RESEARCH ARTICLE:

Post Covid-19: The New (Ab)normal in South African Higher Education – Challenges with Emergency Remote Learning

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Abstract

The pandemic has compelled Higher Education Institutions around the world to resort to Emergency Remote Learning (ERL). This abrupt 'pivot to online' learning has exacerbated existing challenges in Higher Education, particularly in South Africa. This paper interrogates whether the sudden move to ERL has compounded or ameliorated existing academic challenges for students in Higher Education Institutions. The study summarised herein draws on 'critical humanising pedagogy', an approach that centres student needs in the teaching and learning process. In exploring student experiences and perceptions of ERL, the study adopted a qualitative approach, with specific focus on students from one of SA's top five universities. A perturbing finding is that teaching and learning under ERL has regressed into impersonal methodologies, devoid of any notion of pedagogy as the science and art of teaching. More unsettling is that ERL has alienated and disengaged students from learning as a collaborative process. The increased transactional distance between students and academics has desensitised the latter to the peculiar challenges students encounter in the virtual classroom. The study recommends Higher Education should consider student difficulties in adapting to online remote learning and find ways of fostering student-centred pedagogy in virtual classrooms.

Keywords: post Covid-19; emergency remote learning; higher education; teaching and learning; pedagogy

Introduction

The South African Higher Education (HE) system remains severely fractured, still struggling from the effects of apartheid. Research by scholars such as Tjønneland (2017) reveals that the country's university students fail to complete their studies in the required time due to various factors. Oparinde and Govender (2020) also argue that the Coronavirus pandemic has caused havoc to higher education particularly in South Africa. Boughey and McKenna (2021: 5) refer to higher education institutions (HEIs) as suffering from "huge hangovers of their colonial and apartheid pasts", while they have become 'massified' to accommodate students from previously disadvantaged schooling backgrounds. As if this is not enough, Emergency Remote Learning (ERL) has further hamstrung students, resulting in nothing short of learning paralysis. Globally, studies reveal disproportionate impacts of the pandemic in different regions because of their unique contexts, especially in relation to student access to online resources. HEIs worldwide are making remarkable progress in finding new approaches to adjust to this sudden shift to online learning. Literature discussed in this article has revealed two concerns that occupy the minds of university leaders and decision-makers worldwide: the need to provide students with access to devices and data, and the need to train staff to teach online.

Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, universities are making progress in bridging the digital divide by providing modern learning resources. Agyapong *et al*. (2020) report that fully online universities,

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such as African Virtual University, Kenyatta Digital School of Virtual Learning, Laweh Open University, and Open University of Tanzania already exist, having full capacity to offer online programmes. In addition, during the pandemic, the Universities of Ghana and Ashesi swiftly moved to innovative Learning Management System (LMS) platforms, while countries such as Ghana, Rwanda, and South Africa (SA) partnered with tele-communication companies for zero rated access. The University of KwaZulu-Natal in SA and Ashesi University in Ghana provided students with access to laptops and data packages, while the Durban University of Technology offered their students data bundles. Furthermore, the Remote and Virtual Education Laboratory of SA's University of Fort Hare and the Nelson Mandela University lead the way in customised blended learning models, coding, robotics, and apps for implementation of remote online learning (Agyapong *et al*. 2020).

Existing studies have, however, not paid much attention to how the shift to remote learning has affected pedagogy, particularly in relation to student engagement. The unfamiliar ERL environment brought new challenges to the fore, which could exacerbate existing challenges in the South African HE-sector, such as low throughput and high dropout rates. The psycho-social effects of Covid-19, such as trauma, fear, mental instability, and isolation on students are certainly not conducive to learning, as emphasised by (Browning *et al*. 2021).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This study draws on 'critical humanising pedagogy' as a vital principle that can bring social justice to a post-conflict education context such as that of SA. In his 1970 book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (cited in Freire, 2012), Brazilian educator Paulo Freire drew a distinction between pedagogy that maintains conditions of oppression and pedagogy that liberates. In Freire's formulation, disengaging and non-participatory pedagogy is 'dehumanising' because it keeps learners' passive, while participatory pedagogy is humanising, as it liberates learners' minds. For Freire, education is a vehicle for transformation, which empowers learners to think critically and become agents of change in society. He also believed education does not end in the classroom since learners should be conscious of power structures and inequalities in their "incessant struggle to regain their humanity" (Freire 2012: 25). Humanising pedagogy emphasises love, care, dialogue, and solidarity as key in empowering learners to be critically conscious of "the way they exist in the world" and "to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire 2012: 56).

Other scholars of humanistic pedagogy, such as Hattam (2005), refer to pedagogy as a resource for reconciliation in a troubled society. In Hattam's view, humanistic pedagogy is 'emancipatory', especially for societies emerging from oppressive systems such as SA, because it engages participants in praxis, reflection, and action in the learning process. In a similar vein, Keet, Zinn and Porteus (2009) conceptualise critical humanising pedagogy as an approach that can heal the traumatic experiences learners often go through in times of crisis. In the South African context, Fataar (2016: 1) argues humanising pedagogy is likely to bring social justice because it emphasises "participation that brings process pedagogical orientations back into view to counter the rigid pedagogical orientation" that once informed SA's curriculum approach. Fataar posits the inclusion of the learner as part of the 'social subjective' in the education process is critical for 'pedagogical justice', specifically in the South African setting, where HEIs have a mandate to address the injustices of the apartheid past. A critical humanising pedagogy in SA is likely to engage "the full and ever evolving humanity of people" (Fataar 2016: 20) against the background of dehumanising experiences of the apartheid era.

While the foregoing deliberations revolve around the concept of humanising pedagogy, the notion by Keet *et al*. (2009) of 'critical humanising pedagogy' adds the radical consciousness of Marxist Humanism to Freire's views on the liberating potential of humanising pedagogy. Keet *et al*. developed the 'mutual vulnerability' concept, which they argue is a crucial humanising

pedagogical principle that must guide the teacher-student relationship. When teachers and learners perceive themselves as mutually vulnerable, they become conscious of the "interconnections among ideology, power and culture" on the one hand, and "epistemic and cultural justice" on the other (2009: 115). By bringing together 'humanising', 'radical' Marxist, and 'reconciliation' pedagogies, Keet *et al*. created an approach that re-centres "compassion, care, respect and love" and recognises student diversity in terms of "identities, histories and experiences" (2009: 111). Critical humanising pedagogy is appropriate for a society such as SA, because it levels out inequalities and paves the way for social justice.

The role of pedagogy is not only to facilitate teaching and learning but also to foster social justice and ensure active student participation in the learning process. One cannot speak of participatory pedagogy without understanding the human side of education, particularly the students' lived realities. Fraser (2009) accentuates how active engagement with students is imperative for the optimisation of learning, thus "inserting the social–subjective to generate a pedagogy of recognition" (Fataar 2016: 9). According to Fataar, this 'social subjective' is "a conceptual reference or shorthand for the complex processes by which human beings now transact their lives" (2016:11). Given that critical humanising pedagogy recognises the student as centre to the social subjective and focal point of curriculum logic (Soudien 2010), adopting it in the post-Covid-19 virtual classroom is likely to foster interactive engagement between lecturers and students. Jézégou (2010) and Anderson (2017) echo this sentiment in support of collaborative learning, which emphasises individual and collective knowledge construction.

Some scholars have argued that, in the context of the shift to online learning, technology can dehumanise learners. Lewin and Lundie (2016) assert that digital education is often viewed as transformational because it facilitates access to technology and restructures learning experiences; however, digital education tends to overlook the social, ethical, and epistemic aspects of education and neglects the role of human intersubjectivity in pedagogy. While HEIs are under pressure to keep up with the call for digitisation, Lewin and Lundie note "a discrepancy between the 'production and conception' of university education, and pedagogical and philosophical reflection" (2016: 2). In a study on distance post-graduate education, Hardwick (2020) proposes a collaborative model to humanise the teaching and learning process. The study claims that in a linear education context (exemplified through ERL), the student is "lifeless" (2020: 7) because of limited or lack of robust social interaction. While the internet could be an effective vehicle for content delivery and skills that empower students to work at a personalised as well as global level, Hardwick questions whether 'technical interactivity' is enough to facilitate productive engagement. Collaborative pedagogy, involving shared intellectual effort by all participants in the learning experience, humanises the technology landscape and places the student front and centre of an effective learning environment (Hardwick 2020).

Adopting critical humanising pedagogy in the post-Covid-19 virtual classroom is not only likely to bring love, care, and empathy back into pedagogical practice but also address the lack of personal contact when students and lecturers engage behind screens. In fact, literature regarding learning challenges during Covid-19 reveals its disproportionate effect on HEIs, depending on peculiar contexts. The next section provides an overview of such literature.

Covid-19 and Its Impact on Teaching and Learning

Technologically advanced countries with progressive HE systems generally received adequate support in transitioning to ERL. In a study conducted across 63 countries (Aristovnik *et al.* 2020), students in developed countries were found to be largely satisfied with the technical support they received from universities. They also agreed lecturers provided adequate support and timeous information through a variety of digital techniques. In addition, most students felt competent with digital skills in their transition to online learning. Although developed countries adapted to online learning better than developing countries, Aristovnik *et al*. (2020: 19) note in the most advanced countries "students do not have equal opportunities to study online efficiently due to different

living conditions, domestic duties, and other factors". In the Netherlands, students experienced learning delays, which impacted the quality of their education, administrative needs, enrolment, examinations, and finances (de Boer 2021). Universities in Italy responded to the Covid-19 emergency by adopting a student-centric approach to minimise disruptions to learning, assuring students of their right to learning, making efforts to enable online learning, and resorting to 'communicative boosters' such as social media and email (Agasisti and Soncin 2021: 93).

In lesser developed regions, the pandemic worsened an already dire situation in HEIs, most of which had inadequate learning resources and deficient technical and administrative support. Inequalities in Argentinian HE resulted in improper internet connectivity, aggravated by outdated devices at home, and a worsening "technological and digital gap" between rural and urban communities (Perrotta 2021: 35). Similarly, the digital divide in India was exacerbated by lack of essential online resources, with India's challenges described as both 'technical and ideological' and its education as not only under-resourced, but also historically under-developed (Mishra, Gupta and Shree 2020: 6). Lack of online resources, inconducive home environments and household chores left students in a state of "dejection and despair" (Mishra *et al*. 2020: 118). Odera, Wachira and Mugo (2021) state that post-graduate studies across East, West and Southern Africa were totally disrupted as institutions did not have e-learning for post-graduate students.

The worst affected by the pandemic were students from lower income backgrounds in Africa and Asia, where students from poor backgrounds solely relied on government for educational support. In a global study by Aristovnik *et al*. (2020), most students attributed poor academic performance to lack of computer skills, high workloads, and poor internet connectivity. In India, students from poor communities lived in unsuitable home environments that made it difficult for them to study from home. Most students had inappropriate online learning devices, poor internet connectivity and insufficient data (Mishra *et al*. 2020). Moreover, lack of relevant computer skills affected their preparedness for the shift to online learning.

The pandemic also impacted students' mental and physical well-being, as a study by Aristovnik *et al*. (2020: 1) highlights, s with students reporting 'boredom, anxiety and frustration'. Although it is not clear what caused these feelings, the uncertainties of the pandemic and the impersonal nature of online learning are likely causes. Similarly, a study by Aslan, Ochnik and Cinar (2020) concluded that during the pandemic the mental health of students was at risk due to high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Students were anxious about graduation, their academic future and completing the semester. In some instances, students suffered "academic burnout" due to stress (Aslan *et al.* 2020: 11). Chinese students also experienced extreme anxiety about delayed classes and use of unfamiliar online resources and methods although the universities provided technical support, regular information, and training for teachers on the use of online resources, students experienced "low learning efficiency and inability to focus for a long time" (Yang and Huang 2021: 131). A study of doctoral students in Australia identified additional factors, such as anxiety, stress, isolation, and embarrassment, as well as jealousy, as affecting student mental well-being (Tam 2020). Aucejo *et al.* (2020) explored multiple challenges students at one of the USA's largest HE colleges faced, such as delayed graduation, loss of job offers and internships, as well as fears about reduced earnings, causing anxiety and stress. Students in Hong Kong "felt under duress due to psychological issues caused by social isolation, insecurity, and anxiety" (Jung, Horta and Postiglione 2021: 108). Given Hong Kong's volatile political situation, some students completely disconnected from virtual platforms for fear of being perceived as 'spies'.

In a study of Australian universities, Tam (2020) interrogates institutional insensitivities to the impact of the pandemic on students, finding that doctoral students viewed university support mechanisms as apathetic, specifically related to online learning resources. In addition, while students called for flexible deadlines and extended study durations, universities continued to pressure them towards completing their studies. Similarly, students in India were stressed by the fast pace of instruction, which affected fundamental conceptual grasp (Mishra *et al*. 2020). Research in both India and Australia shows students needed access to suitable information and

communication technology (ICT) facilities, more personalised engagement, and additional activities to ground their understanding. The pandemic also caused social deprivation among students. In China, one-way transmission of learning content robbed students of opportunities for interaction with classmates (Yang and Huang, 2021). Universities in Hong Kong were observed to prioritise the technical aspects of virtual learning, while social learning was affected with students being denied the opportunity to build relationships and interact with lecturers and peers between class times (Jung *et al.* 2021). Moreover, Eringfeld (2021: 146) states students in the United Kingdom were concerned that should online learning continue, it would result in "loss of education as an embodied and communal experience". They referred to online learning as 'anti-humanist' because it deprived students of opportunities to socialise and develop a sense of belonging. A similar sentiment was reported among Australian doctoral students (Tam 2020).

From a South African perspective, Mpungose (2020: 1) identifies the "digital divide as the main hindrance to students' effective e-learning". In some institutions, students were enrolled as first-time users on an unfamiliar learning platform such as Moodle LMS. Another unique factor that affected students was mental fatigue, with high levels found among post-graduate students, who reported pressure to meet deadlines from supervisors (Hedding, Greve, Brretzge and Nel 2020). Likewise, Mpungose (2020) reported the relentless demands on post-graduate students in SA to deliver on assessment tasks and learning activities leading to work overload. In terms of the social impact on learning, Khoza (2020) observes students in some South African universities gravitated towards the use of WhatsApp to access social learning, rather than the designated learning management systems.

Although there is abundant literature that addresses the challenges of ERL, few studies explore its cognitive or intellectual effects on students. One study on student experiences in Spain asserts students who were confined by the pandemic performed far better than when they were unrestricted from movement (Gonzalez *et al*, 2020). Students acquired improved learning strategies during the pandemic and advanced their competencies, yet, before the pandemic, they did not study continuously. However, the study could not establish whether the change in teaching methodology had any effect on improved student performance, rather, it demonstrated that learning during the pandemic improved students' autonomous learning strategies (Gonzalez *et al*. 2020). Eringfeld (2021) recommends a blended approach to Teaching and Learning (TL) but does not explain how pedagogy can mitigate online learning challenges. Govender and Rajkoomar (2021) studied experiences of South African students during the pandemic and simply recommend the adoption of learning models such as 'connectivism' (combining previous information with current information to grasp understanding) and 'multimodal' models (a combination of visual, auditory, reading, writing, as well as kinaesthetic methods) to make meaning, without explaining how pedagogy can improve student-lecturer engagement in the virtual classroom.

Methodology

The study was conducted at one of SA's leading Universities of Technology amid ERL in 2021. It sought to investigate how the University pedagogically adapted and adjusted to the realities of ERL. The researchers did this by examining student experiences of ERL, with specific focus on how the shift to ERL affected student-lecturer interaction in the classroom. Two questions guided the study: What did students think about and experience, with the shift to ERL? Did the students embrace ERL as an effective approach to facilitate learning? The study sought to reflect on student perceptions of ERL, thus, a qualitative approach was adopted, located in an interpretive paradigm. It was descriptive, sense based as well as highly subjective in nature. A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because it enabled the researcher to extract value-laden data, which provided for the extraction of preponderant, context-bound themes.

The study used *focus group discussions* as a data collection tool, which created a platform for students to discuss issues and generate rich data. Scholars such as Breen (2006) recommend focus groups for deeper understanding of issues within a group. Breen adds that focus groups are 'far more appropriate [than individual interviews or questionnaires] for the generation of new ideas formed within a social context' (2006: 464) and effective when the groups are homogenous. The target population consisted of students from the Faculty of Arts and Design, which includes the following departments: Video Technology, Fine Art and Jewellery Design, Media, Language and Communication, as well as Visual Communication, and Drama and Production Studies. The researcher selected students from these departments because they need specialised software and equipment to study highly practical courses. The objective was to investigate how students within these highly technical and hands-on departments coped with ERL at home during the Covid-19 lockdown, without the technical resources normally accessed on campus.

Since students were studying remotely, purposive sampling was used to draw a cross-section of participants from every level of study and from every programme. Purposive sampling intentionally identifies and ensures information-rich participants (Patton 2002). The study opted to purposefully select student representatives as participants, as they would be more aware of their peers' experiences with ERL (Creswell and Clark 2011) and hence, represent whole cohorts of students. A succinct overview of the sample is tabled below:

Table 1: Focus group sampling

Department	Level of Study				
	Diploma	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	Postgraduate
Education	1	1	1	1	1
Video and Technology	1	2	1	2	1
Fine Art and Jewellery Design	1	1	1	1	1
Media, Language and Communication	1	1	1	1	1
Visual Communication	1	2	2	1	1
Drama and Production Studies	1	1	1	1	1
Fashion and Textiles	1	3	2	2	2
Sample No.	7	11	9	9	8
Focus Group	1	2	3	4	5

Guided by key research questions as well as core focus-group questions, data from the five focus groups were analysed using the strategies and procedures of data reduction, coding and decoding, as suggested by Saldaña (2021). To this end, descriptive and in-vivo codes were created inductively (data-driven) and deductively (theory-driven). A code list or a codebook of 172 codes (1st cycle) was reduced to 31 codes (2nd cycle) and eight thematic code groups or categories from 282 quotations. This was done through ATLAS.ti version 9, which Smit (2005: 107-111) explains as a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package, that provides an audit trail for analysis process transparency. Smit (2014, 2021) further describes ATLAS.ti as a powerful workbench for analysing extensive textual and audio data, assisting the researcher to explore the complex phenomena hidden in the data. All responses were loaded into the project function (a container for all data) for subsequent coding, which is the procedure of associating code words with units of data or quotations, the association between a quotation in the text and a specific code. In linking, collecting, and interpreting the data, coding is the basis for developing the analysis. Codes were clustered into eight groups, referred to as categories in the literature (Smit, 2014; 2021). The next section of this article describes and discusses (interprets) the research findings based on these categories. Coding such as '¶25' refers to Participant 25 which is a verbatim students' responses. Such codes are used throughout the ensuing discussion.

Discussion of Findings

Two dominant themes emerged from the data. The first was student challenges with online learning. As seen from the literature, many universities responded to the challenges of ERL by providing appropriate infrastructure to students. Universities worked hard to alleviate challenges such as lack of resources, delayed start to learning, lack of supplementary learning requirements, and poor service delivery in addition to inadequate communication, and inadequate student consultation. Participants confirmed that although their institutions were slow to respond, they were making efforts to address the challenges they faced. The second theme that emerged from the data was student challenges with learning online; that is, hurdles related to pedagogy or the act of learning. This theme is discussed under eight separate sub-themes. As the study is mainly interested in investigating how students experienced pedagogical approaches lecturers adopted during ERL, the analysis will focus more on challenges students experienced with learning online, as opposed to challenges associated with online learning.

Alienation of students

Some students felt alienated from the learning process because of receiving insufficient individual attention from their lecturers. One student summarised this sentiment as follows: '*There are some lecturers who don't ask you …if you have a question and even if you raise your hand*' (¶62). Another student stated that some lecturers '*don't even [give students an opportunity to] ask questions*' (¶147). Some students lamented lecturers often resorted to, '*group sessions and avoided one on one sessions*' (¶145). This is to some extent understandable, because some academics were also overwhelmed by the effects of the pandemic (Shepherd 2021). However, Boughey and McKenna (2021) argue that student self-efficacy or sense of belonging correlates with academic success. When the educational subject is not accounted for, or the learner is de-contextualised, his/her learning suffers. In view of the lack of engagement in the online classroom, lecturers tended to have no knowledge of learners' learning styles, personalities, and competencies. One student was aggrieved by the lack of lecturer engagement in the online classroom, responding as follows: '*You have to read on your own, and then you can't ask anyone…that put speed bumps in the whole learning process*' (¶56).

Other students mentioned that often, lecturers ignored or did not take the time to acknowledge when they raised hands online. A disgruntled student said some lecturers '*are usually on another app, so they can't really see that you are raising your hand … some lecturers don't ask you every five minutes if you have a question and even if you raise your hand*' (¶62). This response shows how online learning can detach lecturers from students. In fact, it is difficult in an online learning context to ensure focused class attendance, as both students and lecturers may attend to other issues and/or web applications while in an online class. Consequently, lecturers end up focusing on delivering content to passive, non-participating learners. When there is no engagement in the classroom, lecturers miss the opportunity to become familiar with identities, personalities and learning styles of different students. Without student-lecturer engagement, Fataar (2016) asserts, constructive learning and meaningful curriculum delivery are impossible.

Lack of motivation

The findings show students experienced online learning fatigue because of the time they spent studying alone without the support of peers and lecturers. Social interaction and collaboration are important components of the learning process. According to one student who was bored during online learning said: '*Most of the time, I fall asleep during the class*' (¶92). This response shows computer-assisted learning tends to isolate students from social communities that provide motivation and emotional support. In some instances, learning online becomes mechanical as opposed to social and interactive. One participant stated that, '*Some learners will just switch on MS Teams and mute their mic and camera and then they just carry on sleeping or whatever, and they don't listen to the class until it is over, just to make attendance*' (¶132). Another student is

aware of this lack of motivation, pointing out that '*Students even say it aloud that they are no longer motivated; they are not even sure if taking the course was the right idea because this wasn't what they signed up for*' (¶189). When asked if they enjoyed online learning, participants candidly stated '*I don't enjoy online learning at all*' (¶90); '*My lecturers are boring*' (¶94). Given the absence of social communities in online learning spaces, students tend to '*lose focus… and interest in learning'* (¶187) as one student puts it, with learning becoming a 'box ticking' exercise for both students and lecturers.

On the one hand, lecturers simply use the LMS as a 'trash can' where they dump learning content, while on the other hand, students connect to virtual classrooms merely to report attendance, as most students '*do not give their 100%; they […]do it for the sake of doing it*' (¶187). Learning from home blurs the distinction between domestic/everyday spaces and academic/intellectual spaces. As a result, students tend to relax and fail to keep up with academic programme demands. One participant conceded thus: '*At home, I feel like you become lazy, and then you can't go on with your schoolwork*' (¶58). Such sentiments depict lack of enthusiasm among students when studying from home. What is evident from participant responses, is that online learning requires concerted commitment from both students and lecturers. It is not enough to simply connect to an online classroom; one needs to remain connected with others for the duration of the experience. On the part of lecturers, prodding and prompting students to participate could lead to active engagement (Yang and Huang 2021).

Deficiency of feedback and support

Some students complained lecturers did not provide sufficient feedback. As one participant stated, students are left to fend for themselves: '*We had to think for ourselves, learn everything for ourselves'*. In some instances, students grappled alone with complex content without assistance from lecturers and peers. According to one participant (¶212): '*You have to rely on yourself … more classes maybe, or more feedback*' [would have helped]. Another student echoed a similar observation: '*you left there to learn everything yourself*' (¶197*),* suggesting absence of academic support in the online classroom. Students do not have an opportunity to engage with lecturers in real-time and ask for help when needed. One student noted, '*when you have a problem with your assignments, or maybe you didn't do well on your assignment; you just don't get a chance to get more help from your lecturer*' (¶200). Without sufficient supplementary support, students become cognitively stunted, as scaffolding of new information cannot occur, deeming TL futile in advancing students' academic success (Dhawan 2020). One student was quick to pick this up: '*It stresses me, so whenever I go to the parts I am sure that I know of, I am already rattled up by these difficult questions. I might make mistakes that may be cause me to fail…it would be better if I started with a fresh mind on the things that I know for sure that I know*' (¶128).

The situation becomes worse for students when they are unfamiliar with new lecturers' teaching styles, creating confusion about how to learn. This is especially prevalent when students are taught by foreign lecturers. One student said *'foreign lecturers speak in accents difficult to understand over a device'* (¶131). An additional finding was that while students were already exasperated with technical complexities associated with learning platforms, they had to grapple with difficult content without adequate guidance. Consequently, confusion emanated from lack of support or guidance in real-time. Moreover, lecturers did not provide students with feedback in the form of revision or reinforcement exercises during or after class time. The situation was just as bad for one student who complained: '*I had difficulty getting feedback … they are unclear … you are unsure whether or not on the right track*' (¶72). Without formative development, there can be no proper understanding of student progress. Academics could enhance more sophisticated levels of understanding through continuous evaluation of what students have learned and what was unclear to them (Merisotis 2000).

While lecturers often provided feedback and reinforcement via audio or video, these online resources can be misunderstood or misinterpreted, more so in instances where students cannot

immediately access lecturers for further guidance. Feedback is supposed to bring clarity, not more confusion; however, from student responses, it seems online feedback, without explanation, caused more confusion, as it was sometimes wrongly interpreted. This became evident in comments such as: '*This online thing is just confusing for me; … I don't know how to do this exactly, and they can't go back and explain again*' (¶66). Some students, moreover, expressed concern about the absence of tutors to support their learning. '*We are having a lot of difficulties with finding tutors because up to now we don't have tutors, so we don't get the assistance that we need to learn the new programmes, to know if we are going the right path*' (¶111). This could be attributed to lengthy bureaucratic processes that delay the appointment of tutors. In an online learning context, students need real-time support outside 'class' time, when lecturers are not available. The lack of physical and social presence of the teacher and peers also contributed to a feeling of confusion, as one student expressed '*via online learning, you are just hoping that everything you are doing is going according to what it is supposed to be going, but you are not even sure if it is correct'* (¶145). When students are accustomed to attending classes physically, learning online brings a sense of uncertainty as no one is there to provide assurance.

Deprivation of social learning

Aslan *et al*. (2020) state that Covid-19 related restrictions and protocols isolated students from family, friends and loved ones, culminating in the deterioration of social networks and absence of social learning. Without a community of learning, isolation can lead to more severe learning challenges and psychological effects such as trauma and fear. One student explained, '*We were supposed to … work together with the students and have them feature in our stuff. But now it is hard to do that because they are not on campus, we don't know each other at times, so it is hard to communicate with them, find them and speak to them*' (¶74). Another student exclaimed there is '*less interaction*' when you are not with '*people who are actually on the same level as you in a way and you have the same mindset*' (¶58) or '*you don't have someone that we can pair by*' (¶66). The effectiveness of peer-learning cannot be downplayed in the learning process (Koob *et al*. 2021). Without this support structure, students remain uncertain whether they are on the right track or not. One student stated, '*it gets a bit frightening when you are doing something alone when you know that maybe you could have studied with a friend together*' (¶94). In addition, attempts to consult with peers are hampered by lack of data and connectivity, where even acquiring additional data is problematic, because of the high data costs in SA. As a result, some participants made the following observations: '*When it comes to studying with my peers, it was tough as I had to save data*' (¶70). Furthermore, the poor socio-economic circumstances of most learners caused them to grapple with poor connectivity, as one student stated: *I can't even connect to my colleagues because where they are staying, you need to go to a certain point for the network*' (¶86).

Insufficiency of experiential learning

Students noted that learning online did not allow for practical immersion in the learning process. One student exclaimed that '*practical work … requires us to think and be more practical … as a designer, and it really impacts on our thinking skills, on our productive skills and … to create without anyone pushing us*' (¶146). Students expressed the need '*to see the teacher signing for us, the practical side, the theory we can do at home, practical we honestly need a teacher*' (¶146). In this way, the lack of practical online demonstrations to reinforce learning became evident, and even if students could attempt to upskill themselves from home, they lacked the finances to purchase specialised equipment for experiential learning. As expressed by one student: '*Not everyone has access to these stuff in their homes…Some of the stuff are very expensive, so it is hard, plus we can't even for our assignments you know we had to do movies and stuff*" (¶74) and '*almost half the class complaining about the software expiring*' (¶205). Some participants appealed for practical demonstrations and hands-on use of equipment before they undertook projects, yet these were not available. They mentioned the need to '*Teach … how to operate the stuff and then they let us go out to shoot our films*' (¶74). In yet other instances, students prepared for assessments without practical experience with specialised equipment. They had to devise their own ways of learning,

which then created further problems, as they used up data bundles meant for a month in a short space of time: '*We had to go on YouTube and learn for ourselves before we could do our practical test*' (¶84). Yardley, Teunissen and Dornan (2012) strongly assert how experiential or practical learning experiences are vital to the learning process.

Under-preparedness for assessment of learning

Some students said lecturers delivered content for the purpose of meeting assessment deadlines, regardless of whether students were adequately prepared or not. One participant put it as follows: '*We had a problem of like not having lectures, and then we would have a test… They are not going to teach us for like those whole few months, but they will have a class the day before the test*' (¶74). Often, students had to find alternative ways to prepare for assessments, such as the previous mention of the use of YouTube. Adherence to rigid testing schedules, which Maton (2009) calls 'curriculum stringency', is counteractive to cognitive development and knowledge retention; it merely ticks administrative check boxes bent on achieving throughput rates.

Fatigue

Information overload not only affected students' ability to cope and/or keep up with the workload, but it also often culminates in what Smith (2021) calls 'brain fog'. One participant stated he *'had to catch up with a lot of work all at once …three assignments, to do in one week … so much work … was kind of overwhelming'* (¶44). Students who missed classes due to various technical hurdles had the worst mental fatigue because '*listening to voice notes, doing assignments, doing tests was altogether burdening* (¶73). Furthermore, although class recordings are available for students to access at any time, listening to the audios is too time consuming. As one participant put it '*To be going in after every recording…becomes another process*' (¶122).

While online learning, in general has several challenges, online learning from home poses unique challenges related to demographics and socio-economic realities of specific households. Students described the enormous physical strain they endured as they attempted to integrate studying with regular house chores: '*You have to do something before the class starts; you have no time*' (¶111). Learning from home was particularly challenging for students from poor backgrounds, as they had to work in a blended environment where their study space was also used for other everyday activities. Learning from home affected female students the most as, culturally, females are considered home-keepers. They had to juggle between academic and domestic responsibilities: '*It is a bit challenging, especially for us, ladies, or girls, because you still have to do house chores right after you finish …or start your class*'s (¶103)

Subsequent to lockdown disruptions, most universities had to 'save the academic year' by reducing content or teaching much content in a short time. The compressed academic calendar put pressure on students: '*This whole year we've only had one-week holiday … it is non-stop working as soon as we hand in something, then we have a new brief on top of that, and I feel like we do not get much time to just breath, like we work all week, all weekend, it is like 24/7*' (¶217). According to Willingham (2012: 35), lack of rest brings 'wide ranging cognitive costs'.

Unconducive home environment

Most students from poor home backgrounds faced other challenges such as electricity load-shedding and water shortages. To make matters worse, lack of space in the home environment stifled online engagement and caused students to refrain from participating in online classes. One class representative reported that '*Students would literally cry … I cannot even study at home, the moment I touch my books, chaos starts … it is the noise* (¶82). In most homes, household activities such as cooking, and cleaning have to continue as usual, consuming time students could dedicate to learning. One student mentioned that when learning from home, family members expected domestic responsibilities to come first. These scenarios typify the difficulties faced by students who study in an unavoidably inconducive environment (Boughey and McKenna 2021).

Conclusions

The study found that multiple factors affect students' online learning experience. One of the major challenges is that some universities took a 'business as usual' approach, despite the shift to ERL. The findings suggest academics need to adapt to the unprecedented precarious environment engendered by ERL, by adapting new teaching and learning approaches that facilitate student engagement (Boyer 2012). The results of the study show that lecturers have abandoned pedagogical approaches such as 'Connectivism' or learning by associating familiar with unfamiliar information (Siemens 2005), and 'Constructivism', where new information is built on existing information (Hedden *et al*. 2017), instead, opting for passive approaches where online platforms are used to post content such as recordings and notes. Moreover, ERL approaches to TL appear to be oblivious of the negative impact of the pandemic on students' physical, mental, and psychological well-being, with lecturers often focusing on meeting deadlines, while ignoring the effects of ERL such as trauma, fear, isolation, and depression (Browning *et al.* 2021). Unless HEIs adapt TL practices to the demands of online learning, students will continue to receive sub-standard education.

Given the numerus challenges students in SA face in the context of ERL, prospective studies should explore how South African HEIs can replicate solutions from abroad, regarding students' pedagogical challenges with ERL. A critical variable would be to situate the study within a HE context, where most students come from disadvantaged educational and economic backgrounds without adequate access to proper learning resources outside the institution. Since technological inequalities remain a global phenomenon, future studies can undertake comparative studies of student online learning experiences in developed and developing countries. With economic differences between regions in the Global South, such as Africa and Asia, studies can also explore how students from different regions in the Global South experienced learning online. In the South African context, future studies could also compare the experiences of students from formerly privileged universities and formerly disadvantaged universities.

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