Online, Open, and Equitable Education

Lessons from Teaching and Learning during the Global Pandemic

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CHAPTER 2

Remote Teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Personal Reflection

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The South African higher education sector has faced challenges of inclusivity, accessibility, transformation, and funding over the years. These challenges can be attributed to the historical antecedence of apartheid and have resulted in nationwide students' protests in 2015 and 2016 under the auspices of the #FeesMustFall movement. The movement calls for a free and decolonised education (Mbembe 2016; Chawana and Akpojivi 2022) that is accessible to all and responsive to the needs of society. These challenges confronting the higher education sector was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 global pandemic, which made it impossible for universities worldwide to continue with face-to-face teaching, thus migrating to online teaching and learning (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021). In South Africa, the first case of COVID-19 infection was reported on March 5, 2020. The subsequent rapid increase in cases led to the presidential announcement of a nationwide strict lockdown and "stay at home" strategy, which commenced on March 26 in order to mitigate the spread of the virus (SA News 2020; BBC 2020). Consequently, universities across South Africa resorted to remote teaching and learning as a strategy for completing the 2020 academic year due to the uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (see OECD 2020).

On one hand, the migration to online teaching and learning can be considered innovative, transformative, and a responsive way of saving the academic year, and it presents opportunities to effectively

harness digital technologies for teaching and learning. On the other hand, especially in a country like South Africa, where there are gross inequalities, access issues due to infrastructural challenges (technology and electricity), and issues of stable and sustainable education funding (Wangenge-Ouma 2021) this migration poses serious challenges to promoting learner-centred teaching that meets the needs of every student. The swift move to emergency remote teaching by universities (Lapitan et al. 2021) compounded these challenges, by not allowing staff members time to carefully design and redesign their courses to reflect a pedagogical approach that would help ensure a smooth transition. This extra time is needed because the pedagogical approach of remote online teaching is significantly different from the contact or face-to-face pedagogical approach (Scull et al. 2020). Within the South African context, accessibility and participation are key challenges confronting students, as according to the In On Africa position paper (IOA 2017), only 9.6% of the population have access to the internet at home, and the high cost of data plans for cell phones in South Africa compared to other African countries means that students are at a disadvantage.

These circumstances imply that the sudden migration to emergency remote teaching and learning due to the strict lockdown restriction requires the adoption of an appropriate pedagogical approach that will ensure all students' needs of access and participation are adequately catered for and that the approach is responsive to learners' and societal needs. In this chapter, I draw from my emergency remote teaching experience of two courses, following the autoethnography methodological approach (Ellis 2004). The first course, taught to a large second-year class (145 students), commenced on February 6, 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic, but had to be migrated to remote teaching halfway through the course on April 20 due to the lockdown restrictions. The second course was taught to a smaller third-year class (21 students) and was purposively designed for remote teaching during lockdown commenced on April 21, 2020. Drawing from my reflections, I seek to compare the teaching and learning practices employed for both

courses, highlight the challenges of migration from face-to-face to remote education, and consider how the opportunities highlighted by these challenges can be exploited for the post-COVID era.

Context

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University), located in Johannesburg, South Africa, is in the top 200 universities in the world (Times Higher Education 2021). As a traditional university offering theoretical oriented degrees, with a student number of around 40,000 (Wits University Quick Statistics 2020), Wits University's strategic mission for 2020 was to be research-intensive and have a postgraduate focus (University of Witwatersrand 2020). Consequently, it has adopted a comprehensive, proactive approach that focuses on solving societal problems by increasing access (see figure 2.1) and producing future "thinkers, leaders, and professionals to advance, transform, and improve the world" (Wits University Quick Statistics 2020). To this end, Wits University prides itself on its transformative agenda as reflected in its students' demography, where black students have been granted more access (see figure 2.1).

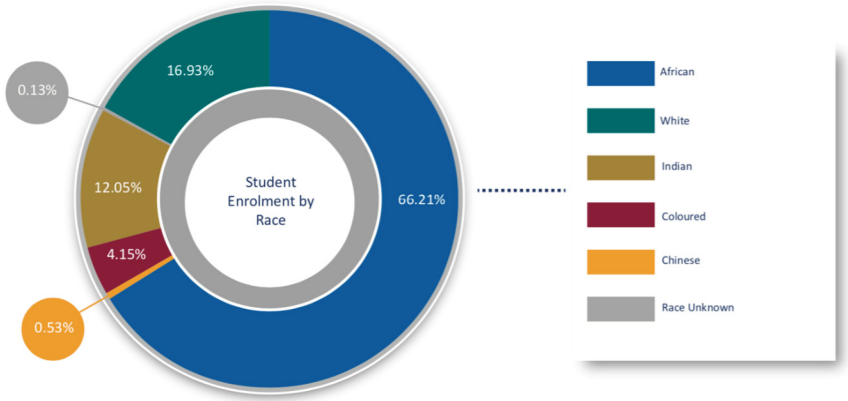

Figure 2.1. Wits student numbers by race (source)

Consequently, my department, media studies, designs curricula to foster critical and theoretical debates from the Global South. We

examine the power relations underlining the media landscape, critically analyse media and cultural texts, behaviours, institutions and production processes, regulation, content, and audiences [https://www.wits.ac.za/mediastudies/]. To be responsive to the needs of society, media studies teaching and learning practices seek to promote and facilitate inclusivity by equipping our students with essential life skills in writing, research, and critical thinking, which are germane in addressing contemporary societal problems. Teaching culture and assessments are applied to the diverse needs of our students. Likewise, students' experiences are considered invaluable components of knowledge production, which is reflected in our annual curriculum development workshop. Therefore, the power dynamic between the lecturer and the students is dismantled to encourage student participation, enabling their voices in the knowledge production and distribution processes.

To encourage participation and accessibility in teaching and learning, the department has long embraced a blended learning approach that combines synchronous and asynchronous strategies (Lapitan et al. 2021; Bonk and Graham 2012). Departmental courses are hosted on the learning management system; we previously used Sakai but have recently moved to Canvas (Ulwazi) in 2021. Course notes (slides, annotated notes, etc.), readings, links to external sites (e.g., YouTube videos, etc.) are all available to students to use in their own time. Bonk and Graham (2012) see blended learning as "an essential methodological scaffolding needed to effectively combine face to face instruction, online instruction and arrays of content object and assets of all form factors" that enhances student participation and enables students to study at their own pace and time, thus empowering them to be critical thinkers and problem solvers (quoted in Lapitan et al. 2021). This strong practice of blended learning should have enabled a smooth transition into the emergency remote teaching and learning that occurred following the COVID-19 outbreak in South Africa, since our students were already exposed to the use of technology in teaching and learning.

However, the historical context of the university, that is, a historically white institution that gave birth to the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa (see Chawana 2020; Chawana and Akpojivi 2022), and the abrupt lockdown and move to emergency remote teaching and learning following the declaration of the National State of Disaster (Government Gazette No. 43096) calls for a critical evaluation and reflection of this remote teaching and learning for two reasons. Firstly, as earlier stated, South Africa is one of the more unequal countries in the world due to the historical antecedence of apartheid. Moreover, policy initiatives to transform the educational sector by creating "equal opportunity in relation to educational access and outcome" since 1994 when South Africa became an independent nation (Southall 2016, 99) haven't been successful. This failure has been mainly attributed to limited financial opportunities that hinder the state from funding the education sector adequately, thus giving way to institutions seeking alternative sources of revenue via tuition fees, which became tools for excluding students from poorer backgrounds (Chawana 2020). Consequently, the #FeesMustFall protests of 2015 and 2016 sought to address inclusivity and access, as students demanded transformed teaching and learning spaces, decolonised curricula, and free education. While there have been initiatives to encourage reforms at the University of the Witwatersrand, the COVID-19 outbreak during the reform process presented challenges (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021).

Secondly, following the completion of the 2020 academic year, universities in South Africa, especially the University of the Witwatersrand, considered the academic year to be successful based on the completion of the academic year that was initially thought lost. Furthermore, the improved student pass rate, which goes contrary to the anticipation of failures from the university due to the migration to online teaching and its impact on students, has been used to justify the success of the academic year. This narrative from the universities has been challenged by academics who cite the lost lecturer-student interaction and the impact on the learning process (Pikoli 2020). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in

their 2021 report on education and COVID-19, while noting the impact of the lost contact on the learning process, held that physical interactions are central to students' social, emotional, mental, and educational outcomes. Therefore, there is a need to interrogate lecturers' teaching and learning practice if, indeed, the academic year was successful and if students could develop the critical thinking skills required, especially for disciplines like media and communication studies. Likewise, there is a need to examine how lecturers could maintain or build, in a virtual setting, the student-lecturer interaction needed for a holistic educational process.

This examination is imperative because the central issue from both points highlighted above is access and inclusivity. The COVID-19 pandemic not only highlighted this issue but exacerbated it. According to Oyedemi (2012, 2014), there is limited and skewed access to the internet in South Africa, and students access the internet predominately from their universities and not from home. The university management's positive assessment of the 2020 academic year, alluded to earlier, ignores this problem, as their assessment took into account access from the perspective of providing laptops and monthly data (30 gigabytes each) to students, but failed to consider other factors such as students' ability to connect and access the learning management system amid unequal infrastructural issues and the conduciveness of their learning/study environments at home. As Oyedemi (2012) describes, there is a low penetration rate of the internet, since most often students in rural areas are unable to connect. The demography of black students at a historically white institution like the University of Witwatersrand shows that most reside in rural areas or delinquent infrastructural areas (semi-urban) with a lack of basic amenities where constant service delivery is an issue.

The following discussion is therefore a reflection on my teaching and learning practices during the pandemic. It highlights the challenges as well as the opportunities presented in migrating courses in a discipline that requires contact (between lecturer and student) to foster critical thinking, such as media and communications studies.

Methods

Following the closure of educational institutions on March 17, 2020, the university's management announced emergency remote teaching and learning to complete the academic year. This meant that staff members had four weeks to redesign their courses and be ready to commence term two scheduled for April 20, as term one ended on March 17, 2020, a week before the scheduled study break. These four weeks were intense as staff members attended different online courses, such as Rapid Online Teaching Toolkit organised by the Faculty of Commerce Management and Law (CLM) and the Centre for Learning, Teaching, and Development (CLTD). The training and resources from the Faculty of the Humanities Teaching and Learning Committee provided insights on approaching emergency remote teaching. To this end, the Faculty of Humanities and the university called for the adoption of an asynchronous learning approach due to the realities of South Africa, as such an approach would not only allow students to access the course material and study at their own pace and time without being present in the classroom but also offered interactivity with "faculty members and collaboration with other students" (Jaffee 1997, 263). This asynchronous approach also helped to address the access and connectivity issues highlighted by Oyedemi (2012). However, Jaffee (1997, 262) cautions that while technology has enhanced teaching practices, when lecturers teach asynchronously, pedagogical principles for asynchronous learning should guide their course development and teaching. Harasim et al. (1995) argue that asynchronous learning presents a good opportunity for problem-solving-oriented disciplines and promotes in-depth teaching, learning, and engagement with course material (cited in Jaffee 1997). However, this is only possible when the course has been carefully designed to facilitate constant interaction and feedback from the lecturer to the student (Jaffee 1997).

The media studies curriculum at the University of Witwatersrand fits these criteria as our courses promote critical thinking, problem-solving, and deep approaches to learning, rather than

surface approaches to learning or pure memorisation. Just like other disciplines in the humanities, media studies is not heavily reliant on procedures, or practical and creative application, but focuses on unpacking the power relations underlining the media landscape and critically analysing media and cultural texts, behaviours, institutions and production processes, regulation, content, and audiences (https://www.wits.ac.za/mediastudies/). My pedagogical approach during the emergency remote teaching and learning in 2020 was informed by this positioning, and the present chapter considers this from an auto-ethnographic perspective of two courses that I taught during the pandemic. The use of auto-ethnography is beneficial, as Custer (2014) argues that the method is engaging, allowing the researcher to reflect on past events and experiences, interrogate ideas, and challenge known assumptions. However, auto-ethnography can raise subjectivity and ethical concerns over the use of personal data and other participants in a study (Wall 2016). Nevertheless, within the context of this study, I adopted what Wall (2016) called ethical and self-focused auto-ethnography, where the data is based on unique personal experiences to provide a nuanced discussion.

Findings

Course 1: Pre-pandemic to migration to online teaching during the pandemic

My second-year course titled Texts, Processes, of Reception and Audience (SLLS2003) is a semester-long course that began before the pandemic, on February 6, 2020. The course was administered as a weekly lecture lasting for 105 minutes. The course seeks to examine the power relationship between the media and the audience, the media producers, media texts, and audiences themselves. Therefore, a vital aspect of the course is the theoretical and public debate of the media and audiences, and the intended learning outcomes include the ability of students to perform an in-depth analysis of media audiences and link those to existing theoretical debates and paradigms, show a critical understanding of the approaches and debates about the relationship between the media and audiences,

and conduct a small-scale research project on the audience. Because media text is central to the course, during contact lectures, the use of media text and in-class exercises and discussion was germane in order to unpack the different theories underpinning media sociology and facilitate deep approaches to learning by scaffolding the concepts and theories within the course. The modes of assessment were a quiz, written essay assignment, group tutorial project, attendance, and an exam, which were meant to test the students' ability to critically use or apply media theories to expound on media text and interrogate the power dynamics between the audience and the media.

My teaching practice when migrating course 1 to remote learning

Before the commencement of emergency remote teaching and learning on April 20, 2020, I contacted my students via the Sakai platform, the learning management system, requesting that they provide me with information on issues that might hinder their ability to study from home and suggest ways in which I could assist them.

> Dear all,
>
> There is no doubt that these are stressful and unprecedented times. The outbreak of Coronavirus has impacted our lives greatly as our routines have been disrupted.
>
> As you are aware, the second block teaching term commences on Monday, April 20. The university has planned to migrate to online teaching as a way of completing the academic year. To do this effectively, please, could you kindly answer the following questions?
>
> - Do you have internet access at home?
> - Do you have an appropriate computing device on which to effectively study at home?
> - What are some of the challenges you foresee that will impact on your study at home via online teaching?

- In what way(s) can the school and department assist you in addressing these challenges?
- Lastly, would you want the study material to be couriered/posted to you at home?

Kindly email me your answers. I will be grateful if you answer the questions urgently. Please, note that as your lecturer I am here to support you, and kindly contact me should you require any assistance or need to talk.

Kind regards,

Dr. Akpojivi

While most students confirmed that they had laptops and were happy to continue the course remotely, some students highlighted a lack of study devices (laptop/desktop) and convenient study space at home. On the other hand, others highlighted the deep access and connectivity issues confronting the South African state (see Oyedemi 2012) as salient factors that might hinder them from participating and continuing with the course.

Re: Second Block Teaching

I am a second year student, enthusiastic about acquiring education.

However, due to the global issue it seems my dream will be placed on hold.

I am from the villages in Limpopo, no internet access, both telcom, Vodacom, and MTN network tends to be out of coverage. Further, I don't have a smart phone or computer. I used my neighbour's phone to do the survey and also check my emails, which I rented for an hour. I believe that the school shouldn't exclude me, though I am from the disadvantage context. . . . We all deserve equal education irrespective of our situation. Thus I believe that if the university can kindly assist me with a smart

device to internet, I can compromise by going to my neighborhood town for internet coverage.

Thank you

Considering the unequal access and connectivity issues in South Africa and the diverse students and their needs within the course, I decided to use low-cost technology for teaching and learning to enable access to all. This approach was to accommodate the limited mobile data (30 gigabytes per month, 10GB for daytime use and 20GB at night) the University of Witwatersrand provided students. Therefore, I recorded audio into the lecture PowerPoint, which was uploaded into Sakai twelve hours before the scheduled lecture time, instead of doing a live synchronous lecture. The rationale behind this is that I wanted the students to use the scheduled lecture times for the actual download of material and study and ensure that the pattern of studying before the pandemic during contact lectures was maintained. The student could further revise at their own convenience. Also, I made use of annotated notes to explain deep and complex ideas and theories. These annotated notes made references to issues discussed within the PowerPoint slides for ease of reference. In addition, all the readings were uploaded one week ahead of the scheduled lecture to enable students to read and understand the material before accessing the lecture notes. Prior to the pandemic, the course had weekly contact tutorial sessions with tutors for an hour. The purpose of the tutorials is to expound on the concepts and topics treated in class for the week. Students were encouraged to engage in written exercises before the tutorial session, as the tutorial was meant to be a discussion session to share ideas with colleagues. With the migration to emergency remote teaching, I created a forum section in Sakai for each tutorial group, assigned a tutor to each group, and uploaded the tutorial questions for discussion a week ahead of the scheduled tutorial.

To facilitate access and participation during tutorial times, I requested that the tutors probe the students' ideas further by engaging with their written answers. In some cases, I interrogated the

comments of the students and tutors on the forum section. The rationale was to ensure that students understood the topic in-depth, as such probes facilitate deep approaches to learning. According to Biggs and Tang (1999), deep approaches to learning enables the lecturer to correct any misconceptions students might have and address them via engaging in active learning. Thus, engaging the students in the forum section facilitates interaction between the lecturer and students (Jaffee 1997). Furthermore, students' ideas, theories, and knowledge are critically expounded, thereby allowing students to attain the intended learning outcomes. In addition, I maintained an open consultation policy, where I was available to address student queries any day of the week with extended working hours (8am-10pm) via Microsoft Teams, email, and telephone. This availability allowed students more time where they could be free to study and ask any questions they had. While offering this extended consultation time was complex and difficult, the decision to do it was influenced by the answers from the pre-survey conducted before the commencement of online teaching where some of my students complained of not having a study space as all family members live within a room or two, coupled with connectivity issues.

The extended working hours also mean that, should students be studying and have queries, I would be available at these times to immediately respond to their queries, thus helping to address any misconceptions they may have early in the learning process. Jaffee (1997) argues that learning is a social process that requires intensive interaction, and my availability and interaction via the different platforms ensured that genuine concerns from the students were addressed in a timely manner, thereby closing the gaps of independent learning that are often associated with asynchronous modes of teaching and learning (see Jaffee 1997).

I did not alter the assessments during the move to remote teaching because the different modes of assessments had been carefully designed to critically test the intended learning outcomes and students' ability to apply the knowledge in a real-life situation. At the end of the semester, the pass rate of the course was 89% of 145

students that registered for the course (see table 2.1 below). While the pass rate shows a decline of 1% from the previous year in 2019 (contact teaching), which was 90% based on 184 students, there was no statistical difference in the pass rate between 2019 (full contact teaching) and 2020 (beginning of emergency remote teaching and learning). Nevertheless, it should be noted that this pass rate was affected by challenges students encountered from online teaching and learning, which resulted in some dropping out of the course and others not completing assessments due to access and connectivity issues. These issues are discussed in the subsequent section.

Course – SLLS2003	2019	2020
Number of Students	184	145
Pass rate	90%	89%

Table 2.1. Pass rate for SLLS2003 in 2019 and 2020 academic years

Course 2: In-pandemic online teaching

My third-year course titled Media Policy and Regulation in South Africa (SLLS3010) began on April 21, 2020, in the second block of teaching during the pandemic and whilst the nation was still in lockdown. Lectures for this course occurred twice a week with lecture time of 105 minutes each. The course provides a critical look at the evolving debates and issues surrounding media and communication policy and regulation from the national, regional, and global perspectives. Also, the course explores the conflicting interests and tension between the various actors in the media arena and examines the impact of political, economic, and cultural institutions in media policy formulation and implementation. To this end, the intended learning outcomes of the course were to (1) demonstrate an understanding of the media systems and key media policy debates in South Africa, (2) critically discuss the impact of political, economic, and socio-cultural factors that impinge on media policy formulation, regulation, and implementation, (3) be familiar with the South African media policy history, and (4) demonstrate

knowledge of the different media systems and policies around the world, especially from neighbouring Southern African countries.

The course draws heavily from conceptual policy and regulatory issues. Hence, the use of relevant case studies and policy debates and their wider implications during contact lectures was significant in unpacking the different theoretical frameworks underpinning the relationship between the media and society and to broaden the students' understanding of the historical and cultural specifics of media institutions, media policy, and regulation. From the above, it can be argued that the course is not practical but designed to generate policy and theoretical debates of media freedom and regulation, thus requiring active participation and engagement with the course resources (reading material, assessments, announcements, etc).

My teaching practice when designing and delivering course 2 via remote learning during the pandemic

Although this course commenced during the pandemic, I conducted a survey with the registered students just like in course 1 above, requesting them to inform me of challenges they might encounter with remote teaching and learning and ways the department and I could assist. Most students had access to at least one device (laptops and mobile phones) that could be used for study. Only a few students raised the issue of connectivity due to their geographical location, where they had limited internet access, as well as issues regarding access to comfortable study space. Considering the unequal access and connectivity issues identified, again I decided to use low-cost technology for teaching and learning to enable access to all. This included audio recording into the lecture notes (in PowerPoint) and uploading these notes into the course page on Sakai twelve hours before the scheduled lecture time.

Like when course 1 was migrated to remote teaching, I uploaded all course readings one week ahead of the scheduled lecture. The course was also structured to facilitate student engagement with study material and peers. This is evident in the problem-centred format of assessments: written essay, group project, and take-home exam. For this course, I likewise maintained an open consultation

policy, by being available to address students' queries any day of the week with extended working hours (8am–10pm) via Microsoft Teams, email, WhatsApp, and mobile telephone.

According to Armagan, Sagir, and Celik (2009), problem-solving is essential to students' development as it enables students to be more efficient and transfer the skills learnt in solving real-life problems. Therefore, in this course, case studies were further used to facilitate deep approaches to learning, as the asynchronous teaching mode has been criticised for students' inability to grasp concepts (see Jaffee 1997). The pass rate for the course in 2020 was 94% of 21 students registered for the course (see table 2.2). While this pass rate shows an increase of 7% from the previous year (87% of 33 students in 2019 with contact teaching), the quality of assessment submissions from students was weaker compared to the previous year. This observation was confirmed by the course external examiners. This was albeit a significant increase in pass rate to the previous year, and it should be noted that the course was purposively designed for remote teaching and delivery.

Course – SLLS3010	2019	2020
Number of Students	33	21
Pass rate	87%	94%

Table 2.2. Pass rate for SLLS3010

From the reflection on my experiences above, it can be argued that both courses were successful based on pass rates and the ability of students to engage with the course material, which resulted in the completion of the academic year. However, there are some challenges which call into question some of my pedagogical approaches. One of the fundamental challenges is students' engagement with course material (see figure 2.2a and 2.2b).

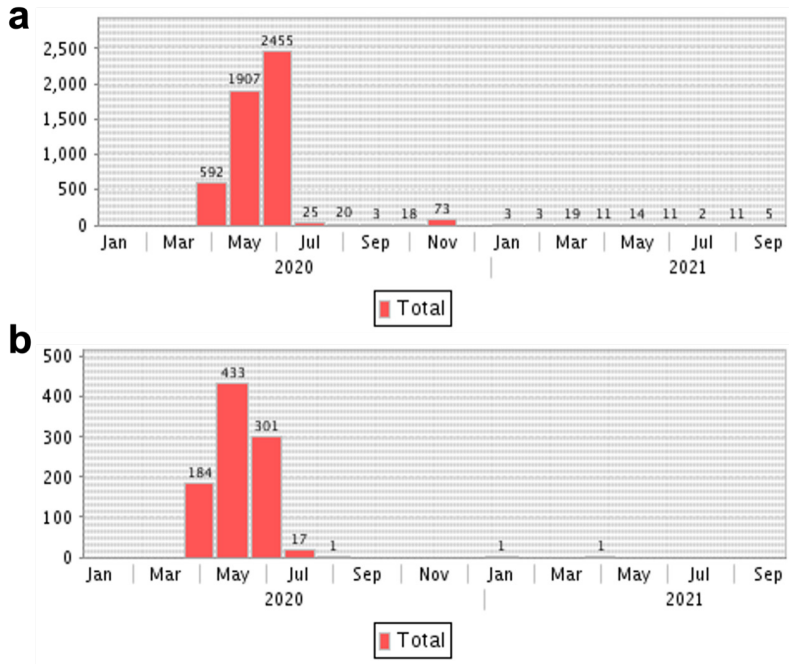

Figure 2.2. Student engagement with resources (lecture notes, readings, forum, etc.)
a) *During the study block of April-June on course 1- SLLS2003*
b)During the study block of April-June on course 2- SLLS3010
Note: Y-axis represents the number of students and X-axis represents the month.

I observed that students' engagement in the forum discussion was passive as they provided brief comments and single-word answers on required tutorial exercises. When the tutors and I probed their written responses further, they provided similar short comments. It can be argued that because forum discussion was used to validate students' participation, students saw it as an opportunity to register their participation mainly to fulfil due performance (DP), an essential requirement for media studies courses and assessments.

Furthermore, while the available statistics from Sakai indicate a weekly engagement of 75% and 87% of students in the second and third years respectively, some students were unable to engage with the course material due to technical and health challenges. This

could be attributed to the impact of COVID-19 that has further exacerbated the access issues within South African universities. I approached the Faculty of Humanities Students at Risk Officer to assist these students by offering the necessary support, but the deep inherent apartheid antecedence, such as unequal financial access and unequal infrastructural distribution (Southall 2016; Oyedemi 2012), had an impact on this process. Consequently, some students dropped out of the courses (about 6 students), and some failed to hand in assessments despite the flexibility I offered with assessment deadlines. Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021, 135), while addressing the impact of these inequalities on students' ability to study, argue that "many students at home/living spaces have undergone psychological and emotional distress and have been unable to engage productively," as they have unconducive learning spaces within their homes. Although students suggested and highlighted the need to courier weekly lectures and activities (in printed handouts or on pen drives), the strict lockdown restrictions made it difficult for such logistical arrangements to be made, especially in a timely manner.

Additionally, some students were unable to grasp and display in-depth knowledge of the course content, especially in my third-year course, despite increased engagement as shown in the statistical data and increased interactivity via the open consultation policy, which encourages regular interaction between the lecturer and student. One could argue that students were involved in surface approaches to learning, focusing on memorising concepts to pass an assessment with uncritical ideas (Biggs and Tang 1999). Therefore, we must ask whether student engagement translates into actual material engagement and deep approaches to learning. The third-year students, who had greater weekly engagement compared to the large second-year class, produced average quality submissions lacking in-depth conceptual and theoretical understanding of policy and regulatory issues. The second-year class had excellent submissions, as attested to by the course external examiners.

Furthermore, I observed an increase in plagiarism cases from students compared to the previous years. The basis for such increased

cases cannot be explained as students have previously been exposed to lectures on plagiarism and how to reference during their first year of study. The course outline uploaded on the learning management system also outlined in detail referencing processes and provided the university's plagiarism policy. However, it can be argued that the impact of the pandemic and the migration to emergency remote teaching and learning may have a role in the increased plagiarism cases. It is likely that students were more concerned about submitting assessments and completing the academic year, whilst paying less attention to adhering to the principles governing academic assessments.

This is connected to another issue I experienced: the sense of entitlement exhibited by students during the pandemic. Students registered on both courses generally assumed that the migration to remote teaching and learning due to COVID-19 meant that established standards to ensure quality control of courses would be overlooked. For instance, students requested that they be awarded marks for assessments not submitted or that I adjust rubrics to reflect the challenging learning environment. When such requests were declined, I was accused of not adhering to the university's call to support students to graduate during the challenging period. While the university called for flexibility and for staff members to provide the needed support students required during the pandemic to ensure that they complete their programmes and graduate, students misinterpreted this to mean "all registered students must be passed," irrespective of their performance. Such an assumption is problematic and highlights the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wider education system.

Recommendations and Implications

The global COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted teaching and learning and greatly impacted students' mental, social, and cultural development (UNICEF 2021), as the migration to emergency remote teaching and learning brought numerous challenges and opportunities. Within the South African context, while the

pandemic presented an opportunity for universities to actively embrace technology for teaching and learning, which resulted in the completion of the academic year despite earlier concerns, the inherent social inequalities, infrastructural issues, and lingering problems of funding, equity, and access confronting higher education institutions affected the remote teaching and learning experience. In addition, access and connectivity issues posed serious challenges, hindering marginalised students from actively engaging and participating in remote teaching and learning due to inequitable access to the internet and compounded by factors such as geographic location, as well as a lack of a safe and comfortable study environment. All these problems are not new to the South African state but are due to the historical antecedence of apartheid (see Southall 2016).

Experiences from my two courses suggest that we need to rethink students' engagement and participation within remote teaching and learning environments, especially within a largely unequal country. That is, how should we approach engagement and participation within a virtual learning classroom? Does downloading course lecture notes and reading material translate to deep learning and understanding of concepts by students? As Scull et al. (2020, 504) observed, participation within an online learning situation is context-based and "cannot be reduced to simply measuring the extent to which students engage with each other and their teachers in an online environment." My experience from both courses highlight the importance of this statement as, despite the increased access (open consultation policy) and metrics (material download and page views) from the learning management system (see figure 2.2), such engagements did not translate to quality submissions and showed that surface approaches to learning rather than deep approaches to learning occurred. Scull et al. (2020) called for educators to reduce expectations to address engagement and participation. On the other hand, I propose that online courses should be carefully structured so that engagement and participation are nuanced and reflect the unique context of society and the challenges confronting education.

Educators and universities should think creatively beyond just appropriating technology for teaching and learning and consider ways of (re)balancing technology pedagogy that is learner-centred, enabling students to engage in thoughtful and deep learning in an inclusive way. This calls for educators and universities to ask deeper questions about how technology can be harnessed effectively so that it goes beyond a mode of delivery or "isolated" platform in the teaching and learning process to becoming an "inclusive platform" that is part of the broader teaching pedagogy. My experiences during the emergency remote teaching and learning highlight the growing need for a thoughtful rebalancing of the technology-pedagogy complexity in higher education, especially within a post-pandemic era.

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