AOSIS

Beyond COVID-19: Teaching and learning lessons for the next pandemic through Ubuntu currere

CrossMark
click for updates

Authors:
Mlamuli N. Hlatshwayo[1]
Amanda Mbatha[2]

Affiliations:
[1]Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

[2]Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Mlamuli Hlatshwayo,
mhlatshwayo@uj.ac.za

The emergence of the teaching an pandemic was a fundamentally disruptive force in the global higher education system that called on us to re-think the very purposes of higher education, our values, and who the academy is inherently for. Largely driven by the then panic over the unpredictable and infectious nature of the COVID-19 disease, higher education institutions had to close down and find virtual, Online and/or digital ways of continuing the teaching and learning programme. In this article, we firstly explore and theorise academics' experiences of the emergency remote teaching and the complex challenges that they had to negotiate during this crisis in higher education. We reveal the complex, challenging and depressing experiences that they navigated as they grappled with the emergency remote teaching in their context, and the effect this had on their well-being. We propose the idea of Ubuntu currere as an emancipatory pedagogy, necessary to helping us respond to the next pandemic in the higher education sector. We suggest that our response to the next pandemic(s) needs to be anchored in decolonial and social justice frameworks, necessary for rethinking teaching and learning during a crisis.

Contribution: In this article, our contribution is twofold. We firstly contribute to the emerging body of research that shines a spotlight on academics' experiences, voices and/or narratives in grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic in their teaching and learning contexts. Secondly, we propose the idea of Ubuntu currere (i.e. Ubuntu curriculum) as offering us useful emancipatory lessons in responding to the future pandemics in higher education.

Keywords: emergency remote teaching; higher education; teaching and learning; Ubuntu currere; COVID-19.

Introduction

There is little doubt in our minds that the COVID-19 pandemic was a fundamentally disruptive force in the global higher education system. The emergence of the pandemic forced the higher education sector to re-think its teaching and learning (and research) practices, resulting in what was gradually agreed to be a 'skewed response' symptomatic of the global and structural inequalities in the higher education system (Guangul et al. 2020; Iglesias-Pradas et al. 2021; Means & Neisler 2021). This resulted in higher education scholars rightfully arguing about the purposes of a university, its functions, and who it ought to serve in the global South. In the article, 'The pandemic is a portal', the Indian novelist and activist Roy (2020) argues that the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic offers us an epistemic, ontological and/or methodological opportunity to reimagine the way we do things, and to pursue an inclusive, democratic, and socially just alternative. For Roy, the pandemic offers a space to 'imagine [*our*] world anew… It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next' (Roy 2020), and this gateway offers a challenge to do two things. That is, rethinking our current neoliberal order, and to reject the 'business as usual' model, premised on a deep rejection of our pre-pandemic order as anti-human, anti-environment, anti-development, and anti-human rights. In this article, we take on Roy's challenge through exploring and theorising the complex experiences of academics in navigating and negotiating the pitfalls of the emergency remote teaching (hereafter the ERT). We reveal how the ERT was disruptive, lacked critical engagement, and resulted in some students being left behind. Building on these academics' narratives, voices and/or experiences, we propose Ubuntu currere (i.e. ubuntu curriculum) as a decolonial and emancipatory pedagogy that will help us respond to the next pandemic in higher education, and in teaching and learning practices.

The emergency remote teaching: Teaching in crisis

Ferri, Grifoni and Guzzo (2020) argue that scholars often make the mistake of assuming that the ERT is part of the online teaching and learning offerings. For Ferri et al. (2020), the ERT refers to

the temporary and often unplanned urgent shift of instructional delivery (i.e. teaching and learning) to an alternative remote and/or virtual forum in response to a crisis. This includes making available in the digital space, all the teaching and learning material, delivery, assessments and readings that would traditionally be transmitted through face-to-face interactions. The central rationale for the ERT, at least according to Ferri et al. (2020), is not necessarily designed to re-create the critical engagement that characterises the face-to-face interactions, but rather to offer temporary access to curriculum. In a previous publication, one of the authors of this article has argued that the ERT was essentially the universities conceptualising 'teaching and learning as the "dumping" of curriculum material online in an attempt to salvage what is increasingly becoming a lost academic year' (Hlatshwayo 2020:143). This reflects similar cautions offered by Godsell (2020) who warned us about the possibilities of ERT producing 'disembodied script-like curriculum' that is meaningless, and that is anti-education.

The emergent literature on the ERT focusses on the complex challenges and experiences of both academics and students in grappling with this unplanned crisis in teaching and learning engagements (Jili & Masuku 2021; Ulla & Perales 2021; Waghid, Meda & Chiroma 2021). Jili and Masuku (2021) write about the technological, administrative and political climate in South Africa, the growing psychosocial factors affecting students in higher education as well as the socio-economic challenges that continue to cripple largely black working-class students who had to contend with structural poverty in their lives. Matarirano, Gqokonqana and Yeboah (2021) reveal how students had a largely twofold response to the ERT. They firstly struggled with the insufficient and expensive data costs, unstable network, loneliness as well as navigating an unconducive working environment at home. Secondly, response from students was largely positive with students appreciating the flexibility and convenience of recorded lectures, as well as the compassion and understanding that they received from their lecturers. Matarirano et al. (2021) concede that the ERT 'in its current format and students living in their home environments, remote learning greatly diminishes the chances of success for most students' (p. 199). This conclusion supports Du Preez and Le Grange's (2020) commentary on the challenges of enabling epistemic access (i.e. access to the curriculum goods) in the time of virtual, digital and/or Online. We should also recognise and acknowledge the 'underside' of the ERT as was seen with the cheating and academic dishonesty because of the lack of monitoring, checking and accountability systems in ensuring that assessments were truly performed by students (Gamage, Silva & Gunawardhana 2020; Verhoef & Coetser 2021; White 2020).

There has also been an emergent scholarship that has sought to interrogate the 'Zoom fatigue', mental and/or physical health challenges as well as the difficulties of socially constructing and managing assessment in an emergency pandemic (Majola & Mudau 2022; Ní Fhloinn & Fitzmaurice 2021; Slamet et al. 2021). Naidu and Modise (2022) comment on the increasing fallacy and blurriness of the home and/or work divided, in how the day was never ending for academics who now had to sacrifice themselves, their lives and families to make sure that they salvage the academic programme.

An emancipatory pedagogy: A brief commentary

Emancipatory pedagogy is deeply rooted and located in the idea that the function of education ought to be creating a just, inclusive and democratic society (Arce 2004; Nouri & Sajjadi 2014). In other words, education is inherently political, ideological and largely serves the needs of the ruling class, often at the expense of colonised and occupied subalterns. Education and its pedagogy is designed to socially construct, maintain and reinforce this racial, class, and gender inequality and marginality in society (Freire 1970). For Césaire (1972), this is an education that responds to the 'thingi-fication' of the subalterns, and for Du Bois (2008) and De Sousa Santos (2015), it is an education that continues to reveal the colour line, demarcating those who live, think, and breath in the zone of being, and the wretched of the Earth who continue to languish in the zone of non-being. Taking up Gordon's (2011) argument, emancipatory pedagogy must be an educational project that preoccupies itself with thinking through how to constantly shift the geography of reason, and to re-humanise the historically conquered and occupied. Nouri and Sajjadi (2014) suggest that education:

> [*I*]nvolves a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationships in classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state. (p. 78)

Hence, this cannot be teaching for the sake of teaching, or teaching for the sake of rushing through and fulfilling the neoliberal, performance management requirements.

For scholars such as Giroux (1988), Freire (2018), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), education becomes a tool in which students become 'transformative intellectuals' who are committed to the redressing of the injustices at the ideological, methodological, epistemic and ontological levels of the liberation struggle. At the heart of Freire's emancipatory pedagogy is the kind of education that enables both the student and the teacher to develop some form of critical consciousness, which will enable them to understand their role in the world. Put differently, it is the kind of education that enables the teacher to become the student and dialectically, the student to become the teacher. This for Freire, is enabled through *true dialogue* that occurs through love, humility, faith, trust, hope, and critical thinking (Nouri & Sajjadi 2014). In 'Teaching to transgress: Education as a practice of freedom', Hooks (2014) argues that the classroom environment is a productive space with the potential to liberate and help fashion the 'most radical space for possibility' in our lives (Hooks 2014). This aligns with Cabral's (1974) argument in recommending that we need to

'return to the source', thereby resolving two contradictions for us in emancipatory pedagogy. That is: (1) rejecting the postcolonial nationalist governments' nativist or localised conceptions of knowledge and (2) rejecting the global North-ification of educational outcomes, seeking to produce Euromericans or what T.S. Elliot (1963) had called, the 'hollow men' in the global South. Cabral (1974) advocates for what he calls a 'critical analysis of African cultures', premised on a developing dialectical and complex appreciation of the diverse and pluriverse nature of African ways of being and seeing, beyond simplistic, imperial and/or colonial binaries.

In this article, we rely primarily on the work of Le Grange (2019) to formulate the idea of Ubuntu currere as an onto-epistemic solution to higher education teaching and learning. We see, read and conceptualise Ubuntu currere as an emancipatory pedagogy that attempts to resolve a number of educational challenges. Firstly, it challenges, rejects and/or dismantles the flawed western epistemic assumption based on the Cartesian rationality of *Cogito, ergo sum* ('I think therefore I am'). We argue that the 'I' in Cartesian thought, represents the colonising, white, heterosexual European man, who based on his race, class, and/or gender classifications, is therefore the *only* real and legitimate actor in the planetary and ecological space. Secondly, we are persuaded by the need to challenge the unequal power relations in curriculum design, where students are often re-presented as passive consumers of curriculum knowledge whose role in curricula and teaching and learning often comes at the end of the module when they are asked to evaluate a finished curriculum product. This understanding of curriculum as a priori, as complete – is misleading, dangerous, and deeply undemocratic. We draw on these ideas later in the article.

We now turn to the methodological decisions of our article.

Research methods and design

In this article, we adopted a critical paradigm to see the emergent powers, inequality, structural oppression, and racialised inequality in focussing on the experiences of academics in grappling with the ERT in their context. We were drawn to the critical paradigm particularly because of the emancipatory intellectual contributions of the Frankfurt school scholars such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Benjamin, Pollock, Lowenthal and Fromm (Corradetti 2012). Largely shaped by Horkheimer's argument that 'when an active individual of sound common sense perceives the sordid state of the world, desire to change it becomes the guiding principle by which he organises given facts and shapes them into a theory'. The central organising logic of the critical paradigm is thus twofold: (1) understanding how power and/or structural oppression operates in society and (2) challenging that power, and dislodging it (see Brincat 2011:218). In the article, 'On the methods of critical theory: Advancing the project of emancipation beyond the early Frankfurt school', Brincat (2011:220–221) argues that the critical

paradigm has always been concerned with the human condition to emancipate from suffering, a suffering bought by coercion from nature and from social life. In our article, the critical paradigm aligns with the commitment to an emancipatory pedagogy in suggesting that the teaching and learning methods adopted during the ERT were alienating, outdated and unjust, both to the academics, and to the students as well.

We purposively recruited and interviewed seven education academics in one research intensive university in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal. The guiding questions for our research were: (1) What are academics' experiences of negotiating the ERT in teaching and learning practices? (2) How do academics negotiate the ERT, and perhaps most important for us in this project, (3) Why do academics negotiate the ERT in this particular manner? All these three questions were central in framing the research project, and in helping us get access to the voices, narratives and/or experiences of academics in grappling with the ERT in their teaching and learning. It should be observed that this study was conducted at the heart of the COVID-19 lockdown mandates in South Africa, beginning in March 2020 and the data generation concluded in May 2020.

This research article is part of a much larger institutional study focussing on higher education transformation and decolonisation. Through this project, we have obtained the necessary ethical permission and gatekeeper consent to undertake this study. All the research participants who took part in this article had read their research and ethical rights, and we obtained their consent both in writing and through digital and/or audio recording. The main data generation method was semi-structured interviews, ranging between 45 min and about 2 h per individual. In respect of protecting the confidentiality of the research participants, all the participants' names were anonymised, and all efforts were made to hide their identities and to protect any information that could potentially harm or compromise them.

The data were analysed and coded in two ways. Firstly, and in line with suggestions from Peel (2020), we relied on the six stages of data analysis. That is: (1) collecting, (2) engaging with the data, (3) coding, (4) generating the code categories, (5) conceptualising the themes, and (6) contextualising and representing the findings. This allowed the data to essentially 'speak for itself', before we impose any theoretical or conceptual framework. The secondly set of analysis involved bringing in Ubuntu currere as an emancipatory pedagogy needed for fashioning an emancipatory praxis.

All the interviews were manually transcribed and coded. Nine significant themes emerged from the data, but for the purposes of this article, only three themes are discussed and theorised.

We now turn to the findings and discussions.

On disruptions, the (lack of) engagements, and the never-ending shift

For the majority of the participants who took part in this article, the COVID-19 pandemic was a chaotic, unplanned and disruptive moment in their academic and/or personal lives. They largely felt that they were forced to not only respond to this crisis but they also had to quickly learn about the different technological tools that are available to take traditional forms of teaching and learning to the virtual and/or digital spaces. Using words such as 'boom', 'conquered', 'crashing', and 'fears', research participants narrated the early moments of the institutional rush to the ERT, and how they navigated it:

'Then suddenly, boom, 2020! Even more changes, it was suddenly from contact to emergency remote teaching. It was back to square one, learning everything from scratch, changing everything, going through YouTube videos, learning how to use different platforms. I did not know what hit me. I haven't really conquered all my fears, but I have grown so much.' (Priyanka, woman, lecturer)

'It just came upon us, and one had to hit the ground running as far as online teaching and learning was concerned. So, there was not enough time for preparation, we had to learn along the way and make mistakes. Learn from them but unfortunately the mistakes we were making were significant mistakes because they had to determine someone else's future.' (Sizwe, man, lecturer)

Priyanka and Sizwe comment on the crippling challenges that they encountered, navigated and negotiated during the early days of the ERT in their academic lives. For Priyanka, she approached what we could call the 'pandemic teaching' and its 'COVID curricula', she looked at this period as a teaching moment that was existentially designed to make her grow as an academic. For Sizwe, there was not enough time to build the ERT, and prepare the students and academics on how to conduct teaching and learning completely in that virtual space. This was further echoed by another research participant, Palesa, who commented that the 'training wasn't enough. It was some form of crash course because we were told we had to attend'. These voices, narratives and/or experiences are not new per se in the field. They reflect arguments by Moorhouse and Kohnke (2021) who revealed in their study, how academics spoke about 'surviving ERT', and reflected on how the pandemic and the emergent ERT had an effect on their self-confidence, resulting in them having feelings of self-doubt, and lacking competence. This was painfully shared by Katlego, another research participant, who commented that 'there was still that fear, like fear of anything that is new. There will always be that doubt of, will I be able to make it'. Thus, the fear, anxiety, doubt, and what could be seen as social dislocation was expressed by a large number of the research participants.

One of the major themes that emerged from the data focussed on the challenges of enabling and facilitating some form of critical engagement in the online and/or virtual space in line

with ERT requirements. It should be observed and appreciated that the South Africa state-nation,[1] is an imperial, colonial and/or apartheid invention, and as such, is still struggling (and failing) to resolve the racialised inequalities in the country (Francis & Webster 2019; Hundenborn, Leibbrandt & Woolard 2018; World Bank 2018). Often correctly classified and categorised as having the world's most unequal society with debilitating levels of structural poverty, underemployment, hunger, homelessness, and gender-based violence, the emergence of the ERT should be located within such a contested terrain. It therefore came as of little surprise when a large number of the research participants commented on the challenges of enabling and facilitating some form of online engagement during the ERT, with little success. Sizwe narrates below in how the class attendance and participation dropped dramatically during the ERT, which led to him teaching a reduced class size, and feeling like he is 'talking to himself':

'In a class of 250 students, you'll be lucky to have 20 students, and out of those 20 who would have logged on to attend, half would have logged on and disappeared to wherever they want to go. Effectively, you are talking to yourself, and those who are there, are just too shy to leave the class, no one bothers to answer you. You talk to yourself, literally. You ask a question; you ask if they are there, and no one answers. It is a very frustrating experience.' (Sizwe, man, lecturer)

In another research, one of the authors of this article had argued about the neoliberal university's simplistic conceptions of teaching and learning in general and ERT in particular when it comes to our pandemic teaching (Hlatshwayo 2020). Teaching and learning in a large number of universities in South Africa consisted of providing data, and for others, even laptops. Students (and academics) were thought of as 'decontextualised learners' (Boughey & McKenna 2021) whose socio-economic background and raced, gendered and/or classed lived experiences were rendered irrelevant and immaterial to the operations of the ERT. This further proved detrimental to the well-being of students who had to navigate the expensive costs of data, connectivity issues, signal challenges, unconducive home (working) environment and food insecurity. In 'Undergraduate psychology student experiences during COVID-19: Challenges encountered and lessons learnt', Laher et al. (2021) reveal how some students had to contend with isolation, loneliness, depression, tensions between their parents and/or guardians, family responsibilities, and attempting to work while sharing a living space with a large number of family members in a small space. One of the research participants, Priyanka, remarks on how some students did get left behind in her module, and the difficulties she experienced in attempting to reach out to them:

'There are students who do badly, mostly because of no communication from their side. They don't join the online

1. Statehood in and of itself is globally understood as being a by-product of the post-Westphalian order, where European states started first as nations who then constructed borders/boundaries around themselves thereby creating states/statehood (Bauder & Mueller 2023; Croxton 1999; Osiander 2001). In Africa and in other formally colonised parts of the world, statehood was imposed on us as a means of colonially dividing up different parts of the world, and enabling effective and efficient looting/plundering/stealing of indigenous resources.

classes. You send them a message or email saying that I haven't seen you in my class or I haven't heard from you, but I get no response. I have made effort to reach to them, but I don't get a response from them. I always try and drop an email to check on students as many things are happening, even to us as academics, and you'd be surprised when the student tells you about a challenge they have been having and it is a genuine problem.' (Priyanka, woman, lecturer)

Although not a major theme in the data, one of the interesting insights that emerged was around the idea of the never-ending day, or what Boncori (2020) calls the 'never ending shift' in the ERT. For some academics, they expressed frustrations about the growing blurriness, the instability and lack of clear boundaries between the home space and the workspace in their lives. For these academics, the home space and the workspace inter-sectionally became a single space, thereby disrupting their family time, resulting in one research participant, Palesa, remarking that this 'added stress on me as an academic and on my ability to perform… This made me lose out on family time and my studies'. In 'The Never-ending shift: A feminist reflection on living and organizing academic lives during the coronavirus pandemic', Boncori (2020) writes about Palesa's challenge in how this overlap produced new forms of marginality, anger, frustration and guilt, particularly in being unable to focus on the well-being of her family. This burden is often gendered and patriarchal in nature, and tends to affect women academics who have to contend with the invisible labour of the university, unlike their male counterparts who rarely have to confront such complexities. In 'Forced to care' at the neoliberal university: Invisible labour as academic labour performed by Black women academics in the South African University', Magoqwana, Maqabuka and Tshoaedi (2019) suggest that women academics, such as Palesa, tend to become what they call the 'black nannies' of the university, often being forced to perform this unrecognised, unseen, and unappreciated labour in higher education.

So far in this article, we have explored the complex and challenging experiences of academics in grappling with the emergence of the ERT in their lives. We revealed how disruptive, chaotic, undemocratic and troubling ERT has been for them. Through the use of Ubuntu currere, we now turn to proposing a series of lessons and interventions that could help the South African higher education sector respond to the next pandemic. We now turn to this idea.

Lessons for the next pandemic

As argued earlier, Ubuntu currere is largely concerned about the unequal power relations in curriculum thinking, and the complex and intricate manner in which the subaltern Others are *othered*, marginalised and oppressed in higher education spaces. In relation to the epistemic potentialities (or possibilities), Ubuntu currere could be useful in helping us think seriously about the kind of knowledge(s) that are re-centred, privileged and that dominate higher education curricula. This means that we as academics need to reconsider

the ontological, epistemic and methodological orientations of those who continue to live, breath and theorise our curriculum in higher education. This means doing two things. Firstly, being intentional, ideological, political and deliberative in re-centring and re-placing African and global South epistemic traditions as central in our curricula planning and its imaginations. Secondly, heeding Le Grange's (2019) caution about the need to collapse and dismantle the vertical, unequal power structures between the academics and students in the university. This aspect of curriculum planning, what the late British educationist Bernstein (1975) had called the 'field of recontextualization', is often hidden, unseen, and students are often dislocated from it. This socially produces the operational discourse, as argued earlier, that continues to represent students as deficient, unable and passive consumers of curriculum knowledge in our classrooms. Students (and other academics) often do not have access to the field of recontextualisation and are often excluded from it. A decolonial reading of Ubuntu currere as an emancipatory pedagogy in higher education teaching and learning practices could demand that students play a significant role in helping with the curriculum design, planning, content selection, sequencing, pacing, as well as choosing the different appropriate assessment tools in the module. A rethinking of the student, and our curriculum planning is essential, in particular given the rich and complex experiences, knowledge(s) and perspectives that students bring to curricula that we could potentially tap into. Thus, our first lesson for the pandemic has to have a decolonial orientation towards rethinking thinking itself, and the kind of knowledge(s) that we continue to produce, value and/or legitimate in our classrooms, including bringing in the student voice(s).

As suggested earlier, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of the ERT in our midst – teaching and learning – was abrupt and without much preparation; teaching and learning moved online with students expected to continue the virtual engagement(s) as demanded by curricula. As a result, we began to see a number of crises. Firstly, academics (and students) were not adequately prepared for this fundamental shift, as seen with some research participants who have lamented the abrupt shift to the ERT as chaotic, disruptive and challenging in their lives. Secondly, some students did indeed get left behind, as a result of being unable to access the online teaching and learning material, perform assessments, and other socio-economic and psychosocial challenges in their lives (e.g. Rallis & Allen-Tejerina 2020; Steinberger, Eshet & Grinautsky 2021). Thirdly, and perhaps most troubling for us, it reinforced the neoliberal (and colonising) 'survival of the fittest' discourse in higher education where saving the academic programme (and curricula) became much more important than saving human lives. Our response to the next pandemic need to be fashioned by a much more humane, democratic, and socially just understanding of higher education teaching and learning. What scholars such as Bozalek and Winberg (2018) and Corbera et al. (2020) call 'the ethics of care', and what Ramose (2016) calls the 'critical pan-epistemic orientation', should be a necessary response

for the next pandemic in ensuring that no student (or academic) is left behind. Research participants in this article have expressed great frustrations with the introduction of the ERT, highlighting in particular the lack of critical engagements online, the reinforcement of virtual forms of inequality particularly among students, as well as the never-ending shift in their lives. Thus, our lessons for the next pandemic in higher education, ought to be underpinned by the ethics of social justice, care and understanding. In practice, this means that we need to recognise and acknowledge that at least 55.0% of the population in the South Africa live in poverty (World Bank 2020), with unemployment sitting at 32.3% in the first quarter of 2023 so far (Stats SA 2023). This has implications for the kind of students who are in front of us in the classroom, and their ability to successfully engage with the online teaching and learning programmes.

Our lessons and interventions for the next pandemic in higher education must: (1) be firmly rooted and framed in a decolonial and social justice frameworks that will allow us to focus on saving lives instead of salvaging the academic year, (2) better training, workshops and/or mentoring are required to ensure that both academics and students are competent and can pedagogically engage in the virtual and/or digital spaces, and most importantly for us, (3) there is a pressing need to rethink and reimagine teaching and learning practices beyond the provision of technological devices and data. The latter point warrants an emphasis as we saw an emergence of what I had called the 'dumping' of curriculum material online earlier. This disruptive, chaotic and violent pedagogy was especially prominent during the hard lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic:

> With all the current challenges facing the public university during this lockdown period, teaching and learning is arguably central. Universities have begun to conceptualise teaching and learning as the 'dumping' of curriculum material online in an attempt to salvage what is increasingly becoming a lost academic year. The operating logic of this discourse of salvaging the academic year, is largely driven by the need to ensure that it is 'business as usual' at the university, and that the university calendar, its ceremonial traditions and norms cannot be disturbed, and should continue as normal, albeit online. This insistence on the reestablishment of 'normalcy' and its social order presents a couple of challenges. Firstly, it reduces the pedagogical shift to entail the mere *uploading* of material online. Secondly, it forfeits the social justice and critical engagement agenda that is often required when teaching and learning is concerned. Academics are now under pressure to upload as much material as they can online to claim that they had made curricula 'accessible', without firstly asking accessible to who? Whose agenda is being served by online teaching and learning? (Hlatshwayo 2020:14)

Thus, we argue, the ERT offered us an opportunity to rethink and reimagine the ideological and philosophical foundation of the higher education as well as rethinking teaching and learning practices. This will ensure that higher education institutions are better prepared to confront and respond to the pandemic in more humane, and socially just ways.

Conclusion

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic was a significantly disrupting moment for the global higher education system. Largely driven by the then panic over the twin challenges of preventing the community spread of the virus *and* salvaging the academic year, the higher education sector proposed various instruments of the ERT in the hope of accepting what was agreed to be the 'new normal'. In this article, we shine a spotlight on the voices, narratives and/or experiences of academics in grappling with the ERT in their context. We reveal the complex, challenging and depressing conditions that the academics were negotiating, and the effect that this has had on their wellbeing. We propose ubuntu currere as an emancipatory pedagogy, necessary in helping us rethink the very logics of higher education, as well as teaching and learning practices. We propose mainly three central lessons for higher education in dealing with the pandemic(s), that is, the responses to emergency in the sector need to be: (1) firmly rooted and framed in a decolonial and social justice frameworks; (2) better training, workshops and/or mentoring are required to ensure that both academics and students are competent and can pedagogically engage in the virtual and/or digital spaces, and most importantly for us, (3) there is a pressing need to rethink and reimagine teaching and learning practices beyond the provision of technological devices and data. These interventions, although not a panacea in resolving all the higher education challenges during an emergency, could at least mitigate against some of the crippling challenges that have been discussed.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to confidentiality and are available from the corresponding author, M.N.H., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author(s) are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

Arce, J., 2004, 'Latino bilingual teachers: The struggle to sustain an emancipatory pedagogy in public schools', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 17(1), 227–246. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390310001653880

Bauder, H. & Mueller, R., 2023, 'Westphalian vs. indigenous sovereignty: Challenging colonial territorial governance', *Geopolitics* 28(1), 156–173. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1920577

Bernstein, B., 1975, 'Class and pedagogies: Visible and invisible', *Educational Studies* 1(1), 23–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305569750010105

Boncori, I., 2020, 'The never-ending shift: A feminist reflection on living and organizing academic lives during the coronavirus pandemic', *Gender, Work & Organization* 27(1), 677–682. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12451

Boughey, C. & Mckenna, S., 2021, *Understanding higher education: Alternative perspectives*, African Minds, Cape Town.

Bozalek, V. & Winberg, C., 2018, 'The ethics of care and academic development', *South African Journal of Higher Education* 32(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.20853/32-6-2764

Brincat, S., 2011, 'On the methods of critical theory: Advancing the project of emancipation beyond the early Frankfurt School', *International Relations* 26(2), 218–245. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117811423648

Cabral, A., 1974, *Return to the source*, New York Press, New York, NY.

Césaire, A., 1972, *Discourse on colonialism*, Monthly Review Press, New York, NY.

Corbera, E., Anguelovski, I., Honey-Rosés, J. & Ruiz-Mallén, I., 2020, 'Academia in the time of COVID-19: Towards an ethics of care', *Planning Theory & Practice* 21(1), 191–199. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2020.1757891

Corradetti, C., 2012, 'The Frankfurt School and critical theory', *The internet encyclopaedia of philosoph*, viewed 01 September 2023, from https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/80179124.pdf.

Croxton, D., 1999, 'The peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the origins of sovereignty', *The International History Review* 21(1), 569–591. https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.1999.9640869

De Sousa Santos, B., 2015, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*, Routledge, New York, NY.

Du Bois, W.E.B., 2008, *The souls of black folk*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Du Preez, P. & Le Grange, L., 2020, 'The COVID-19 pandemic, online teaching/learning, the digital divide, and epistemological access', in L. Ramrathan, N. Ndimande-Hlongwa, N. Mkhize & J.A. Smit (eds.), *Re-thinking the Humanities Curriculum in the Time of COVID-19*, vol. 1, pp. 90–106, Alternation African Scholarship Book Series, Pietermaritzburg.

Elliot, T.S., 1963, *Selected Poems*, Faber publishers, London.

Ferri, F., Grifoni, P. & Guzzo, T., 2020, 'Online learning and emergency remote teaching: Opportunities and challenges in emergency situations', *Societies* 10(86), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.3390/soc10040086

Francis, D. & Webster, E., 2019, 'Poverty and inequality in South Africa: Critical reflections', *Development Southern Africa* 36(1), 788–802. https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835X.2019.1666703

Freire, P., 1970, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, NY.

Freire, P., 2018, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Continuum, London and New York.

Gamage, K.A., Silva, E.K.D. & Gunawardhana, N., 2020, 'Online delivery and assessment during COVID-19: Safeguarding academic integrity', *Education Sciences* 10(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10110301

Giroux, H.A., 1988, *Teachers as intellectuals: Toward a critical pedagogy of learning*, Bergin & Garvey, Westport, CT.

Godsell, S., 2020, 'Teaching History teachers during COVID-19: Charting poems, pathways and agency', *Yesterday and Today* 24(1), 112–135. https://doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2020/n24a3

Gordon, L., 2011, 'Shifting the geography of reason in an age of disciplinary decadence', *Transmodernity* 1(1), 6–9. https://doi.org/10.5070/T412011810

Guangul, F.M., Suhail, A.H., Khalit, M.I. & Khidhir, B.A., 2020, 'Challenges of remote assessment in higher education in the context of COVID-19: A case study of Middle East College', *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 32(1), 519–535. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-020-09340-w

Hlatshwayo, M.N., 2020, 'The emergence of the Lockdown University: Pitfalls, challenges, opportunities', in L. Ramrathan, N. Ndimande-Hlongwa, N. Mkhize & J.A. Smit (eds.), *Re-thinking the Humanities Curriculum in the Time of COVID-19*, vol. 1, pp. 133–152, Alternation African Scholarship Book Series, Pietermaritzburg.

Hooks, B., 2014, *Teaching to transgress*, Routledge, New York, NY.

Hundenborn, J., Leibbrandt, M.V. & Woolard, I., 2018, *Drivers of inequality in South Africa*, WIDER Working Paper, viewed 01 September 2023, from https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/211200/1/1043725660.pdf.

Iglesias-Pradas, S., Hernández-García, Á., Chaparro-Peláez, J. & Prieto, J.L., 2021, 'Emergency remote teaching and students' academic performance in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic: A case study', *Computers in Human Behavior* 119(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106713

Jili, N.N. & Masuku, M.M., 2021, 'Emergency remote teaching in higher education during COVID-19: Challenges and opportunities', *International Journal of Higher Education* 10(5), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v10n5p1

Laher, S., Bain, K., Bemath, N., De Andrade, V. & Hassem, T., 2021, 'Undergraduate psychology student experiences during COVID-19: Challenges encountered and lessons learnt', *South African Journal of Psychology* 51(1), 215–228. https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246321995095

Le Grange, L., 2019, 'Currere's active force and the concept of Ubuntu', in C. Hebert, N. Ng-A-Fook, A. Ibrahim & B. Smith (eds.), *Internationalizing curriculum studies*, pp. 207–266, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Magoqwana, B., Maqabuka, Q. & Tshoaedi, M., 2019, '"Forced to care" at the neoliberal university: Invisible labour as academic labour performed by Black women academics in the South African university', *South African Review of Sociology* 50(1), 6–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2020.1730947

Majola, M.X. & Mudau, P.K., 2022, 'Lecturers' experiences of administering online examinations at a South African Open Distance E-Learning University during the COVID-19 pandemic', *International Journal of Educational Methodology* 8(2), 275–283. https://doi.org/10.12973/ijem.8.2.275

Matarirano, O., Gqokonqana, O. & Yeboah, A., 2021, 'Students' responses to multi-modal emergency remote learning during COVID-19 in a South African higher institution', *Research in Social Sciences and Technology* 6(1), 199–218. https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2021.19

Means, B. & Neisler, J., 2021, 'Teaching and learning in the time of COVID: The student perspective', *Online Learning* 25(1), 8–27. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v25i1.2496

Moorhouse, B.L. & Kohnke, L., 2021, 'Thriving or surviving emergency remote teaching necessitated by COVID-19: University teachers' perspectives', *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher* 30(1), 279–287. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-021-00567-9

Naidu, K. & Modise, M.-E.P., 2022, 'Lecturers' experiences of the blurring of work and home boundaries during the covid-19 pandemic at a South African ODeL university', *Open Praxis* 14(1), 270–279. https://doi.org/10.55982/openpraxis.14.4.486

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S., 2018, *Epistemic freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and decolonization*, Routledge, New York, NY.

Ní Fhloinn, E. & Fitzmaurice, O., 2021, 'Challenges and opportunities: Experiences of mathematics lecturers engaged in emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Mathematics* 9(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.3390/math9182303

Nouri, A. & Sajjadi, S.M., 2014, 'Emancipatory pedagogy in practice: Aims, principles and curriculum orientation', *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 5(2), 76–87.

Osiander, A., 2001, 'Sovereignty, international relations, and the Westphalian myth', *International Organization* 55(2), 251–287. https://doi.org/10.1162/00208180151140577

Peel, K.L., 2020, 'A beginner's guide to applied educational research using thematic analysis', *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation* 25(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.7275/ryr5-k983

Rallis, K.S. & Allen-Tejerina, A.M., 2020, 'Tele-oncology in the COVID-19 era: Are medical students left behind?', *Trends in Cancer* 6(10), 811–812. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trecan.2020.08.001

Roy, A., 2020, 'The pandemic is a portal', *The Economist*, viewed 01 September 2023, from https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca.

Ramose, M.B., 2016, 'Teacher and student with a critical pan-epistemic orientation: An ethical necessity for Africanising the educational curriculum in Africa', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 35(4), 546–555. https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2016.1247248

Slamet, S., Amrullah, A.M.K., Sutiah, S. & Ridho, A., 2021, 'Differences in the experience of lecturers and students on distance learning in higher education in Indonesia: Case study in the pandemic of Covid-19', *Systematic Reviews in Pharmacy* 12(1), 742–747.

Stats SA, 2023, *Five facts about poverty in South Africa*, Department of Statistics SA, viewed 01 September 2023, from https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=12075.

Steinberger, P., Eshet, Y. & Grinautsky, K., 2021, 'No anxious student is left behind: Statistics anxiety, personality traits, and academic dishonesty – Lessons from COVID-19', *Sustainability* 13(4762), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13094762

Ulla, M.B. & Perales, W.F., 2021, 'Emergency remote teaching during COVID19: The role of teachers' online community of practice (CoP) in times of crisis', *Journal of Interactive Media in Education* 9(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.617

Verhoef, A.H. & Coetser, Y.M., 2021, 'Academic integrity of university students during emergency remote online assessment: An exploration of student voices', *Transformation in Higher Education* 6(1), 132. https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v6i0.132

Waghid, Z., Meda, L. & Chiroma, J.A., 2021, 'Assessing cognitive, social and teaching presences during emergency remote teaching at a South African university', *The International Journal of Information and Learning Technology* 38(5), 413–432. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJILT-01-2021-0006

White, A., 2020, 'May you live in interesting times: A reflection on academic integrity and accounting assessment during COVID19 and online learning', *Accounting Research Journal* 34(3), 304–312. https://doi.org/10.1108/ARJ-09-2020-0317

World Bank, 2018, *Overcoming poverty and inequality in South Africa: An assessment of drivers, constraints and opportunities*, World Bank, Washington, DC, viewed 01 September 2023, from https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/530481521735906534/pdf/Overcoming-Poverty-and-Inequality-in-South-Africa-An-Assessment-of-Drivers-Constraints-and-Opportunities.pdf.

Word Bank, 2020, *Poverty and equity brief: South Africa,* World Bank, Washington, DC, viewed 01 September 2023, from https://databankfiles.worldbank.org/public/ddpext_download/poverty/33EF03BB-9722-4AE2-ABC7-AA2972D68AFE/Global_POVEQ_ZAF.pdf.