

## TEACHING IN THE TIME OF CRISIS: A DECOLONIAL TAKE OF MY EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE TEACHING AT A RURAL UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

The spread of the 2019 novel coronavirus in South Africa, like in many parts of the world, has led to a sustained national lockdown meant to prevent the continued spread, as well as a potential resurgence of the virus. This meant all institutions of learning (higher and basic education institutions) were closed. Higher education institutions in South Africa were forced to adopt Emergency Remote Online Teaching and Learning (EROTL) Modalities to salvage what was left of the 2020 academic year. This was partly to avoid a systematic and institutional collapse of the education sector. Therefore, in this paper I reflect on the pedagogical difficulties and successes that I have encountered as a teacher-educator (lecturer) at a rural university in Limpopo Province, South Africa relating to the sudden, unprecedented, shift from face-to-face teaching and learning to EROTL. This I do by employing a decolonial framework underpinned by decolonial love as decoloniality, and a living theory methodology with action-reflection cycles as a method. I concluded, for instance, that for EROTL to be meaningful and impactful; university departments need to have a reliable institutional memory that would enable new academic staff members to know what was taught previously in a specific module or course allocated to them. Beyond this, as lecturers, we need to build solid relationships with our students that center their interests, and these relationships need to be informed by decolonial love. This will enable us to meaningfully collaborate with them in our pursuit of a successful academic project that is transformative. We also need, in our pedagogical choices, to consider other online platforms such as WhatsApp, especially in managing larger classes.

**Keywords:** Covid-19; Decolonisation; Emergency Remote Online Teaching and Learning; Higher Education; Pedagogical Content Knowledge; Rural University.

### INTRODUCTION

The current global pandemic caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was first reported on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2019 by the World Health Organization (WHO) after a cluster of pneumonia cases in the Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China<sup>4</sup> has fundamentally disrupted our

way of life. The spread of the virus to other parts of the world, including South Africa, forced governments to lockdown their countries and institutions. These lockdowns were necessitated by some of the following reasons:

- i. The absence of vaccination medicine to combat the spread of the virus.
- ii. The need for citizens to self-quarantine and practice social and physical distancing to prevent the spread of the virus.

<sup>4</sup> This information was accessed from the National Institute of Communicable Diseases' (NICD) website. The NICD is "national public health institute of South Africa, providing reference microbiology, virology, epidemiology, surveillance and public health research to support the government's response to communicable disease threats." Their website link is: <https://www.nicd.ac.za/>

In South Africa, the national lockdown was announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa<sup>5</sup> on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2020 under the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002.<sup>6</sup> It was initially meant to commence at midnight on Thursday, March 26 until midnight on Thursday, April 16. However, this was later extended due to the rapid increase in the number of people getting infected by the virus and the need to contain its spread.<sup>7</sup> This move prompted universities to move towards Emergency Remote Online Teaching and Learning (EROTL) to complete the 2020 academic programme thus avoid a systematic and institutional collapse of the entire education sector. However, EROTL has placed lecturers and their students under great strain and pressure leading to deepened mental health issues amongst them (Godsell, 2020). This is partly to do with the fact that university managements adopted a business-as-usual approach in their operational logics and implementation of EROTL. They have seemingly ignored the fact that other basic imperatives needed to be in place first before they can implement EROTL.

Therefore, in this paper I reflect on the pedagogical difficulties and successes that I have encountered as a teacher-educator (lecturer) at a rural university in Limpopo Province, South Africa relating to the sudden, unprecedented, shift from face-to-face teaching and learning towards EROTL. I do this by firstly historicising the difference between a rural and urban university in contemporary South Africa. Secondly, I review the literature on the challenges and successes necessitated by

the transition from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. Thirdly, I outline the theoretical and methodological tools I employed. Lastly, I reflect on my positionality as a teacher-educator at a rural university, and the pedagogical difficulties and successes I encountered having joined the rural university during the national lockdown from a historically white, well-resourced cosmopolitan university.

## **HISTORICISING A RURAL UNIVERSITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA**

Contemporary South African higher education is profoundly shaped and structurally influenced by the history and legacy of colonial-apartheids and a pervasive modernity/coloniality project (Badat and Sayed 2014; Badat, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015, 2018ab). The adoption of the Extension of University Education Act 45 introduced in 1959 by the colonial-apartheid regime led by the National Party saw the establishment of various types of institutions of higher learning (IHL). These were based on racial, geographical location, and ethnic differences, i.e., historically white universities (HWUs) and historically black<sup>9</sup> universities (HBUs). The main reason for a differentiated higher education sector, especially the establishment of HBUs, “was overtly political and instrumental; they were not established because of an academic need for institutions of the kind they became” (Bunting, 2006, p. 46). In other words, they were established for the domestication and subjugation of Africans. This differentiation was also used to ensure and maintain the cultural hegemony

<sup>5</sup> Watch President Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa announcing the lockdown here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LegaUR1A0Jg>

<sup>6</sup> South Africa’s initial national lockdown regulations can be accessed in various national department website. However, it should be noted that these regulations were amended by various departments based on their departmental mandates.

<sup>7</sup> President Cyril Ramaphosa’s speech on measures to contain Coronavirus and the extension of the National lockdown can be accessed here: <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-extension-coronavirus-covid-19-lockdown-end-april-9-apr-2020-0000>.

<sup>8</sup> I frame colonialism and apartheid as an inseparable enterprise because they are fundamentally and ideologically the same. That is, they are two sides of the same coin.

<sup>9</sup> Black in the context of this paper is used within its Black Consciousness conceptualisation. That is, with reference to Africans, Coloureds and Indians who were oppressed under colonial-apartheid.

of the dominant group, i.e., white people (Bourdieu, 2011). Additionally, they were also used as a manipulation of the economic system and its structures to ensure and maintain the economic reproduction of the status quo (Bunting, 2006; Muthama and Mckenna, 2017). According to Muthama and Mckenna:

Ten HBUs were established which were classified into three broad groups based on geographical location and the ethnic population they were designed to serve (Education Policy Unit, University of Western Cape, 1997). The first group comprised six rural universities: University of Zululand; a campus of the University of the North, established in QwaQwa; the University of Fort Hare (that existed before apartheid but was then designated for the Xhosa population), which became the homeland institution for Ciskei (Subotzky, 1997; Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013); and three universities found within “independent homelands” – University of Transkei; University of Bophuthatswana, and University of Venda (Subotzky, 1997; DHET, 2013). The second group comprised two urban universities, University of the Western Cape for ‘Coloured’ people, situated in Cape Town, and the University of Durban-Westville for ‘Indians’ in KwaZulu Natal. The last group comprised two specialist institutions, the Medical University of South Africa (MEDUNSA) which was established in response to demand for medical care for the black population, and Vista University, which was established to offer teacher education through seven satellite campuses across the country (Subotzky, 1997; DHET, 2013). (Muthama and Mckenna, 2017, p. 130)

All these institutions were controlled by eight different government departments (Bunting, 2006). This differentiated approach meant that the colonial-apartheid regime was able to further justify, legalise,

maintain, and perpetuate inequalities and injustices that existed between Africans and whites. Therefore, in terms of IHL, this differentiated approach meant that the colonial-apartheid regime was able to discriminate against HBUs in terms of funding, networking opportunities, autonomy, infrastructure development, research, and postgraduate studies development (Muthama and Mckenna, 2017).

The legacy of this differentiated approach is still very much alive in contemporary South Africa’s higher education sector. This is despite the 1996 liberal Constitution<sup>10</sup> and the Green and White Papers of 1997<sup>11</sup> on higher education which resulted in the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997, promising a somewhat uniform higher education sector. This was vividly exposed, first, by student protests post-1994 especially the 2015-6 #MustFall student protests (see: Badat, 2016, 2017; Nyamnjoh, 2016ab; Heleta, 2016, 2018; Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2020; Mazibuko, 2020). What was interesting about the 2015-6 student protests was the unbalanced media coverage and unbalanced government response to student demands. In other words, mainstream media appeared to only cover student protests when they were taking place in HWUs.<sup>12</sup> Thus, further reinforcing the unearned privilege that those institutions continue to enjoy to this day. The government response is also worrisome. Students from HBUs have been protesting the lack of transformation, infrastructure and so on in their respective

<sup>10</sup> Section 29(1) of the 1996 Liberal Constitution provides:

"Everyone has the right (a) to a basic education, including adult basic education, and (b) to further education, which the state through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible."

<sup>11</sup> These papers frame higher education as a social institution that functions to redress historical injustices.

<sup>12</sup> See: *History of South African student protests reflects inequality's grip*, by Nuraan Davids (Senior Lecturer in Philosophy of Education, Stellenbosch University), and Yusef Waghid (Distinguished Professor of Philosophy of Education, Stellenbosch University) at: <https://theconversation.com/history-of-south-african-student-protests-reflects-inequalitys-grip-66279>

institutions since the dawn of democracy. Yet, their demands are either met with perpetual silence or systemic state sponsored violence. However, when similar demands are made by students from HWUs, the government appears to be *proactive* instead of *reactive* in their response to the crisis in higher education.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, the coronavirus pandemic also vividly exposed these inequalities and injustices. The fact that HBUs battled in completing the academic year in 2020 due to limited resources, lack of adequate infrastructure, less to no private dominations, less to no expertise, etc., was partly informed by the historical inequalities and injustices discussed and the pervasive modernity/coloniality project. Many, if not all, completed their 2020 academic year in between the second and fourth months of 2021, while HWUs managed to complete their 2020 academic year in late December 2020.

Thirdly, the inequalities and injustices that exist between HBUs and HWUs are also because of the *digital divide*, *inequality*, and *marginality* that can be historicised. Charp describes the digital divide merely as:

...the gap in technology ownership and access between those who are affluent and those who are poor or live in rural areas with limited or no access to the internet. (Charp, 2001, np)

The State, the private sector, and HBU managements attempted to remedy the situation by loaning various technological devices and allocating about thirty gigabytes in mobile data to each student per month. This with the view of aiding students online learning by making sure that they had access to various online teaching and learning platforms. This was

simply not enough because, beyond access to technological devices, mobile data and online teaching and learning platforms; real access is access that makes it easier and possible for anyone to use the said resources in ways that are effective and meaningful to their learning and teaching.

Lastly, many of the students that HBUs educate are from rural and township communities situated in countries that make up the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Most of these communities are yet to be electrified or have reliable internet connectivity. Hence, universities such as the University of Limpopo (UL) were forced to repatriate<sup>14</sup> some of its students to make sure that they complete their 2020 academic year. This came at a huge cost for these institutions because these are funds that they did not have or budgeted for. Moreover, unlike HWUs, these institutions do not receive significant additional funds in the form of private donations.

### **EMERGENCY REMOTE ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING UNPRECEDENTED TIMES**

Beyond the many crises that universities in contemporary South Africa are experiencing such as institutional racism, knowledge production politics, and modernity/coloniality (Fataar, 2017, 2018; Khunou *et al*, 2019). For Hlatshwayo, with whom I fully agree, “teaching and learning are arguably central” (Hlatshwayo (2020, p. 143). This is because “universities have begun to conceptualise teaching and learning as the ‘dumping’ of curriculum material online in an attempt to salvage what [was] increasingly becoming a lost academic year [reference to 2020 academic year]” (Hlatshwayo, 2020, p. 143), and the avoidance of systematic and institutional collapse moving forward. This

<sup>13</sup> See Langa, M. (Ed.) (2018) #Hashtag: *An analysis of the #FeesMustFall Movement at South African universities*. Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Johannesburg.

<sup>14</sup> A Repatriation Task Team was set up by the University [https://www.ul.ac.za/index.php?Entity=c\\_news&TheS=541](https://www.ul.ac.za/index.php?Entity=c_news&TheS=541)

is informed by the business-as-usual approach adopted by universities to re-establish and project 'normalcy' in unnormal times. This has brought about numerous challenges and successes.

Firstly, despite the oversold *blended learning* approach<sup>15</sup> by universities, teaching and learning in the new normal has been reduced to mere *uploading* of learning materials and recorded lectures online (ibid). What Godsell (2020, p. 117) calls "a space of delivering a disembodied script- like curriculum". Thus, in many respects, both students and lecturers were and are denied the opportunity to engage in effective and meaningful teaching and learning sessions. These sessions are usually underpinned by effective and meaningful dialogue between *student-to- student*, *student-to-lecturer*, and *lecturer- to-student* in real-time. These dialogues usually enact and inspire deeper intellectual thought, as well as enable all parties to determine each other's emotions, which is somewhat limited in online teaching and learning situations. This denial is informed by many disruptions (see Hlatshwayo (2020) *on other disruptions*). But the most central disruption is the business-as-usual approach adopted by universities, because "it forfeits the social justice and critical engagement agenda that is often required when teaching and learning is concerned" (Hlatshwayo, 2020, p. 143). Hence, Maringe asserts that:

First is the fact that both staff and students do not quite know how to conduct university business in the distance mode. There is a vast and complex scholarship of distance learning, which traditional universities are not quite up to speed with

<sup>15</sup> University Managements proposed blended learning (refers to the use of both online and face-to-face teaching simultaneously) as one of the pedagogical approaches that academics and students can be engaged with during this deadly pandemic. However, given the many restrictions of people gathering in one space by the State. This approach was never really implemented in many respects. Thus, majority of the university programmes were done online.

(Guardia, 2016). Mere posting of teaching and learning materials on platforms such as SAKAI without the underpinning pedagogies is likely to negatively affect both the quality and effectiveness of students learning. Secondly, the transition to online learning is often thought of as a cheaper option. There is a significant amount of human resource and technological support needed to sustain meaningful online learning (Bates, 2016). The initial costs of setting up effective online education are quite substantial, and many universities will not have budgeted for this in the current academic year. The tendency will be to turn to cheaper online options which may negatively influence both quality and effectiveness. (Maringe, 2020, np)

However, what is not said here is that this is not the reality of all students and lecturers in South Africa. In some cases, *blended learning* has been used and it is working. Thus, in these cases effective teaching and learning take place. But, my sense, having reflected on this issue with some of my colleagues from other institutions of higher learning especially in HBUs; what I am describing above is their reality too. As Hlatshwayo argues:

if we are not careful, our pace and speed to get everything online could potentially lead to the unintended consequences of reinforcing technological and virtual inequality, marginality, and exclusion in society. This can result in millions of Black working-class students being socially construed as the *natives of nowhere*, locked out of the online curricula and forced to stay longer in the academy as a result of failing to meet the demands of assessment and risking academic exclusion. We need to rethink teaching and learning during the time of a pandemic. (Hlatshwayo, 2020, p. 144-5)

Secondly, the lack of online Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)

from many lecturers has proven to be a constrain to online teaching and learning. This is because understood in its traditional sense, PCK refers to “the blending of content knowledge, knowledge of learners [and students] and their context and general pedagogical knowledge into representations that are “pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by [learners and students]” (Shulman1987b, p. 102)” (Rusznynak and Walton, 2011, p. 272). Moreover, to aid this PCK, Vygotskian principles of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) and *scaffolding*, which speak to the difference between what a learner or student can do without help and what they can do with help in a teaching-learning situation ought to be considered (Maluleka, 2018). Thus, PCK for online learning and teaching has been reduced to the mere *uploading* of learning materials online. When it should include “...technical and administrative aspects of teaching online (e.g., respectively, using platforms and tools and organizing workflows). More significantly, it [should] include the pedagogical foundations and knowledge of principles needed to design for, and facilitate, meaningful online learning experiences” (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, and Koole, 2020, p. 924). Additionally, this requires lecturers, in their pedagogical choices, to be aware of the fact that online teaching and learning means that teaching in a divided world characterised by multiple realities (access to smart devices and data, rurality versus urbanity etc.) that in turn have a bearing on their teaching.

Similar experiences of online teaching and learning are found in the United States of America and elsewhere around the world (Conaway, Eston, & Schmit, 2005; Bassoppo-Moyo, 2006; Limperos, *et al.*, 2015; Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago, 2017). Therefore, what this says is that the challenges that we are experiencing in

contemporary South Africa are not unique to us. Thus, there needs to be a coordinated effort at a global, national, as well as individual university level to overcome this crisis.

## **A DECOLONIAL FRAMEWORK AND LIVING THEORY METHODOLOGY**

The paper builds on a decolonial framework that considers the higher education sector in the so-called “postcolonial situations” as one site of many to which its project can be advanced and realised. This is because of the persistent and pervasive coloniality project that continues to reproduce the varied inequalities and injustices that exist in South Africa’s higher education sector. Hence, the lingering legacy of the Extension of University Education Act, Act 45 of 1959 as discussed above.

Coloniality is the *underside* or *darker side* of Euro-north Americentric modernity that is often hidden and should be unveiled or unmasked (Quijano, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2008; Mignolo, 2009). Maldonado-Torres emphasises that coloniality:

... survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self- image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects, we breathe coloniality all the time and every day. (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p.243)

All institutions of learning (schools, colleges, and universities), as well as the interplay of several institutional dimensions, namely, capitalism, industrialism, surveillance and information control of the nation-state, and development of military power continually reproduce coloniality. i.e., coloniality of

power, knowledge and being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018ab). Therefore, there is a need to disrupt it to address inequalities and injustices that exist in higher education.

One of the ways of disrupting coloniality and addressing inequalities and injustices that exist in higher education is through the spreading and embracement of *decolonial love as decoloniality*, which is a critique of the formative relationship between the coloniality of power, knowledge and being (see Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Sandoval (2000) and Maldonado-Torres (2008) have since theorised about the need for decolonial love. For Sandoval, decolonial love is the kind of love that demands one to recognise and affirm others' humanity in its wholeness despite our differences. This kind of love is informed and shaped by a *decolonial attitude*.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Maldonado-Torres (2008, p. 187) asserts that this love recognises "alliance[s] and affection across lines of difference." It is thus "the humanizing task of building a world in which genuine ethical relations become the norm and not the exception." This means, lecturers in their pedagogical choices, need to recognise past inequities and injustices that inform and shape the students they work with. Beyond this, decolonial love demands lecturers and students too, to work towards a transformative future that transcends coloniality and its power matrix. This transformative work needs to be underpinned by kindness, dignity, sharing, co-responsibility, humaneness, social justice, affinity, and generosity, i.e., *ubuntu*.

Methodologically, I have adopted the Living Theory Methodological Framework (Whitehead, 2008). The living

theory is a disciplined process of critical self-reflection. That is, a process of "turning back onto a self" where I am "at once an observed and an active observer" (Steier, 1995, p. 163; Mortar, 2015, p. 1). The process is a personal and self-oriented activity that entails "inquiring into the self by the self; thinking about one's own life and work as a practitioner so that one can continue developing oneself, one's work; that of others and by so doing make significant contributions in one's work and society" (Ndille, 2018, p. 93). In other words, this disciplined process or activity is informed by decolonial love because it requires a complete change in our way of seeing and interacting with *the self*, each other, and the world around us. This complete change can only take place if we first start by decolonising *the self*. This can only happen if we embrace critical self-reflection. This means incessant critical self-reflection on our attitudes and reactions towards the many perpetual inequalities and injustices that continue to negatively affect African students<sup>17</sup> in institutions of higher learning especially in South Africa. This is a critical scholarly exercise underpinned by compassion, love, care, solidarity, and never-ending self-reflection and self-critique that can in turn make one recognise and appreciate not only the many injustices and inequalities that exist. But also, how one, in their little corner, can work towards easing the pain, suffering, hopelessness and the alienation that African students continue to experience even though one's actions can and might be a direct contrast to the powers that might be. Thus, in turn, lands one into trouble. However, this is the risk that one ought to take if one is truly on the side of the oppressed.

The research method that informs this paper is what Whitehead (2008, p. 107) calls "action-reflection cycles". This

<sup>16</sup> A decolonial attitude is human quality which informs and shapes a "new ethics beyond coloniality," and is an "expression of an ethical subjectivity that defines and positions itself in a way that promotes decolonization and re-imagines human relationships" (Maldonado-Torres, 2006, p. 242).

<sup>17</sup> By African students I am referring to mainly Black working-class students who continue to be negatively affected by the legacy of colonial-apartheid.

method is informed by a research question that asks: “How do I, *as an individual*, improve what I am doing?” (ibid; italics own emphasis). This research method enables one to critically self-introspect about their practice and the choices they make. This is done with the view of meaningfully improving one’s practice, as well as improving students understanding of the knowledge rendered.

### **TEACHING IN THE TIME OF CRISIS: REFLECTIONS OF MY PEDAGOGICAL DIFFICULTIES AND SUCCESSES AT A RURAL UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Before reflecting on the pedagogical difficulties and successes I have encountered since the beginning of this global pandemic. It is worth mentioning that I am a teacher-educator (lecturer) at the UL – School of Education (formerly, University College of the North). It is located about thirty kilometers outside the City of Polokwane, Limpopo Province, South Africa. During colonial-apartheid, UL was one of many sites of revolutionary resistance, intellectually and otherwise. The institution educated the likes of Abram Onkgopotse Tiro<sup>18</sup> and other young militant revolutionaries of the day (Tiro, 2019).

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2005, the University College of the North was merged with the MEDUNSA to form UL. This merger, like many other mergers in the higher education in contemporary South Africa, was meant to reconfigure higher education institutions “according to *type* and *mission culture* (programmatically differentiation) and involved name changing in some instances to dissipate the erstwhile eminence of geopolitical engineering (Bunting 2006, p.59)” (Baloyi

and Naidoo, 2016, p.22). UL’s vision as it stands reads:

To be a leading African University focused on the developmental needs of its communities and epitomising academic excellence and innovativeness.<sup>19</sup>

I joined UL in September of 2020 from the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS). UL and WITS are true reflections of HBUs and HWUs respectively. My transitioning from one to the other was not easy at all given the different realities of both institutions, coupled with the fact that while trying to settle in a new city; I am still in the process of writing and finalising my doctoral thesis. Therefore, the first obstacle I experienced after joining UL was the lack of *institutional memory*, at least at the departmental level. This is important to build for any institution of higher learning that takes the academic project seriously. The lack of this institutional memory negatively impacted my pedagogical choices. This is because one of the courses I was asked to teach had no paperwork whatsoever. Under ‘normal circumstances’ this paperwork was supposed to be handed over to me to see what was taught in the course before. This would have enabled me to familiarise myself with the content, aims, objectives, and intended learning outcomes of the course. It would have also enabled me to assess if the entire course needs improvement or I can continue with what was previously taught. To make matter worse, this was a course that I have never taught before; and had no training in it during my undergraduate years. All of this made me question *what, how, and by whom* was the course taught years before me. Was this course even taught or were previous students just given marks to proceed? I wondered. The questions I asked myself are consistent with the action-reflection cycles research method

<sup>18</sup> Tiro was a young militant student activist of his time. He was a was a Black Consciousness Movement and South African Students' Organisation member with Bantu S. Biko.

<sup>19</sup> UL’s vision retrieved from: [https://www.ul.ac.za/index.php?Entity=ul\\_mis\\_vis#start](https://www.ul.ac.za/index.php?Entity=ul_mis_vis#start).

adopted. It is also consistent with decolonial love because in loving what you do and the students you teach; you continuously need to ask yourself *what* knowledge and *whose* knowledge is legitimated or not within the disciplines you teach and *why*?

However, with the help of a former colleague, Dr Rene Ferguson<sup>20</sup> a specialist in the course, I managed to build a new course altogether. The new course was thus rendered to students two weeks after the course was scheduled to start. It was underpinned by an inclusive decolonial approach to knowledge that sought to recenter African knowledge forms in the curriculum (Fataar, 2017). In the midst of all of this, some students enrolled in this course made available previous examination papers and asked if I can build a course out of that. These were students who were not going to graduate in 2021 had they not completed the course. However, knowing the kind of work that one needs to do to produce a thought-provoking course. That is, the complex nature of curriculum knowledge building and structuring (see Bernstein, 1996, 1999; Maton, 2014). I politely rejected these suggestions from students and engaged my former colleague. This was not meant to undermine contributions by students in any way, as decolonial love requires the need to recenter students as equal contributors to any academic project. Rather, the rejection was based on the need to first establish a sound course founded on disciplinary traditions that would in turn allow for contributions by students to be more meaningful. This was a decision I took also considering that not all contributions can coherently be included in the curriculum. In the end, the course was taught successfully, and the students

passed satisfactorily with some stating that

they enjoyed the course.<sup>21</sup> However, my sense of this process, having critically evaluated myself, is that both myself and the students were in many instances assessment-driven “...rather than doing work to learn for the sake of learning and becoming good teachers” (Godsell, 2020, p. 119). This assessment-driven approach led to the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr Blade Nzimande stating that “*University students getting better marks during Covid-19 than in past years*” (media emphasis).<sup>22</sup>

The other pedagogical difficulties I encountered included the teaching and learning platform that UL is using called, *Blackboard*. This platform was new to me because previously I used a platform called *Sakai* that my previous university, Wits, used in 2020. At first, I found it difficult to navigate and effectively use the platform even after attending few online training sessions on it. This was the sense that I got from students, because before Covid-19 the platform was merely used for uploading materials not so much for teaching and learning. However, with the help of certain colleagues, I managed to know my way around the platform quickly and thus used it effectively – to teach my courses. Therefore, apart from the data and network issues that students experienced, as well as access to smart devices, those students who managed to log in were exposed to a somewhat engaging pedagogical experience. This is because Blackboard has functions such as the *chatroom* and *messaging* that myself and the students somewhat effectively used to engage on numerous issues related to our courses. For those students, who were unable to log in during scheduled time for whatever reason; all the sessions I had were recorded and immediately *uploaded*

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<sup>21</sup> This is based on feedback from several students conveyed to me.

<sup>22</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/university-students-getting-better-marks-better-during-covid-19-than-in-past-years-nzimande-20201126>.

<sup>20</sup> Dr Rene Ferguson is my former colleague and head of the Social and Economic Sciences Division at Wits School of Education.

for them to access at their convenience. This also included the exchanges that took place in the *chatroom* and *messaging* functions. Another useful function was the *announcement* function. I used it to either remind students of their next lecture, test, assignment, or the need to work on the tutorial activities.

Over and above this, *WhatsApp* proved to be a useful pedagogical tool. Unlike the WITS School of Education; UL's School of Education, at least in my department, does not make use of tutors because they do not have a well-established cohort of graduate students to assist with tutoring; and the fact that we are short-staffed is not helping either. Another reason might also be the financial constraints that the institution finds itself in. So, one had to think of innovative ways to engage students beyond the timetabled lecture times to make up for what could 'normally' be tutoring periods. That is where WhatsApp comes in. I employed WhatsApp because I wanted to create conditions conducive to engaging students who have felt alienated from the university due to pervasive modernity/coloniality. This I believe was a show of decolonial love, in that, I employed a platform that was not consistent with university rules on teaching and learning platforms to make sure that all students were meaningfully part of the academic project (Bernstein, 1996).

So, to make up for this very important academic experience (tutorials), through elected Class Representatives, we created WhatsApp groups that worked as tutorial groups. Each group was administered by an elected class representative. Students were allocated a group based on the sequence they appeared in the class list. For instance, number one to thirty on the class list would make a single tutorial group. I was only a member of one group that included all class representatives. This is because there were

just too many groups. For instance, in one course that I was teaching, I had over 750 students enrolled. So, if thirty was the standard number to make up a tutorial group; it meant in that course alone we had twenty-five tutorial groups. These groups worked as sites where students could meaningfully contribute to the academic project.

In the specific group that I was a member of, the class representatives shared with me the experiences and concerns that the students had especially relating to the administrative aspects of the course, as well as the academic features. I would in turn share with them information on all these aspects for them to immediately share in their groups. I would also share with them tutorial activities that they shared in their groups. All this information I communicated in my online lectures as well. Thus, the effectiveness of this method came through the online lectures I had and how the students engaged. Their engagement through the *chatroom* and *messaging* functions would also reflect if they either got the information I shared through their elected class representatives or whether they did what they were supposed to do as individual students or not.

The creation of these tutorial groups was not only crucial in getting some work done. It was also informed and shaped by Freirian concepts of *dialogic exploration*, *self-reflection*, *action*, and *more reflection* (praxis) and ideas of *humanisation* and *conscientisation* (Freire, 1996), as well as *collectivity* and *vulnerability* (hooks, 1994). All of which are consistent with decolonial love and Living Theory Methodological Framework. However, as argued by Godsell

23 who I completely approve of:

23 Dr Sarah Godsell is a lecturer at WITS School of Education, and a former colleague of mine. We worked in the same department while I was still at WITS.

These are all practices that require an extensive and extended relationship with students. It is very hard to build this relationship online, so where these functioned, when they did, it was because of a strong foundation that we had built in the class. (Godsell, 2020, p. 118)

The difference with me is that I did not have the opportunity to build an extensive and extended relationship with my students at UL in person. I have never met any student I teach at UL to date in person due to Covid-19. So, the relationship we built online was successful because of the decolonial love that I showed them through my teaching and the way I engage with them even after working hours and weekends. This I did, not because I needed some form of recognition or accolades. I did because decolonial love as underpinned by the philosophy of *ubuntu* requires one, in their pedagogical choices, as well as epistemological and assessments choices, to think of the kind of impact (is the impact positive, encouraging, engaging, or building? Or it is just negative and regressive?) their choices would have on the end receiver, in this case, the students.

Secondly, this was done with a bigger goal in mind. That is, working towards educating initial teacher-training students that would later become exceptional teachers/educators that would, in turn, work towards the betterment and benefit of the entire South African community. This is what Kenyan writer and novelist, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o., and Nigerian writer and novelist, Chinua Achebe, in their literary work stress. The need for, and importance of *collective effort* in dismantling the coloniality/modernity project that is embedded and flourishes in all aspects of our lives for the betterment and benefit of everyone. In their respective texts, Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), as well as wa Thiong'o in *Weep not, child* (1964); *The*

*River Between* (1965) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) reiterate the need for a stable centre that holds a family together. This would then translate into a community and then an entire nation coming together under a common purpose and vision.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the coronavirus disease continues to disrupt our lives and ways of living. It also forces us not only to coexist with it; but to also *reimagine* higher education and the different ways we get to teach, learn, assess. In this paper, I have critically reflected on my positionality as a teacher-educator at a rural university in South Africa, and the pedagogical difficulties and successes I encountered having joined the university during the national lockdown in South Africa from a historically white, well-resourced cosmopolitan university. Over and above this, I argue that there is a need for all involved in higher education to *reimagine* how we do things to avoid leaving behind millions of students, especially the African students in our country that are already disadvantaged due to the legacy of colonial-apartheid (Hlatshwayo, 2020).

Therefore, for lecturers, this means acquiring the necessary PCK for online teaching, as well as having a curricular that stimulates critical engagements amongst students whilst at the same time negotiating and navigating the 'new normal' for survival.<sup>24</sup> At the heart of this, is the need for decolonial interventions that many students and progressive staff (academic, support, administrative etc.) in many universities especially in the global South have been calling for before this global pandemic (Ngcobozi, 2015;

<sup>24</sup> Numerous studies have been conducted about the lack of and need for online pedagogical content knowledge (As a start, see: Godsell (2020), Hlatshwayo (2021), and Dube, M. C (2020) *Online learning challenges postgraduate certificate in education History students faced during COVID-19 at the University of Zululand*).

Maxwele, 2016; Klein and Jenkins 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2017; Ruddock 2018; Hlatshwayo and Shawa, 2020). These decolonial interventions go beyond challenging the continuing epistemic inequalities and injustices that exist in all universities of the world, and not just universities in the global South. They are also concerned with making sure that we *re* imagine and work towards a higher education sector that does not see students and staff as disposables that can be replaced at any time. Hence, the adopted business-as-usual approach alluded to earlier. But sees these important stakeholders as human beings before anything else. In this way, any change in the operational logic of a university would be underpinned by ethics and values of *ubuntu*, *Afrikan humanness*, *decolonial humanism*, and decolonial love (Maldonado-Torres, 2008; Badat 2017; Heleta 2016). This is because *ubuntu* just like *Afrikan humanness*, *decolonial humanism*, and *decolonial love* is well captured by the Nguni maxim *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (I am because of who we all are), meaning “to be a human being is to affirm one’s humanity by recognising the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish humane relations with them” (Nxumalo and Mncube, 2018).

For students, this means meaningfully engaging and learning in the new normal.<sup>25</sup> That is, being taught in meaningful ways that would enable them to meaningfully negotiate, navigate and engage with the three dialectical purposes of education in any society as proposed by Biesta (2009). This means, firstly, students being able to obtain qualifications they enrolled for (Hlatshwayo, 2020). However,

this does not mean obtaining a

<sup>25</sup> Again, there are numerous studies (as a start, see: Chisadza *et al* (2021) *Online and face-to-face learning: Evidence from students’ performance during the Covid-19 pandemic.*, and Mpungose, C (2020) *Emergent transition from face-to-face to online learning in a South African University in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic*), about the education void students have gained as a result of the pandemic and ways in which we, as lecturers, can practically work with students to fill that void.

qualification for the sake of it. In my view, it means obtaining the qualification having acquired all the necessary skills, knowledge, and competencies embedded within, and espoused by the said qualification. The second purpose of education speaks to the need to socialise students into common national norms, values, and beliefs. In South Africa’s case, this means the socialisation of students into those common national norms, values, and beliefs as articulated in, and envisaged by the democratic liberal constitution adopted in 1996 to better equip them with the necessary cultural and social capital for the real world (Biesta, 2009; Bourdieu, 2011). The third purpose of education speaks to the ‘subjectification’ of students into the so-called 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills (Biesta, 2009; Hlatshwayo, 2020). These include critical thinking, reading, and writing; creativity; collaboration; communication; information literacy; media literacy; technology literacy; flexibility; leadership; initiative; productivity; and social skills.<sup>26</sup>

For university management, this means devising operational logics that would create an enabling environment for both lecturers, administrative staff, and students to take the academic project forward in meaningful and impactful ways.<sup>27</sup> This includes re-budgeting their finances to meaningfully respond to the needs of both lecturers, administrative staff, and students. Moreover, this also means doing more (beyond paying lip service) to socially and emotionally support both students and lecturers given the increasing suicidal cases due to mental

<sup>26</sup> Beyond just uploading materials that students are expected to engage with. We need to create materials that incorporate those skills (see: Hlatshwayo, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> More than 300 academics across South African universities have rejected claims by university managements and the state that the 2020 academic year has been a success for universities, lecturers, and students. See interview with Professor Noor Nieftagodien (WITS) on this issue: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVSfupENd1g>.

health-related issues, especially amongst the students.<sup>28</sup>

For the State, especially in South Africa, this means instead of cutting the higher education budget.<sup>29</sup> There needs to be an increase because the cutting of the higher education budget perpetuates not only the historical inequalities and injustices mentioned above.<sup>30</sup> It also limits universities from effectively, impactfully, and meaningfully doing what they are expected to do as mandated by the constitution of the country. Moreover, the State should do more in supporting universities in their work towards dealing with and managing mental health-related issues that are prevalent amongst students and lecturers.

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<sup>28</sup> There has been reported cases of suicidal cases due to mental health-related issues, especially amongst the students in our universities with Student Representative Councils blaming universities for not doing enough to address mental health issues (see: *IOL*

<https://www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/news/tragedy-grips-wits-university-after-three-suicides-in-three-weeks-92baad28-6cdd-4c12-a8fb-c41851e037c0>.,

<sup>29</sup> The Department of Higher Education in South Africa had their budget being cut by almost 10 billion South African Rands for the year 2020/21. This is because the government claims to have moved to address the fiscal damage caused by ongoing corruption and Covid-19 pandemic by adopting a Austerity budget. Access Minister Tito Mboweni's 2021 Budget Speech, here: <https://www.gov.za/speeches/minister-tito-mboweni-2021-budget-speech-24-feb-2021-0000>.

<sup>30</sup> Statistics South Africa has over years reported on the decline of state funding for higher education (see <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=13719> and <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/news-media/latest-news/student-fees/education-sector-funding>). Universities South Africa (A body of all vice-chancellors of public universities) has also reported on this issue for many years (see: <https://www.newssite.co.za/dhen/crisis-student-funding-2021.pdf>).

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