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Covid-19 pandemic highlights challenges of online teaching and learning

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The Covid-19 pandemic has changed teaching and learning in higher education. Overnight, universities around the world have had to migrate from face-to-face engagements to online learning.

The Covid-19 crisis is similar to a war situation where emergency regulations are in place and everything is determined by one single ongoing event that disrupts all forms of social intercourse. Nobody can determine in advance how long the disruption will last, which makes the immediate future inherently uncertain.

In South Africa, classroom pedagogy and online teaching and learning take place in a society that has been classified, according to a recent research-based study, *Inequality Trends in South Africa*, as the most unequal in the world. This finding was made three months before a national lockdown began on March 26. This means South Africans entered the lockdown period in unequal economic conditions and now experience it as such.

It warrants an explanation of what it means when privileged universities put in place pedagogical tools such as online teaching and learning until there is “a return to normal”. We need to acknowledge that the certainty of the “normal” prior to the outbreak of the pandemic is a cause of the unfolding social problems today.

Should we not ponder over the huge **economic inequalities** highlighted in the *Inequality Trends* study and consider a new route for **teaching and learning** methodologies at universities that are

based on considerations of social inequalities?

A recent training information programme offered to researchers at tertiary institutions by an international consortium provided progressive scholars and the public much insight into the challenges faced by this new way of teaching and learning in the most unequal country in the world. There are undoubtedly benefits to the new forms of pedagogy.

For example, online teaching and learning must ensure lecturers are aware that they are operating in a divided world: rural and urban; men and women; dominant and under-class culture; students with upmarket computers and students who do not even have food to eat. More so than before, both students and lecturers can use new ideas of what it means to be productive. They could determine their own pace and location of teaching and learning.

Besides the social and economic problems inherent in remote teaching, lecturers and students also face personal challenges. Whereas face-to-face interactions enable both to determine each other's emotions, online teaching and learning limits this. In this new world, lecturers and teachers should be cognisant of speech tone and try to sense how others will interpret them.

This is especially necessary in the world of binaries. How the lecturer and student communicate will ultimately determine how knowledge is transmitted and accepted. It might be useful for both to provide the context of their social environment and immediate physical surroundings (for example, I am looking after a sick family member or the children are noisy). This is especially valuable if students are in economically poor environments. Lecturers and students also have teaching and learning preferences. Some prefer writing, while others prefer talking. It is necessary to make allowance for both ways of communicating.

The new teaching and learning environment makes lecturers and students more knowledge workers than knowledge producers. They are monitored more on their ability to master the latest technological devices and programmes than on their capacity to produce knowledge. The progressive lecturer will, however, ensure that cutting-edge research-based knowledge is presented to students who, in turn, will use standard texts in their field for primary knowledge acquisition. Lecturers and students should be conscious of the importance of balancing time allocation between logistics and subject content. This means the lecturer must also be a good manager who provides feedback, timetables and stimulates collaboration with other institutions, especially for those who are in economically poorer areas.

The excessive demand on technical skill training in online teaching and learning is also underplayed against value acquisition. Yet, values such as integrity, honesty and trust are essential elements for successful online teaching and learning. Given the competitive nature of undergraduate courses in recruiting postgraduate students, a high premium is placed on mark-based performances. To qualify for places in postgraduate programmes, students will find that online assessments are easy targets for plagiarism and sharing of answers. To counter this, institutions need to formulate new ideas about what it means to be successful in an academic environment.

Hopefully the new world of teaching and learning will be one where everybody has equal rights to learn and teach.

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