, specifically for the previously disadvantaged population. Although the higher education transformation in South Africa was founded on principles of social justice, Jansen (2003) cautioned the country that massification and the merging of certain institutions would increase the challenges with regards to access. He noted that closing or merging of institutions that were meant for those in rural areas would subsequently create competition for access and resources in the newly merged institutions, as there are few resources to fund higher education (Jansen 2003; Hornsby *et al.* 2013). For example, the number of academics was not concomitantly increased (Maringe & Sing 2014). According to the Council on Higher Education (2016), massification spawned changes in sizes, structure, and there was a need to invest in infrastructure that would respond to the increasing enrolment.

The Council on Higher Education (2016) states that mass higher edu-

cation required a change in curriculum delivery and alternatives, such as open or blended approaches, to accommodate the increased student enrolment. Within their budgetary constraints, universities made means to provide solutions to the rising enrolments that would hinder teaching and learning if left unattended. As a result, the call to integrate LMSs into teaching increased as other universities had begun finding ways to make use of them. A key issue is whether institutions have made full use of the capacity of LMSs for interaction. Evidence suggests that LMSs were used as a form of one-way communication; they were not interactive and suitable for student engagements (Snowball 2014). Similarly, Mpungose (2020) notes that students are reluctant to use LMSs like Moodle, because they feel constrained and limited by the platform as limited opportunities are made available for socialising and sharing information, and communication becomes limited to emails.

Our anecdotal evidence shows that institutions were mainly concerned with addressing the challenges of shortage of teaching venues, student funding, teaching materials and resources. The modes of curriculum delivery were not so much prioritised, illustrating Pinar's point that we regress, enter and live in the past (Pinar 1994).

Looking on the crisis faced by the academic community as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, we catapult to the future and seek to envisage what must be done to be able to achieve what we imagine it to be.

3 Progressive: Looking Forward into an Imagined Future

The progressive stage of *currere* indicates that we should imagine what is not yet present; we should imagine the future (Pinar 1994; 2004). In imagining the future, we assert that academics and the academy will constantly be confronted with triggering events that demand a change in approach. A triggering event is 'a state of dissonance or feeling of unease resulting from experience' (Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2001: 21). We qualify this claim by looking at what has already happened and what is currently happening. Massification was one such triggering event, and we believe it will continue. We now have COVID-19, which will also remain in both the present and the future. This is because despite the duration of the panic, its impact will have a long-lasting effect on higher education and the world at large (Martin & Furiv 2020). Considering these triggering events, the urgency for change is constant, and is likely to be present in our imagined future.

We ought to critically reflect on our past actions, their shortcomings, and from these, harness valuable lessons. We must ensure that we take advantage of the opportunities that online teaching and learning present for a changing and evolving world, and ensure that in both our present and future, we use them to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning more broadly (Marshall 2011). It is important to emphasise that the imagined future will be characterised by reforms across all elements of the academy. For now, we focus on online teaching and learning as one of those elements, because through it, a 'huge opportunity exists for all universities to expand access to more students in the medium to long term' (Maringe 2020: para. 10). Unlike before, we anticipate a future in which HEIs have a strategic plan for the implementation and constant improvement of online teaching and learning. According to Morrill (2007), a strategy is well-rounded if it outlines purposes and priorities, gets the buy-in of implementers by providing motivation, mobilises resources, and sets a clear direction, with measurable outcomes to drive change.

In this chapter ,we extend the discussion to examine academics and their future needs in the academy. Imperative to the strategy is their buy in and their capacitation. Christo-Baker (2004) cautions that institutions must ensure that there is technological and pedagogical support for academics, because, without that, any changes in instructional format are likely to fail. Additionally, Mishra and Koehler (2006) suggest that support must simultaneously address content, pedagogy and technology, because a content-neutral approach makes the incorrect assumption that knowledge of a particular technology means good teaching and learning when using the technology. To this, Graham and Robison (2007) remind us that such considerations are important, because the academics are at a crucial vantage point, since they are the primary pedagogical implementers and decision-makers in their classrooms. As such, a bottom-up approach that prepares academics is a critical component for the success of online programmes (Baran & Correia 2014).

The future also requires us as academics to remind ourselves of what we mean and understand by online practice. According to Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001), there are three dominant categories for online practice; namely, instructional design and organisation; facilitating discourse; and direct instruction. Institutions must work collaboratively with academics from various disciplines in order to create fit for purpose professional development opportunities that will facilitate and support the transition to online

teaching and learning (Schmidt, Tschida & Hodge 2016). This is to ensure that academics can develop the necessary pedagogical skills and practices that enable them to engage in online teaching and learning with visibility, intentionality, and active engagement (Jaggars, Edgecombe & Stacey 2013), which are fundamentals of effective online practice. Equally important is that we do not stop learning and adapting our practices and approaches in response to the constantly changing demands. We now know that technological evolution is rapid (Rønningsbakk, Huang, Sandnes & Wu 2019), and academics and the academy must always stay abreast of these changes.

While we look to the future and respond to the urgency, we must not forget that designing a module to be offered on an online platform takes time, with months of preparation and careful consideration of teaching and learning materials, activities, assessments tasks and pedagogical underpinnings that all are aligned to the module outcomes (Humbert 2007). The sudden overload and hastiness of rushing to move to the online platform under such short timelines and the current conditions leveraged by COVID-19 may cause technostress. This occurs when the amount of information provided goes beyond what individuals can actually absorb and respond to (Chiappeta 2017).

That being said, beyond COVID-19 we imagine a future where blended learning and online remote learning, at least for specific programmes, continues, and is sustained. Although there could be challenges years from now, we anticipate proactive and collaborative interdisciplinary work in HEIs, especially in South Africa. We now take a step back and reflect on why the various attempts made by HEIs in strengthening support for teaching and learning through LMSs are now failing.

4 Analytical: We were There, Now we are Here

The analytical stage in the method of *currere* focuses on the past and the present (Pinar 2004). To unpack this stage further, Pinar (1994: 26) uses the following question, 'how is the future present in the past, the past in the future and the present in both?' We are in a time where we experienced massification. That period of expansion of access to higher education presented an opportunity for institutional and curriculum reform and transformation (Fataar 2018). As Fataar continues, 'universities failed to develop traction for establishing an institutional orientation and platform for achieving inclusive student access' (2018: 2). We are now in a time where some of the changes that were favoured,

such as blended learning, would now make it easier to implement the changes demanded by the current circumstance, that is, online teaching and learning.

So, how did we miss the chance to adopt these changes earlier? It is a question as to whether the opportunity has been missed to soften the blow of an urgent transition. We submit that the introduction of online learning management systems (LMSs) was a positive advancement towards the adoption of blended learning. However, even though the timing of the introduction of LMSs was well aligned to the needs of academic activities related to massification, we submit that they were introduced prematurely, without timelines and sufficient technical support for users (Mitchell *et al.* 2007).

The function of LMSs as platforms for facilitating teaching and learning has been underutilised, and has not been efficiently or effectively adopted. As such, there has been an explicit divide between the intended use and the actual use of these LMSs. Madiba (2011) observes that in some HEIs, the acquisition of these systems has been symbolic, and nothing more than a mere technical project. As such, universities did not even have a policy framework for using LMSs. Similar findings are presented by Mpungose (2020), who observes that LMSs in certain teacher education institutions became a 'dumping platform' for notes and communication (see Mpungose 2020: 935). They have been reduced to nothing more than easy access storage facilities, rather than platforms where dynamic learning occurs (McKenna 2016).

The under-usage of the LMSs during massification also took away the opportunity to narrow the digital divide. The digital divide examines four barriers of access, with each barrier being attached to a specific type of access it restricts (Van Dijk & Hacker 2003). These are are motivational access, material or physical access, skills access, and usage access (Van Dijk 2005). Motivational access relates to the motivation to use digital technology (Van Dijk 2005). Here, we add Van Dijk and Hackers' (2003) earlier work, which also considers mental access caused by lack of interest, computer anxiety, and the lack of attractiveness of the new technology. Van Dijk (2005) avers that, while this has been ignored for the most part, it is the first phase of access and overcoming it creates the necessary foundation for full appropriation to the digital technologies, that is, the adoption of blended learning. The material or physical access is the barrier that has received most attention (Hohlfeld, Ritzhaupt, Dawson & Wilson 2017). This barrier speaks to the restrictions of

access caused by the inability to secure the hardware, software, internet connectivity, and other material resources, such as the knowledge and information needed to access and participate in a digital space (Van Dijk 2005). Skills access is the barrier caused by the lack of digital skills (Van Dijk & Hacker 2003; Van Dijk 2005). The digital skills that are necessary are operational, informational, and strategic skills (Van Dijk & Hacker 2003). They can only be cultivated where there is motivational access, material and physical access, and adequate education and support (Van Dijk & Hacker 2003). Usage access is reliant on the access that lies beyond those barriers mentioned above. This is the ultimate goal of all the other forms of access because, at this level of access, users are able to utilise the technology for the purpose for which it is intended (Van Dijk 2005); which in this case would have been the use of LMSs to mediate blended teaching and learning (ibid.).

Specific factors led to failure to capitalise on the opportunities that were present during massification and the adoption of blended learning approach through LMSs. According to McKenna (2016), the adoption of blended learning was more often than not utilised in the absence of the necessary academic support or pedagogical expertise. Not surprising, then, are the findings that indicate that a lack of preparedness, inadequate technological skills, increased administration, and pedagogical concerns (Deaker, Stein & Spiller 2016; Mansbach & Austin 2018) have been barriers that have inhibited academics from fully adopting the blended approach. What we draw from this is that while HEIs were able to provide the material and physical access in terms of LMSs and hardware, they fell short in narrowing the digital divide in terms of motivational, skills and usage access. Had blended learning been fully adopted, with the necessary support in place, the motivational, skills and usage barriers of access would have been minimised, and as a result the present migration to online teaching and learning would have been less challenging from the outset.

As HEIs find themselves under pressure to salvage the academic year, the transition to online platforms should be approached with caution and should not neglect the pedagogical importance required for successful teaching and learning. Already mentioned is that academics have been unable to cultivate the pedagogical profile necessary to teach in online platforms. This is a major concern, especially for academics in teacher education institutions. There have been various studies (Moore & Kearsley 1996; Palloff & Pratt 1999; Collison, Elbaum, Haavind & Tinker 2000) that assert that the funda-

mental role for a teacher on an online platform is that of a facilitator. The facilitator role supersedes other roles and responsibilities. This implies that facilitating and understanding the navigation of the online platform is more important than the pedagogical and knowledge specialist roles that teachers take up in contact teaching (Wallace 2003). The difficulties with this argument become evident in the teacher training field, where not only content-specific knowledge is taught, but how it is taught is knowledge in itself. Therefore, it is impossible to teach pedagogical knowledge without using the opportunity to model and display pedagogics in action through a teacher's method of teaching (Cummings 2020). With that understanding, it is not only the facilitation and navigation of the online platform that is essential, however, in teacher training, it is also the content and pedagogical knowledge, as these all become subject matter for learning (Wallace 2003).

The position we take is that, in our current position, the past is present. By this, we mean that we have experienced a certain stagnation. Therefore, if our decisions in HEIs are not critically thought through, the present will become the future, and we will experience the same challenges should the world plunge into another crisis or pandemic of similar scale or consequence. At this stage our discussion shifts to the present.

5 Synthetical: At a Defining Moment

In the previous sections we analysed the past and the future in relation to the present. Herein we are concerned with the meaning of the present (Pinar 2004) and the different ways to seize the opportunities missed when mass higher education started. We call this a defining moment because, in the midst of the crisis, we are required to make new choices and abandon those that have proven to be unresponsive for 'productive living in complex times' and for the epistemic becoming of a diverse student population (Fataar 2018: 2). There are academic, professional and financial implications that compel HEIs to continue with academic activity under remote online learning. Cognisant of the gravity of the situation facing South African HEIs, institutions should by all means continue to offer quality teaching to the best of their abilities, while taking full consideration of the range of students whose different learning environments may or may not be conducive for learning.

Michael Fullan (2020, April 6) tweeted 'I don't know about you, but I am overwhelmed by the proliferation of ideas for remote learning. My best

advice is, don't run towards a solution [...] Think anew about education, focus on those that need help, while all of us take 2020 to create a better system'. We heed the advice of Fullan and intentionally choose not to provide prescriptive solutions, because perhaps even what we have imagined as our ideal future may still be influenced by our 'deeply entrenched cultures, rituals, and traditions' (Dhunpath & Vithal 2012: 2). Dennis (2020) also reminds us that 'disruptions and upheavals are not the usual companion of logic and reason' (para.3).

Hodges *et al.* (2020) highlight that universities ought to be honest in making a distinction in terms of the kind of education they are offering students during this time. They continue to explain that universities that were not fully using or reliant on LMS ought not to be claiming to offer online learning now, as that gives the impression that LMS was fully operational and optimally used before the COVID-19. They request universities to call it what it is 'emergency remote teaching' (p. 3). We support this call, because this is important, especially to universities who will be going back to the normative post-COVID-19. The true reality is that no institution 'making the transition to online teaching under these circumstances will truly be designing to take the full advantage of the affordances and possibilities of the online format' (Hodges *et al.* 2020: 2). This is the kind of reflexivity that is needed moving forward so we can make sound decisions. We must acknowledge that HEIs face a turning curve and a trajectory of learning under circumstances that are not favourable for such learning to occur.

6 Flexibility and Prioritisation for the Current Situation

This pandemic has also brought us to think about what is truly important about education, and that is learning – institutions should be duly concerned with offering platforms to learn. So how can HEIs carefully continue to provide their core service of teaching and learning during the era of COVID-19? We submit that flexibility is central in assisting and relieving both students and academics from the tensions of the present situation. As the fundamental stakeholders of teaching and learning, academics and students both carry multiple identities – being parents, children, wives and husbands etc. – and they have to attend to and manage all these various identities during this time. Therefore, flexibility is paramount to allow for balance and to prevent emotional and health complications that may arise during this time. In

conversation, teaching and learning management, students and academics need to be given time to adjust both to the circumstances of online learning and to changes in their learning environments, which may or may not be conducive during this time (Cummings 2020).

Stanger (2020) advocates for doing away with grades and implementing a pass or fail system without giving actual marks. This has already been implemented by institutions such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Smith College (ibid.). Stanger (2020) believes that this may eliminate some challenges of fairness, whilst still providing students learning material during this anxious time. In a pass/fail system, academics would conduct formative assessments and focus on the students' learning, instead of summative assessments, which are more rigid, and may be stressful to both academics and students. Here, instructors can find ways to engage students in their learning while assessing their engagement, understanding of the content discussed, shared or taught. For the affected academic year, HEIs can do away with stringent deadlines and penalties, allowing for extensions beyond submission dates where necessary. Being cognisant of the module quality that needs to be maintained, which has already been affected by this social distancing, academics may also reconsider the amount and the kind of assessment tasks they set for students.

In the time that HEIs are in ongoing conversation, trying to find the best solution, it is also important to include students in the conversation. As a collective, we can find creative and innovative ways to best respond to this pandemic. Various universities, when the reality of the need for online learning became clear, sent surveys to students, collecting mainly demographical data – in order to understand student needs. This was necessary in order to identify the concerns of the students and their ongoing challenges, which would need to be taken into consideration for learning and assessment purposes (Kelly 2020). This is particularly important in South Africa, because in all that we do, we must not reverse the gains made by massification by now excluding those who do not have certain types of access due to the digital divide.

In this chapter, we intentionally avoid making suggestions regarding what means exist to currently mediate remote teaching and learning. We believe that, now more than ever, we ought to be able to craft context-responsive solutions that will best serve academics and students alike. HEIs have an opportunity to pioneer a new future. As alluded to by Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, and Bond (2020) about the new normal, Hill (2020) believes we

cannot revert to the old normal post COVID-19. As challenging and uncomfortable as this pandemic has been for the academic community, it should also be understood as a teachable moment, where we can learn new ways of doing things that we can integrate into our new normal for when we go back to contact teaching. In the case of South Africa, we believe that part of the new normal would be concerted use of blended learning post-COVID-19.

7 Conclusion

In our discussion we have shown that responses to the COVID-19 pandemic globally require interventions such as remote teaching, learning and assessment. Pinar's four stages of *currere* provide a useful lens in reflecting on missed opportunities, such as the failure to introduce blended learning parallel with the massification of higher education. Reflecting on the past and anticipating the future suggest that, going forward, we ought to be inclusive in our approaches. The present context and possible post-COVID-context should not widen inequalities. We require flexibility and collaboration to seize those opportunities we might discover in the shift.

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