

## RESEARCH ARTICLE:

# Dismantling Hierarchies in Student-Lecturer Engagement: A Critical Pedagogy Approach in Higher Education

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## Abstract

*The education system is built on the binary student-lecturer relationship. Each player is located on the other side of the wall, which was unsettled by the effects of COVID-19. The aim of the study is to dismantle the wall of separation which is widened by unequal power dimensions where the lecturer is set above the student. Framed within dialogic engagement in Freirean critical pedagogy, the study utilizes self-reflections of both postgraduate students and their lecturer. These reflections are handled within auto-ethnography. Two postgraduate students, reading for a master's degree in English Studies at the Faculty of Humanities, and their lecturer in the discipline of English Studies provided the reflections that informed the study. The reflections are presented through the tradition of ethnographic thick description located in the qualitative paradigm of participant observation. The reflections are subjected to a narrative analysis. The findings point to the varied academic experiences between public and private institutions. This highlights the often-neglected part of rich experiences that students bring which are beneficial to the co-construction of knowledge. Furthermore, the findings point to a reversal of roles where the lecturer becomes a student who must learn from the experiences of students, and students assume the role of a lecturer as they teach through their experiences. The implication of these findings is that future academic engagement will no longer be conceived in terms of sole student recipients versus sole lecturer providers. The principal conclusion is that both players become equal partners and the rules of engagement will no longer be hierarchical. Reflexivity is therefore recommended as a solution of levelling the playfield between students and university academics, administrators and management.*

**Keywords:** critical pedagogy; auto-ethnography; reflexivity; academic engagement; higher education

## Introduction

The interaction between a student and a teacher is as old as education itself. In fact, formal education has been viewed as a continuation of a parent-child relationship; hence, teachers are often seen as acting in loco parentis (Rim-Kaufman and Sandilos, 2015). In such a relationship, there is an assumed hierarchy where the parent and teacher occupy the position of the knower, and the child and learner take the position of an apprentice (Minshew, 2019). In this arrangement the transference of knowledge flows from the knower to the apprentice or from a higher level of authority to the lower. This system replicates itself in many binary situations such as the researcher and the researched, the patient and doctor etc. Nonetheless, in the wake of the corona virus disease of 2019 (COVID-19), these roles that have often been taken for granted were unsettled. For instance, the doctors who occupied a higher level of authority were affected equally as their patients and they in turn became patients. In the higher education setup, students were equally affected as their lecturers, which also called for the dismantling of the wall that separated the two. The main purpose of the study is to interrogate the contesting positions of student-lecturer relationship in higher education. In a student-lecturer relationship, Amerstorfer and Freiin von Munster-Kistner (2021) place the student at a receiving end whilst the lecturer provides care, support, expertise, and so on.

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In another study that unpacked the student-teacher relationship, Tormey (2021) used a three-dimensional approach to describe such a relationship. In the dimension that aligns with the purposes of this study, “feelings of awe and admiration locate the person experiencing the emotion as being in a lower position with respect to another” (Tormey, 2021: 999). Therefore, there is an assumed distance between the lecturer and a student. In this study, this distance between the lecturer and a student is metaphorically referred to a wall that separates the two, which needs to be broken down.

The main thrust of the paper is to demonstrate how the hierarchical student-lecturer relationship can be dismantled. The relevance and urgency of dismantling this wall lies in the democratic expectations of producing graduates that will not be replicas of toxic hierarchies in society. In other words, leveling the student-lecturer relationship goes a long way into shaping society figures that will value every social member equally. In this study, this is set to be achieved through the adopted approach. The adopted methodology of autoethnography places both protagonists as researchers and the researched. This methodology has been adopted by Hunter (2023) who critically explored her experiences as a wife who followed her husband’s career relocation. Autoethnography allowed Hunter (2023) to interrogate some of her privileges as an expat and white woman against the others who were negatively labelled on account of the skin. Similarly, Jain *et al.* (2023) adopted a collaborative autoethnography in examining experiences of being transracialised in their professional trajectories. This approach therefore is pivotal in answering the critical question of how can the hierarchical student-lecturer relationship be dismantled.

The dismantling of the wall of separation between a student and a lecturer is an intentional process catalyzed by reflexivity as this study seeks to demonstrate. The present study is located within Freire’s critical pedagogy which calls for democratic engagement of teachers and their students (Chalaune, 2021). This places learners as co-constructors of knowledge and not just empty vessels waiting for the teacher to deposit knowledge (Freire, 2005). The following issues, organized under literature review and theoretical frameworks, are going to be discussed in the paper. The first issue to be discussed is teaching and learning, followed by critical pedagogy, student-lecturer relationship, co-construction of knowledge, and lastly, reflexivity. The research itself is presented through autoethnographic thick description and thereafter subjected to narrative analysis. Teaching and learning discussed below provides the overall background to the study.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks**

Pertinent reviewed literature, as mentioned, cover aspects of teaching and learning, student-lecturer relationship, co-construction of knowledge and reflexivity. Critical pedagogy is discussed as the theoretical framework.

### ***Teaching and learning***

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the education sector resulted in the closure of schools and colleges around the world (Raju, 2022). Prior to COVID-19, teaching and learning (TL) had taken place in a physical classroom where both students and lectures engaged in TL activities. Because of COVID-19, the entire process shifted from venue-based TL to the online mode of curriculum transaction (Raju, 2022). Furthermore, in both modes of teaching, students needed to attend classes with or without a device, learn materials which were discussed, and submit assignments, etc. (Raju, 2022). Moreover, a thorough comparison of the two modes of TL by scholars found that learning online can be more effective in a number of ways for people who have access to the correct technology (Singh *et al.*, 2021). The demand for online learning accelerated for various reasons such as cost effectiveness, the flexibility of time and place, opportunity to attend classes digitally, space for performing different wide and varied works of day-to-day lives for adults, and less distraction as compared to face-to-face learning (Xu and Jaggars, 2013; Nguyen, 2015; Kirtman, 2009).

Similarly, research conducted by World Economic Forum (2020) revealed that students learning online were found to retain more content than those who learnt offline. Furthermore, the research found that students were able to learn quickly online; it took less time for students to learn online than in a traditional classroom since students were able to learn at their own pace, going back and re-reading, skipping, or accelerating through subjects as needed (World Economic Forum, 2020). On the other hand, Singh *et al.* (2021) found that pre-pandemic, the effectiveness of online education was dismal, as students found it difficult to adjust to the online mode of education and the offline mode of education remained the most preferred. Some of the major reasons that made students to still prefer the offline mode of teaching was the inevitable problem of network connectivity that was mostly experienced

by students residing in rural areas as argued by Ntombela and Ntombela (2022). They confirmed that many rural academics (and students) in rural universities face challenges of internet connectivity in their homes.

It is clear that TL has been overtaken by the centrality of ICT, as Negi (2008) argues that ICT plays a pivotal role in transforming learning, teaching and assessment practices for students and teachers, in a high-quality 21<sup>st</sup> century education system. Therefore, as Negi (2008) contends, ICT integration would be a priority for education because, when effectively carried out, students will be equipped and prepared to live and work in today's complex society. Nonetheless, the migration towards a predominantly online education forced by COVID-19 has had various outcomes as it shall be apparent later in the paper. Suffice it to state that digital migration has exposed and amplified inequalities where only well-off students with cultural capital have benefited, leaving the majority disadvantaged (Czerniewicz, 2022). Another important aspect that provides further background to this paper is student-lecturer relationship to which we shall now turn.

### ***Student-lecturer relationship***

A positive relationship with students, according to Varga (2017), contributes to a positive learning environment. In fact, learners who regard their lecturers as mentors and encouragers are most likely to do better academically. According to Downey (2008), the quality of interaction between a student and a lecturer leads to a higher level of learning in the classroom. Baker (2006) contends that strong lecturer-student interactions may be one of the most crucial environmental elements in modifying a student's educational route. This is confirmed by Camp (2011) who argues that the student-lecturer interaction is an important element impacting academic and behavioural performance at institutions of higher education and training. Camp (2011) further argues that students who have a positive relationship with their lecturer attend to instruction better, put forth more effort, work through difficult situations, are more able to cope with stress, and are more accepting of lecturer redirects and criticism than students who do not have supportive and positive lecturer-student relationship. As such, according to Varga (2017), when students think that they are warmly welcomed and desired in the classroom, they are more likely to be interested and self-motivated to participate in the classroom. Lecturer-student connections are therefore crucial because lecturers have the ability to develop students up and establish a strong classroom culture through their interaction (Camp, 2011). Similarly, Novelli and Sayed (2016) emphasize that lecturers are a critical component of any educational system, and that great teaching is a precondition for success. According to Jankowski (2017), student achievement and lecturer teaching must be a mutual connection where both support and enhance each other. Jankowski (2017) further asserts that students should be involved, and the more engaged they are in learning settings, the more likely they are to complete, learn, and be pleased. In other words, a symbiotic relationship must hold together the student and the lecturer. We will now turn to the theory that framed the present study. Critical pedagogy discussed below provides the theoretical framework of the study.

### ***Critical pedagogy***

Critical pedagogy arose from the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire (2005) and has the potential to develop skills and to transform the educator, the learner, the classroom and the society at large. As critical pedagogy consists of two words: 'critical' and 'pedagogy', Burbules and Berk (1999: 46) explain that "to be 'critical' means to be more discerning in recognizing faulty arguments, hasty generalizations, assertions lacking evidence, truth claims based on unreliable authority, ambiguous or obscure concepts, and so forth." Moreover, Nkealah and Simango (2023: 71) believe that "critical pedagogy is the technique that can provide teachers, learners and researchers with a better means of understanding the role that schools play within a race, class, and gender-divided society". Critical pedagogy is steered by the need to help students develop a profound awareness of the injustices around them based on, for example, class, race, gender, and to become conscientious of their role as critical subjects (Nelson and Chen, 2023); in this sense, critical pedagogy is both theory and practice that helps learners develop critical consciousness. Freire (2005) states that education must begin with resolving the contradiction of instructor-learner relationship, by reconciling the poles of contradiction so that the instructor is seen as a learner and a learner as an instructor. Therefore, in the context of this study, this relationship allows both the student and lecturer to participate and benefit during lessons.

In his critique of the banking system, Freire (2005: 73) outlined some of the factors that hamper social progress and critical thinking:

the teacher teaches and the learners are taught; the teacher knows everything and the learners do not know anything; the teacher thinks and the learners memorise content; the teacher speaks and the learners listen modestly; the teacher makes rules of discipline and the learners follow them.

These factors show that the banking system displays the idea that the more learners work to accumulate the deposits entrusted to them, the less they are able to transform their situation. Moreover, Freire indicates that individuals who knowingly or mistakenly use a banking approach fail to experience that deposits themselves are logical anomalies about reality (Chalaune, 2021). Thus, in Freire's (2005) view, education is a practice of freedom and education should be an activity of freedom. As such, teachers should avail the opportunity of freedom to learners in the process of education. Through critical pedagogy, teachers and learners participate in the learning process in many ways that are meaningful and empowering. It is clear that the principal players in critical pedagogy are teachers and learners or students and their lecturers. Therefore, in the context of this paper, it is imperative to situate critical pedagogy in the context of co-construction of knowledge.

### **Co-construction of knowledge**

Piaget is among the early influences of learning as an active construction of knowledge, which was conceived as mainly an individual cognitive activity (Reusser, 2001). According to this view, learners utilized biological grounded structures and pre-knowledge (Reusser, 2001). However, if knowledge construction is solely conceived as the work of an individual, it raises the question of how individuals can come to the same knowledge. Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory seems to have come up with an answer to this question in the form of claims that learning is a social activity (Reusser, 2001). In that respect, Reusser (2001: 2059) presents three aspects of co-construction in the educational context, which are (a) social type of discourse such as "mother-child dialogue, peer interaction, teacher-student interaction, learning in teams, computer-supported collaborative work"; (b) psychopedagogical processes such as "exploratory talk and collaborative argumentation, collaborative negotiation, joint-construction of a shared understanding, elaboration of mutual knowledge and ideas", and (c) "the expected outcomes of elaboration." In the context of research, Horner (2016: 8) argues that "co-constructed research is research that facilitates co-construction of knowledge." This essentially means that those who take part in research, i.e., the researchers and the community (often the researched) are equally involved in the construction of knowledge. That is, they equally participate in the democratic sense, where such participation is essential for human progress and transformation (Horner, 2016). For instance, Campanella *et al.* (2022: 20), in their research about co-constructing knowledge for action in research practice partnerships, concluded that the whole process enabled them to "position undergraduate researchers as co-leaders in the research design, planning, and facilitation of collaborative knowledge building in the partnership." This means that the hierarchical system that constantly sees students as recipients of knowledge is levelled in the co-construction orientation. However, due to the power inherent to lecturers and researchers in general, the levelling must be intentional and the sharing of power must be deliberate. This therefore calls for lecturers and researchers to be reflexive about their conduct both in research and in teaching.

### **Reflexivity**

Research conducted under the qualitative paradigm is known for subjectivity which is brought about by the involvement of the researcher in the research process (Rees *et al.*, 2020). Whilst it is largely expected that researcher's bias and subjectivity be controlled in research – an expectation influenced by the quantitative paradigm – qualitative research acknowledges the involvement of researchers through their histories, background and knowledge, and how these traits shape the research outcomes (Varpio *et al.*, 2021). In other words, the subjectivities that are shunned in quantitative research are sometimes anticipated in qualitative research. Therefore, reflexivity has been utilized to make explicit the researcher's involvement in the research process, which is essential for replicability of research. Reflexivity as described by Delve.Ho and Limpaecher (2022) allows researchers to gain insight of the research topic through truthful reporting. Reflexivity involves awareness of personal judgements, practices and belief systems during the research process (Delve.Ho and Limpaecher, 2022). "[R]eflexivity is a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes" (Olmos-Vega, 2023: 242). That is, as Delve.Ho and Limpaecher (2022) assert, reflexivity shifts the focus from the research object to the researcher. This has implications for teaching and learning, as Ntombela (2017) argues that reflexivity when extended to postgraduate supervision allows supervisors to gain access to their 'selves' as individuals and as supervisors. In other words, supervisors continuously reflect on their practices in order to identify



and control personal traits that would influence students' pursuit of postgraduate studies or students' reception and internalisation of knowledge in a teaching and learning situation. In the context of education where the hierarchical relationship between a student and a lecturer has been levelled, it goes without saying that reflexivity applies equally to the student.

Before proceeding to the experiences of two students (#ST1, #ST2) and their lecturer (#LCR) where they reflect about their academic engagement in the backdrop of COVID-19, we shall briefly provide the methodological context. In the ethical consideration of anonymity, #ST1, #ST2, and #LCR have been arbitrarily chosen to represent the female and male students and their lecturer respectively. Experiences are presented in the tradition of autoethnographic thick description, of which a brief description shall suffice.

## Methodology

Since the study is underpinned by a transformative, emancipatory ethos, that seeks to dismantle the tensions between students and their lecturers, it was appropriate to adopt an autoethnographic approach that would equalise the experiences of the protagonists by not communicating a hierarchical order that favours one part at the expense of the other. Autoethnography is a form of reflexive enquiry that looks into the author's own experiences in the contexts of either education, psychology or sociology (Ellis *et al.*, 2011; Maunganidze and Ruggunan, 2021; Ntombela, 2021). Responding to the critique that is often mounted against autoethnography as being prone to extreme subjectivity, Maunganidze and Ruggunan (2021) appealed to collaborative autoethnography where two or more researchers reflect on an empirical case. In this research, three researchers have collaborated on reflecting on their educational experiences roused by the imperatives of emergency response to COVID-19. As Maunganidze and Ruggunan (2021) argued, collaborative autoethnography in South Africa is prevalent in the areas of education and sociology; in this study, it focuses on the selves of the researchers (two students – female (#ST1) and male (#ST2) – and one male lecturer (#LCR)), and provides analyses of what it means to be a student and lecturer in the wake of the imperatives of emergency response to COVID-19, and therefor highlights the visibility of the researchers as prominent players in the study. Chang *et al.* (2016) regard such focus to 'selves' and the underscoring of researchers as prominent players in the study as tenets of collaborative autoethnography. This autoethnographic description is later followed by a narrative analysis. An attempt has been made to present the reflections as they are without tempering with the expressions except only for clarity of meaning. Thus, the reflections are not meant to be grammatically or academically impeccable.

## Presentation of Reflections

The reflections that follow are provided by two students: #ST1 who is a female master's student and #ST2, a male master's student. The lecturer #LCR also provided own reflections. The three are engaged in a student-lecturer relationship, which forms the basis of the reflections. Reflections are contextualised in the period of transition in educational offering caused by the outbreak and the aftermath of COVID-19.

### #ST1

*Within the last several years, the paradigm of conventional schooling has shifted dramatically. Being physically present in a classroom is no longer the sole way to learn, not with the growth of the internet and new technology, at any rate. Nowadays, as long as you can go online, you can acquire excellent education anytime and wherever you choose. Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increasing move towards teaching online because of shutting down of schools, colleges and universities for an indefinite time.*

Lederman (2020) justly stated that due to the COVID-19 crisis, both teachers and students find themselves in the situation where they felt compelled to embrace the digital academic experience as the medium of the online teaching-learning process. **I started my online learning experience in July 2021** when I registered with one private higher education institution (PHEI) for my Post-Graduate Certificate in Education. The set-up of the system is very efficient. **The school's website has everything any physical school would have liked:** libraries containing every book, journal, or article you would need; past papers and a chat box where you can enquire about anything. I also like the portal they use for assignments. It has a countdown of the submission date and time, an option to extend the submission date, an option to re-submit and finally an option for a re-mark. This goes out for both assignments and final exams.

The experience itself as a student started out rough due to being in contact learning for 20 years. It was very hard to adjust to things like concentration in a non-learning environment, time management, and feeling like I am alone in class. It has been mentioned that specific characteristics of the classroom's physical environment are related to student satisfaction, attitudes, and evaluation of the quality of the course. **It was hard to concentrate in class while I was home.** I was distracted by my family, the neighbours, the TV, the food in the kitchen and other things that I would not have to deal with if I was in a classroom. It was also hard to create time for my assignments due to house chores, work and spending time with family. **My biggest struggle was feeling like I was alone in class.** I was so used to having classmates I could interact and compare notes with. With online school, due to people being from all walks of life, and not seeing them face-to-face, it is hard to make friends.

In 2022, I registered for my master's with one historically disadvantaged university (HDI). This experience is quite interesting because I previously did my degree and honours degree with this university and I attended classes physically. So, coming back to do my master's and finding out that now everything is online was just quite a challenge – from not knowing how to go about registering, to not being sure how to submit assignments. For registration I typically knew which office to go to and who to enquire with; however, now that things are changed, we were not allowed on campus (COVID-19 regulations), I was not sure who to contact in order to register. I had to contact one of my old lecturers and asked if they could get me in contact with someone who can assist me with registration. When it came to assignments, unlike the PHEI, the HDI did not use portals for assignment submissions. I remember with my first assignment from the first semester, I had to submit it 3 times due to errors that could have been avoided if there was a portal. Currently, in my second semester class, *Issues in Language Education*, taught by #LCR, the experience is everything I would expect in an efficient online class. This is due to the conversation we had at the beginning of our classes in August. We discussed which ways could make the class more productive due to the class being online. **Due to that conversation and the open communication** we have as a class, we are able to face challenges such as network issues and fulfil everything we had discussed.

My experience with online education grew even further as I got employed as a lecturer at one historically disadvantaged university (HDI). **Teaching online is honestly one of the best methods of teaching, especially if you are teaching students that are more than 300 in one class.** As a lecturer for first-year students, I can tell that they are facing a lot of challenges with online learning. The one that affects them the most is the lack of computer competency. They are straight out of high school and most high schools do not offer computer classes. Imagine going from not knowing how to use the computer to having to know how to use it in order to learn all of your modules. For online learning to prosper in South Africa, the government needs to ensure that they introduce computer literacy in primary schools.

The fact is that we live in a world that is always evolving and full of new possibilities. The capacity to study new knowledge or skills whenever and wherever you choose provides significantly more educational options than ever before. The scope and reach of education expand to much broader vistas than anyone could have dreamed.

#ST2

In South Africa, a sudden shift from classroom-based learning and teaching to online learning and teaching was fully put into effect during COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, teaching and learning used to occur in a classroom for most universities, whereas some, such as distance learning institutions (DLI), learning and teaching was already in the right track of the fourth industrial revolution system, occurring online. With the rise of COVID-19 infections early 2020 in South Africa, higher learning institutions had to come up with a way-forward to keep learning and teaching active. For institutions to keep up with teaching and learning, there had to be a solution; therefore, online learning and teaching became the solution for colleges, universities of technology and traditional universities from undergraduate to postgraduate studies. This meant that learning was to take place on digital devices such as a computer, tablet and smartphone through the use of social media platforms such as Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Blackboard. Therefore, students and teachers/lecturer started engaging actively online.

*My personal experience of online learning and teaching as a student goes as follows:*

*I am a first-year master's student at the HBU, for the current academic year, 2022. **My lessons take place online**; I interact and engage actively with my lecturers there. We use Blackboard as our mode of online learning and teaching. I attend my lessons online and get assessed online and I also get to see my grades online. So far, **online learning and teaching has been nothing but the best experience** as it has introduced and exposed me to the enjoyable and easiest way of receiving education.*

*However, this experience came with both positive and negative effects. I will attempt to start with the negative factors and then conclude with positive factors. As a student who is learning from home (rural area to be precise), there are negative effects that I normally encounter during online lessons due to some inevitable factors such as socio-economic factors, technology illiteracy, and poor social development. **My home is based in a rural area that is less privileged, disadvantaged and underdeveloped**. So, the means of accessing online learning and teaching are quite hard as the network towers are very far from my village, hence resulting to constant poor connection when I am attending my lessons online. There are often glitches in most times when the lesson is ongoing, and this affects my knowledge acquisition. In this case, I am always left behind and have to recover the entire lesson on my own. This also affects me when I have to present a subject/topic online. I often experience connectivity problems resulting to poor presentation delivery and this has a greater negative impact on my overall performance since my presentations also form part of my formative assessments marks.*

***Emotionally, this situation leaves me drained and demotivated**, because as much as I can prepare for a presentation, there is always a stumbling block that I know will be responsible for reducing my grades. For this reason, online learning and teaching has been a sweet pain to me. What I mean is that it comes with greater benefits of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and knowledge, but at the same time if you live in an underdeveloped area, you will suffer or suffocate to acquire such benefits. Another major issue is loadshedding that the country is currently facing. I sometimes lose lessons because maybe by the time it is time for class, on my side there is loadshedding. However, with regular continuation of using fourth industrial revolution skills, naturally as students, we are upskilled with the use 21<sup>st</sup> century technological tools.*

*Additionally, having been used to a classroom-based learning and teaching where physical demonstration formed part of reinforcing understanding of the content taught to students, I now find online learning and teaching a bit difficult to conform or adjust to as there isn't a sign or rather enough evidence of physical demonstration, which means there has been a substitute of knowledge understanding reinforcement in online learning and teaching. For example, the teaching of parts of speech requires the lecturer to demonstrate examples using objects, things, and people available in the contextual classroom for easier and understandable knowledge acquisition, and that is not easy or possible with online learning and teaching. All in all, the limit to such exposure and physical experience to the lesson, I tend to not clearly understand some things better than I would if I were learning in a classroom.*

*To go extensively and beyond, I will pick a close experience from one of the modules that I am doing on my master's coursework program. The module name is 'Issues in English teaching' which takes place on Blackboard. Ever since the online learning and teaching of this module commenced, I still have my good and bad share of it. The good part of it is that the online learning and teaching of this module allows for **a 50/50 student and lecturer interaction which I find very beneficial and effective** when it comes to knowledge gaining as different thoughts are poured out and refined by the lecturer then I end up consuming more information of the subject. Moreover, I have gained skills of presenting a lesson online and also download content that is shared by my classmates when they are presenting their papers as well.*

*Still on the benefits, I also **have found online learning and teaching of this module beneficial in terms of having great access to the lecturer**. It has greater positive effect academically as the lecturer makes it a point that we move in the right direction, and we are always familiar with right sources to source out information required as it is the aim of the module. Again, given the fact that every lesson is always recorded, one can always get back to the course and access the lesson at any time and enjoy the lesson better. I for one always revisit my lessons and re-absorb the lesson for better understanding of the content*

*as I believe that academics should master the art of knowing each content they are learning. So, such flexibility of online learning and teaching allows even students who are working to also pursue their studies further as there are options of how one can attend to their studies, whether to attend online or attend to the recording of that lesson and later ask for clarity from the lecturer; this is from a point of view of the person currently experiencing this.*

*Interestingly, for the first time, since I started with my academic journey, I have only witnessed lecturer feedback faster when receiving learning and teaching online, the reason being that mostly the system is easily automated to respond to the assessments swiftly. This has allowed for instant lecturer intervention to the questions that I as a student find difficult to tackle. This quick intervention is beneficial when it comes to teaching and learning as the objective is for students to gain knowledge competently and successfully. And I can attest that I have been a happy beneficiary of the latter.*

#LCR

*My master's coursework class had two students. **Interactions were carried out online through Blackboard Ultra.** This proved to be quite a vibrant class as both students were eager to express their opinions which is a good ingredient for a fruitful academic interaction.*

*Although an online platform had its own affordances in that all of us were able to interact during the lecture in the comfort of our homes or anywhere in the country, there was a lot of unpredictability on connectivity exacerbated by loadshedding. It became not so easy to separate legitimate cases of connectivity problems from truancy.*

*Although the lecturer-student relationship was acknowledged, the ability to express oneself with the option of not showing your face made it easy for everyone to share without worrying too much about saving face. I found my students vocal and open. In fact, one of them insisted that we show our faces on the video at least once. And it was the same student who also insisted that we exchange contact numbers as our communication had only been done through email.*

*My students were also reflective on their journey as master's students. They constantly mentioned how they were keen on building themselves as aspiring academics. They also expressed how they wished to start contributing to the academic world of publication and knowledge sharing. I found this very inspiring because our course was not even going to produce an extended piece of writing. I thought it useful to expose them to the conference call so that we could make a presentation together as a way of inducting them to the academic world. I was inspired by their enthusiasm. In fact, although the conference was a hybrid event offering possibilities of presenting papers physically and online, my students were keen to travel to the conference venue and make a physical presentation. I also noted that my students were in the forefront of enquiring about the developments around preparations for the conference presentation. **I found myself at times having to follow their lead** and make sure I do not exert any pressure on them by appearing to be procrastinating.*

*I also picked up a few things about myself from my students. They commented among themselves that they found my verbal communication quite easy to follow but when expressing myself in writing I tended to be obscure. For instance, they would comfortably understand my lectures and follow my arguments and were even able to make solid contributions that extended the arguments but when questions were asked around a similar topic, it would seem to them that it was a different topic altogether. I had to reflect about the possible reasons that would make me express myself so obscurely in writing than in speech. But I also picked up that according to my students, even my verbal communication was not always straightforward. A 'yes' or a 'no' was not explicitly expressed as such but required a student to think about all the possibilities.*

Having presented the reflections in the tradition of ethnographic thick description, we shall now subject them into narrative analysis, to which a brief description shall suffice.

## **Narrative Analysis and Discussion of Findings**



Narrative analysis is based on narrative cognition that attends to the particular and special characteristics of human action that takes place in a particular setting. Polkinghorne (1995: 6) remarks that "[n]arrative reasoning operates by noticing the differences and diversity of people's behaviour. It attends to the temporal context and complex interaction of the elements that make each situation remarkable". Therefore, narrative analysis promotes the narrative mode of thoughts about "the configuration of the data into a coherent whole" (Polkinghorne 1995: 15), while sustaining the metaphoric richness of a story. It is a method of exploiting the data, in which narrative data that consist of actions, events, and happenings are analysed, in order to produce coherent stories as an outcome of the analysis. The purpose of the narrative analysis is, then, to help the reader understand why and how things happened in the way they did, and why and how our participants acted in the way they did. The final story configured through the narrative mode of analysis has to appeal to readers in a way that helps them empathize with the protagonist's lived experience as understandable human phenomena.

One major change brought by COVID-19 was a shift from face-to-face interactions to online learning and teaching as evidenced by #ST1, #ST2 and #LCR reflections. Coincidentally, such a shift came with the growth of new technologies even though the infrastructure for such technologies happened to be unequally distributed. For example, the issues of connectivity troubled everyone which was exacerbated by the country's slid into loadshedding. Nonetheless, as #ST1 recounts, the online platform seems to work perfectly for a PHEI in comparison to HBU. The demographic context where online learning and teaching operates has impact on the quality of experience. The geographic location of HBU has an effect on the calibre of students that are enrolled. For instance, #ST1 who attends the HBU together with #ST2 report challenges that suggest under-preparedness of HBU to move into an online platform. Furthermore, there are similarities between #ST1's students in HDI with #ST2. They probably come from a similar background that did not prepare them adequately with digital technologies and computer literacy, which threw them into a deep end when they had to move to an online platform. Besides the infrastructural challenges that largely affected students from a rural background, #ST1 and #ST2 report personal challenges that impacted their emotional stability. They both experienced challenges with social alienation as they could not interact with fellow students and lecturers in the way they are used to in a face-to-face environment.

In addition, #ST1 experienced distractions from the home when attending lectures online whilst #ST2 experienced feelings of inadequacy as his online presentations were usually disrupted by loadshedding, which also affected his performance. Amidst the challenges, the relationship between #ST1, #ST2 and #LCR helped them rise above them. This relationship assisted them to make the best out of the trying situation. The students praised the openness of their lecturer and the lecturer was pleased with the response of the students. The good relationship between the three made them able to navigate through challenges brought by attending lectures online. The assistance received by #ST2 that helped him understand the content more, was a result of equality placed by #LCR in their relationship. The openness on their relationship did not only make #LCR make positive contributions to students' upbringing as aspiring academics, but it also made him realise some of his personal shortcomings. The students were able to point out his need to tone down on how he communicates the subject content. An acknowledgement of this fact made him to want to improve. Furthermore, #ST1 and #ST2 appreciate the affordances of an online system, which did not only enhance 21<sup>st</sup> century skills but offered them choice between attending online and face-to-face. Such choice is important for working students like themselves who would not be able to attend physically. An online system also affords teaching large classes as everything could be managed in that platform.

As mentioned earlier, the reflections produced by #ST1, #ST2 and #LCR were informed by reflexivity that shifts focus from the object of research to the researcher (Delve.Ho and Limpaecher, 2022). In this way, the three researchers were able to reflect on their experiences, which, in the tradition of autoethnography, focused on their 'selves' (Maunganidze and Ruggunan, 2021). Thus, the experiences entailed in the reflections became the objects of analysis and enriched the findings of the study. There is no doubt that TL shifted to the online platform, which was largely catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This agrees with already cited studies by Singh *et al.* (2021), World Economic Forum (2020). Such a shift was in fact well in advance prior to the pandemic, inter alia, due to the proliferation of ICT in education (Negi, 2008; Xu and Jaggars, 2013; Kirtman, 2009). The affordances of online learning are obvious which explains why it became a default system when the world was attacked by the pandemic. In fact, the move towards the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) had already prepared the ground for crossing into an online system. Notwithstanding this development, the majority of the institutions were not prepared to move into an online platform when they were forced by COVID-19 (CHE-USAf-UFS Staff Experience of and Perspectives on

Teaching and Learning and its Future Survey Report (SEP-TLF, 2021). Even students encountered a myriad of challenges, chief among which were “network connectivity, data, and not having appropriate devices for studying” (Students’ Access to and Use of Learning Materials Survey Report (DHET, 2020: 8). Nonetheless, the plaque of inequality in South Africa is more visible when it comes to infrastructural development required for maximum utilisation of online affordances in different population settings (SEP-TLF, 2021; DHET, 2020; Mdiniso, 2020). The urban setting where PHEIs are located fare much better than HBUs (and HDIs) that draw students from a rural background (Ntombela and Ntombela, 2022). Those who come from a rural background are not only affected by lack of exposure to digital and computer literacies but are worst hit by loadshedding that prevents them from participating in the online platform meaningfully (SEP-TLF, 2021).

In the higher education setting where the principal players are students and lecturers, it becomes easy to navigate the challenges of migrating to an online system when the relationship is positive (Varga, 2017). The students are able to meaningfully engage with the academic content and the lecturer is able to provide meaningful support to students. At the same time, the positive relationship as benefits for the lecturer who in the process of inducting students into academia is himself re-inducted into teaching. This is in sync with Freire’s (2005) critical pedagogy where students are not just reservoirs for the lecturer to deposit knowledge, but are free to assume the role of lecturer and the lecturer could also be a student. Such a relationship therefore dismantles the dividing wall between a student and a lecturer. The two have a symbiotic relationship. Most interestingly, both students and lecturer have been able to provide valuable experiences of migrating to an online system of teaching and learning. This is in line with studies that report affordances of online learning (Mdiniso, 2020; Hanifah *et al.*, 2019; Roblyer and Hughes, 2019). In fact, even though students are students by virtue of receiving tuition from the lecturer, they are also lecturers in their own right as they also have students to whom they provide tuition. This immediately places students on an equal footing with their lecturer and legitimises the co-constructed knowledge they are contributing. In the context of this study, valuable knowledge about the challenges and affordances of online learning and teaching has been gained through the reflections of students and their lecturer.

## Conclusion

This study has drawn from the reflections of the students and their lecturer which is well-placed within the concept of reflexivity (Ntombela, 2017). Reflexivity has allowed both students and their lecturer not to see themselves as antagonists but as equals. They are equally affected by the migration into the online platform. However, the positive relationship they have has mitigated the challenges imposed by the migration. This kind of relationship is the one envisaged by Freire (2005) in his humanising pedagogy where each lecturer and student play both roles of being lecturer and student. In the teaching and learning situation therefore, the students bring with them valuable experiences which become lessons for the lecturer. Together they contribute knowledge that enhances their engagement within the academic fraternity. This study has therefore demonstrated that there need not be a chasm between students and their lecturers, especially in the context of knowledge construction. Students should not be viewed only as objects that must be studied by lecturers; they are equally knowledgeable. When both reflect on their experiences in teaching and learning, it becomes clear that they are partners. In the light of this conclusion, it would be recommended to employ a different methodological approach such as interviews or surveys. On the one hand, interviews for instance might probe some of the findings entailed in this study, say through focus group discussions; on the other hand, surveys might probe the distribution of the findings entailed in this study. In terms of teaching and learning in higher education, the findings have implications on the importance of building positive and levelled relationship between students and lecturers especially in the context of adult students who are matured. Furthermore, the dialogic reflections employed in this study could be adapted for teaching and learning. This approach would promote transparency and enhance deep communication about what matters the most in teaching and learning. This could be done at the end of a course offering and would easily be used for improvement. It is also possible to do it at the beginning of the course, to allow students and their lecturers to reflect on experiences in order to inform interactions in the course they will be taking.

## Declarations

**Interdisciplinary Scope:** The article demonstrates an interdisciplinary scope by integrating insights from education, applied linguistics and higher education studies.

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