

FROM PANDEMIC DISRUPTION TO POST-PANDEMIC TRANSFORMATION: NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR TEACHING IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

K. Brodie*

School of Education, Faculty of Humanities

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3959-7401>

A. Joffe*

School of Arts, Faculty of Humanities

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3621-859X>

S. Dukhan*

School of Animal, Plant and Environmental Sciences, Faculty of Science

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2139-3232>

S. Godsell*

School of Education, Faculty of Humanities

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3431-2868>

D. de Klerk*

Teaching and Learning Centre, Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8051-0833>

K. Padayachee*

Science Teaching and Learning Unit, Faculty of Science

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7015-5962>

*University of the Witwatersrand

Johannesburg

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had previously unimaginable and far-reaching effects on higher education globally (Baker et al. 2022; Cranfield et al. 2021; Kara 2021; Le Grange 2020). On top of the widespread loss felt by students and teachers across the world, we have had to make rapid changes to previously taken-for-granted ways of doing, being, learning and teaching (Baker et al. 2022; Cranfield et al. 2021). Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL) brought constraints and opportunities, challenges and innovations. This article gives form to the statement: “there is an opportunity in the moment for genuine equity-focused innovation in policy-making,

provision and pedagogy” (Czerniewicz et al. 2020). We use a theoretical framework of structure, culture and agency through which to view possibilities for transformation of pedagogy, and a form of semi-autoethnography as methodology. Two lecturers, one in the Humanities (Education) and one in the Life Sciences, wrote extended narratives of their experiences of ERTL and the other authors then posed a series of questions to the story authors, which elicited a set of analytic descriptions and explanations. Through iterations of this analysis, we identified two important themes: attending to students’ socio-emotional needs and developing students’ engagement, self-regulation and reflexivity. The analysis identifies key opportunities and challenges that these required and how they were addressed by the lecturers concerned. Based on the analysis and drawing on Case’s (2015b) argument for an expanded sense of agency for students, we argue that the lecture is a key structural and cultural element of the university space that was disrupted during the pandemic and can be transformed going forward. We thus argue for decentering the lecture. Furthermore, we argue that care and concern for students has not been a primary cultural element of teaching and learning in higher education, for structural reasons, and that it should be an integral part of pedagogies going forward.

Keywords: decentering the lecture, blended pedagogy, structure culture agency, transformation

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had previously unimaginable and far-reaching effects on higher education globally (Baker et al. 2022; Cranfield et al. 2021; Kara 2021; Le Grange 2020). On top of the widespread loss felt by students and teachers across the world, we have had to make rapid changes to previously taken-for-granted ways of doing, being, learning and teaching (Baker et al. 2022; Cranfield et al. 2021). Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL) brought constraints and opportunities, challenges and innovations, affecting all stakeholders.

We are a group of alumni and facilitators of the Post-graduate Diploma in Higher Education (PGDIP) at Wits University, who meet regularly to discuss our teaching experiences. Our meetings during the pandemic involved reflections on our experiences of ERTL and how these experiences illuminated possibilities for post-pandemic transformations of teaching. In one meeting early in 2021, we generated a set of metaphors, which described our experiences in 2020. We were:

“rolling a boulder uphill,”

“constructing a house without a plan,”

“walking into pristine forest – not sure where you’re stepping and don’t know where you’re going,”

“acting in a disaster movie” .

These were some of the metaphors that suggested that our colleagues’ experiences of the

pandemic were deep, disruptive and worth capturing. We also saw examples of transformative practices, which can take us forward in considering new ways of teaching and learning in the academy.

In this article, we examine some of the innovations developed and challenges experienced by two colleagues at Wits University. Our argument takes forward the suggestion that: “there is an opportunity in the moment for genuine equity-focused innovation in policymaking, provision and pedagogy” (Czerniewicz et al. 2020, 963). We argue that key learning from ERTL has been to consider a broader range of activities for students, of which large in-person lectures are one. While we reiterate the importance of lectures for particular pedagogical purposes, we argue that they should not necessarily form the core of teaching and learning. We thus argue for decentering the lecture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the South African higher education context, the effects of the pandemic were compounded by the severely unequal socioeconomic realities of the country (Cranfield et al. 2021; Davids 2021; Le Grange 2020; Soudien, Reddy, and Harvey 2021). There were losses: of human life; of community and interaction; of opportunity (Kara 2021). Moreover, learning losses have most likely “been experienced disproportionately by those who are vulnerable and less able to draw on the resources of the system” (Soudien et al. 2021, 320). Given the severe disruptions, many have argued for a re-imagining of higher education pedagogy post-pandemic that favours creative, flexible and inclusive pedagogies (Green et al. 2020). Davids (2021) argues that such re-imagining should acknowledge that universities were not “normal” pre-pandemic, given the vast inequalities and the sector’s lack of engagement with them. She argues that we cannot move to a “new normal”, without considering how these inequalities might be transformed in the direction of connecting more with our own humanity, as well as that of our colleagues and students.

Experiences of ERTL

Cranfield et al. (2021) explore the perceptions of higher education students from South Africa, Wales and Hungary about online learning during COVID-19. Comparing survey results from these countries, the authors show that younger students prefer in-person interactions and propose that blended approaches to learning and teaching can be introduced later in a student’s academic career (Cranfield et al. 2021). They also highlight the importance of understanding students’ home and personal circumstances as these factors had a direct impact on students’ ability to study remotely (Cranfield et al. 2021). Other recommendations include the importance

of keeping students engaged during the learning experience and equipping students with relevant literacies, i.e., academic and digital early in their academic careers (Cranfield et al. 2021).

Merisi and Pillay (2020) found that lecturers recognised the opportunities brought by ERTL for developing new teaching methods and approaches, working differently, and being more caring. At the same time, many found themselves “confused, anxious, and in a panic”, somewhat reminiscent of our colleagues’ metaphors. Some “miss the contact and seeing real faces” (Merisi and Pillay 2020, 81). Merisi and Pillay (2020, 77) emphasise the importance for lecturers to have “pedagogical and technical support and expertise in course development and facilitation skills, and an attitude to learn such skills”.

Emergency responses to a global pandemic and the associated shift to online instruction should not be misconstrued for non-emergency, ongoing approaches to using technology in teaching and learning. The field differentiates among online, blended (or hybrid) and hybrid-flexible (hy-flex) teaching and learning. Full online means that all activities, both synchronous and asynchronous occur online. Blended or hybrid teaching means a balancing of in-person and online interactions, depending on course-design requirements and pedagogy, made possible by a range of technologies, pedagogical practices, and instructional approaches (Joosten et al. 2021). In blended teaching and learning the “blend” is the same for all students. Different students will not be in-person or on-line, as in hy-flex. Hy-flex requires that there is provision for both in-person and online participation for students, and they can choose their mode of instruction (Irvine 2020). We do not intend to discuss the merits of the different versions in this article, but we note that Wits University adopted blended teaching and learning as its official policy in 2021 and we therefore are working within that parameter.

Blended pedagogy

Baker et al. (2022) explore the possible emergence of new learning and teaching practices following COVID-19 and the shift to ERTL, by reimagining “possibilities for higher education teaching and learning in the post-COVID world” (Baker et al. 2022, 2). They highlight benefits that have emanated from ERTL, such as lecturers and institutions being more flexible in their expectations of students, assessment policies being adapted to accommodate diverse student realities and learning constraints, and the broadening of educators’ sense of care for students by trying to create a sense of belonging within the classroom (Baker et al. 2022). The authors also emphasise how the shift to asynchronous and blended teaching and learning allowed for greater student autonomy and flexibility, which they argue offers additional possibilities for learning and teaching.

Bao's principles for high-impact teaching practice in online education settings are useful in thinking about different modalities for different pedagogical purposes (Bao 2020). First, it is important to match "quantity, difficulty, and length of teaching content" to the "academic readiness and online learning behaviour characteristics of students" (Bao 2020, 115). This resonates with the recommendation by Cranfield et al. (2021) regarding decisions about when to introduce students to online modes of learning. Bao's (2020) other principles include the importance of focusing on sequencing and pacing to keep students engaged in online settings, the need for adequate support and feedback, adopting measures to deepen the degree of student participation, and the importance of contingency planning when teaching large classes online.

Over the next few years university administrations, academics and students will be trying to find appropriate blends of teaching and learning, as we bridge between ERTL and ongoing, integrated blended teaching and learning, drawing on our strengths from pre-pandemic and during-pandemic times. Resilient pedagogy takes into account that disruption may become a more normal part of our lives and intentionally plans for it. It does so by focusing on teaching-learning interactions and student engagement with content through activities, to enable more seamless shifts among various modes of instruction (Chow, Lam, and King 2020). The argument is that the pedagogy becomes resilient to many possible forms of disruption, rather than students and lecturers having to be resilient, as during ERTL.

Drawing on the above, we argue in favour of rethinking and redesigning curricula to build on the opportunities for teaching, and assessment that emerged from ERTL (Baker et al. 2022). Our analysis below shows that ERTL supported a focus on a broader range of activities for students. Since a coherent teaching programme needs to prioritise different activities, as fit for purpose, we considered in particular how the standard, pre-pandemic lecture might fit with other activities for students. Our key argument is that we decentre the lecture. This does not mean that we dismiss the importance of lectures, but that we see them as one of many activities that can support student engagement, when used in considered and thoughtful ways. We argue that they should not form the central organising feature of a course, but are one of a range of activities considered in relation to purpose. In this way, our pedagogies may become more resilient.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

The theoretical framing of this article draws from both Critical Realism and Social Realism, particularly on the relationships among structure, culture and agency in supporting pedagogy. Hays (1994) develops and clarifies the distinctions and relations among structure, culture and agency, as three key concepts in understanding social reproduction and transformation. For her,

social structures refer to durable patterns of social life that are not reducible to individual action, that transcend individuals and that have their own logic that contribute to their reproduction over time. Social structures are created and recreated by people, so although they transcend individuals they also rely on individuals for their ongoing transmission. Social structures are both enabling and constraining; “they are the very basis of human power and understanding” (Hays 1994, 61). There are different levels of structure, structures are more or less deep, hidden and durable, making them more or less open to transformation and change.

Hays argues that many researchers see culture as the antithesis to structure, i.e., that culture is more malleable and amenable to transformation. She argues that while culture refers to human meaning, ideas and norms, which might seem more malleable, in fact they can be just as enduring as social structures. So she talks about social structure consisting of two main elements: systems of social relations (conventionally structure) and systems of meaning (conventionally culture), and argues that “If one wants to understand the resilient patterns that shape the behaviour of any individual or group of individuals, both the cultural and the relational milieu must be taken into account” (Hays 1994, 66).

Agency is conceptually distinct from structure and culture and closely related to them (Hays 1994). Agency is always enacted within the bounds of structure, and therefore culture as well. Agency is not freedom from constraint, but rather choice and action within the constraints and enablement of structure. Alternative choices are possible within the constraints and enablement of structure, and individuals can make choices on how and when to act. These choices might be conscious or subconscious, willing or unwilling, but they are choices. They might recreate and reproduce existing social structures, which is what happens much of the time, or they might transform structures, which happens more rarely and usually requires more than one agent making more conscious and deliberate choices. Hays therefore talks about structurally reproductive agency and structurally transformative agency.

We can think about how structure, culture and agency interact in sustaining current and supporting new forms of pedagogy. The structure of universities as institutions, both in their social relations and cultures, is enduring. Many universities in South Africa still retain the social relations and values of colonial and apartheid times (Zemblyas 2018), being unwelcoming places for black, poor and first-generation students. ERTL has exacerbated structural and cultural inequalities, with many poorer students unable to access online lessons (Czerniewicz et al. 2020) and struggling with the cultural elements of university learning and online pedagogy at the same time (Khanal 2021). While blended learning as an ongoing post-pandemic pedagogy has been argued to allow for access, as students are able to be more flexible in managing their learning times around other demands, the resource constraints for many students remain a

structural challenge (Czerniewicz et al. 2020). The role of physical campuses in supporting access to technology will therefore remain central in South Africa for a long time.

While many academics and students experienced ERTL as severely constraining and want nothing more than to “get back to normal”, our hope and argument is that we are able as agentic individuals and collectives within the constraints of our university and our disciplines, to integrate some of what we have learned to strengthen our pedagogy, to both regain some of what we have missed during ERTL, and to strengthen teaching and learning. So we hope for some transformation along with what must be some reproduction. A key analytic question for this article is what do we want to reproduce and what do we want to transform, and how might we support transformations? Davids (2021) argues that we need to interrogate the dysfunction of the past if we are to move on to a better place for more students.

We also work with Case’s (2015a) argument that teaching and learning are distinct but overlapping activities, and their relationship is not one of simple, linear causality. She argues for the centrality of teaching-learning interactions as a generative mechanism for understanding the learning-teaching relationship (Case 2015a). Case (2015b) makes the point that teaching-learning interactions cannot be understood outside of structure, culture and agency. For her, disciplinary knowledge as recontextualized into the curriculum operates as a key “manifestation of the structural and cultural conditioning of the space for student learning” (Case 2015b, 848) and “student agency needs to be characterised in all its dimensions, defined by past learning experiences, existing as the power to mediate the curriculum and its constraints” (Case 2015b, 848). We note that in Hays’ terms, both students and lecturers are constrained and enabled by their knowledge, the curriculum, institutional norms and values, and past and current experiences in the university. Even while ERTL has disrupted the prevailing culture, some elements have remained, and we explore the extent to which moving forward to different forms of blended learning could allow for some disruptions to those elements of the culture and structure that were normalised prior to ERTL. For example, a number of lecturers pared down or changed their curricula quite significantly during ERTL and found that learning was not negatively affected. We wonder whether they will continue some of these changes going forward.

METHODS

This article uses a qualitative research paradigm where two lecturers reflected on their own teaching practices (Ashwin et al. 2015) during different moments in the pandemic, using extended narratives. One lecturer is located in the Life Sciences (Lecturer 1) and one in Education (Humanities) (Lecturer 2). Their narratives were written in conversation with each

other and were then thematically analysed by the other authors. We note that the two lecturers might not be representative of the broader range of lecturers at Wits University and elsewhere, given their strong focus on their own roles in supporting teaching and learning, and the fact that they chose to do the PGDip(HE) to support their understandings of teaching and learning. However, in narrating and analysing these “special cases”, we are able to provide insights into potential shifts in post-pandemic pedagogy.

During the initial lockdown period in 2021, Lecturer 1 invited an online class of 552 biology first-years to complete weekly activities over a six-week period within her section on cell biology. She designed these tasks to monitor how students were coping with learning online and to engage with them on their learning progress. The students’ responses to the activities were confidential and visible only to the lecturer when submitted via the online platform. During the first week, the questions prompted students to reflect on their expectations of themselves and the lecturer, as well as any changes they anticipated for their study approaches as they moved from high school into university. Questions midway through the course probed which elements of teaching design presented on the online platform, students found valuable and which they found unsatisfying. Towards the latter part of the course, students were prompted to reflect on the extent to which the different learning resources included in the course helped in their understanding of course content, and how they had brought together the different resources provided on each topic for the course. On average, 302 students responded to the activity voluntarily each week. A total of 1 808 student responses were submitted on the university’s online platform.

Lecturer 2 wrote narratives about two different courses, both of which had a focus on writing (one was a writing-intensive course) and critical thinking. One was a six-week history content course with 169 students, the other a full-year history method course with 60 students. The content course covered a history of the United States of America from slavery through to Black power, focusing on historiography and historical narrative and making links with what land and belonging means in South Africa. This difficult history is often experienced as painful by students. The course comprised synchronous lectures and discussions with the lecturer on Microsoft Teams, supported by narrated PowerPoint presentations, and small (13–16 students) tutorial groups with writing exercises and multiple levels and forms of feedback, which a number of students engaged with. Online attendance at lectures was good, while the tutorials were less-well attended.

The method course offered an opportunity to explore student thinking about history as a discipline and as a school subject. It is a personally imbricated course, addressing issues of identity in relation to history, in particular contentious issues of race, gender, sexuality, class,

and ability, among others. A key principle of the course pre-pandemic, was supporting the space for students to have a meaningful voice in the content, structure and assessment strategy of the course. This meant that the final assessments were a product of conversations with students. The course was harder to transfer to an online mode, and a WhatsApp group supported the students to communicate with each other more freely than was possible in other online spaces.

The analysis of the narratives adopted the method of iterative conversation (Paulus, Woodside, and Ziegler 2008), which included expanding the narratives into a usable data set and reading for patterns and identifying innovations adopted during ERTL and where these might be retained for ongoing blended learning. The narratives were then analysed during an initial round of thematic coding. Questions that arose during this process were posed to the two lecturers and these questions were addressed through a revision of the narratives in response to the questions. Thereafter, the narratives were reanalysed to identify themes and patterns that arose within and across the narratives (Braun and Clarke 2013). A final, more nuanced analysis involved examination of themes emerging from the thematic analyses in relation to the social realist categories of structure, culture and agency.

This dialogic collaborative process allowed the authors to draw on their understandings of learning and teaching in higher education and to agree with, contest or adapt the programmatic reading of the narratives. In this way we built meaning and offered an analysis that provided a deeper understanding of the factors influencing teaching and learning in the two lecturers' courses during ERTL. Moreover, the analysis helped us identify the conditions and factors that may enable or constrain the sustainability of emergent practices as universities shift out of ERTL and adopt more blended pedagogies.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of the narratives revealed two dominant themes: i) developing students' engagement, while promoting self-regulation and reflexivity for students; and ii) attending to students' socio-emotional needs. Structural, cultural and agentic resources for enacting the curriculum also emerged as critical elements influencing ERTL. In both narratives, activities and assessments were foregrounded while direct transmission of content, the domain of traditional lectures, was less prominent.

The analysis provides insight into the expanded role adopted by some lecturers during ERTL, the broader range of activities developed, and concomitantly, the emotional burden this placed on lecturers, with the danger of burnout alluded to in both narratives. The lecturers were acutely aware of the exacerbation of challenges faced by many students, and that multi-layered support was needed for students to learn during ERTL, as discussed below. Drawing on their

narratives, we argue that this support would be essential for future transformation of pedagogy.

Attention to students' socio-emotional needs

Both lecturers demonstrated preferences for a pedagogy of care (Baker et al. 2022), and wanted to maintain a high level of contact and connection with students. They explain:

“The impetus here was to provide a space where students’ concerns could be acknowledged and addressed at the level of individuals.” (Lecturer 1).

“Apart from keeping in touch with my students’ academic progress, I felt it necessary to determine how my students were coping since their emotional state could influence their academic engagement and thus development or success.” (Lecturer 1).

“My pedagogy is always a pedagogy that includes the current context, as well as thinking about the ‘whole’ student, for each of the students in the class.” (Lecturer 2).

These statements provide evidence of both lecturers’ emphases on students’ challenges and wellbeing, as foundational aspects without which effective learning cannot happen. These lecturers were acutely aware of the interconnectedness of the affective and cognitive domains in the learning process. They had been aware of the importance of emotions in learning before ERTL, and knew that these might become more central during the period of lockdown and distance from campus during ERTL.

Both lecturers also explained that providing a caring and supportive environment enabled students to share their experiences, thus providing insights into their circumstances and challenges. They explain:

“I created this space to help my students to express any vulnerabilities and feel heard”. (Lecturer 1).

“When students were approaching me for help, they listed several common things: isolation and exhaustion particularly. One student expressed learning difficulties, saying ‘I am just alone here’, elaborating that they were finding it incredibly difficult to not have classmates to discuss work, and especially assignments with”. (Lecturer 2).

This attention to student wellbeing was reiterated several times in both narratives, underpinned by the lecturers’ own knowledge about learning and philosophies of teaching. It also aligns with the literature on emergent pedagogies during the pandemic, where several studies indicated the heightened need for adopting pedagogies of care (e.g., Baker et al. 2022; Merisi and Pillay 2020). Additionally, this need to care speaks to the sociality of the university campus, the loss of which many students felt acutely and which impacted on their academic performance. Lecturer 2 explains this loss:

“Students missed being on campus space where you had a community in lectures, tutorials, in hallways, on the grass spaces, in labs and the library”. (Lecturer 2).

“While we had attempted to hold the student through various synchronous and asynchronous technological offerings, students hadn’t either gained or been able to apply the skills”. (Lecturer 2).

While the need to recognise students’ challenges and the desire to foster a sense of connection with students was foregrounded in both narratives and supported by similar findings in the literature (Baker et al. 2022; Merisi and Pillay 2020), both participants experienced uncertainty and tension with the adoption of such pedagogies.

For Lecturer 1, the concern emerged from the question of whether trust and care could indeed be established:

“The question that arose here was whether the creation of this virtual space can allow trust and care to be promoted between myself and my students so that student wellbeing and cognitive development could be nurtured as part of the learning process.” (Lecturer 1).

In this respect, Lecturer 1’s concern arose out of the perceived structural and cultural constraints to achieving a safe and trusting environment in the context of the virtual learning environment, including the limitations imposed by the size of the class (522 students). The structural constraint imposed by the large class size was noted by Lecturer 1 as being a significant challenge even prior to ERTL, and the challenge was heightened in the ERTL environment. However, Lecturer 1 realised, on further reflection, that the virtual learning environment enabled a level of connection with students, through their written responses, that would be difficult to sustain in the in-person lecture setting:

“The online environment allows this level of connection to be established in a new and enriching way that is not usually available, due to time constraints, within the in-person, traditional contact setting.” (Lecturer 1).

For Lecturer 2, in addition to the structural constraint of the size of the class, trust and care also emerge as elements that are deeply embedded in the cultural context of the course content:

“In a class this big it is impossible to know each student, but there are common themes of distress and interest that emerged in the class, As this course deals with painful and difficult history, emotional engagement and checking in is very important. As this course was overlaid by the pandemic, and the face to face contact was removed, this became a difficult aspect to manage, and I think did impact the overall success of the course.” (Lecturer 2).

The emphasis on care and wellbeing throughout both narratives, also reveals the inherent assumption that attending to student well-being is the lecturer's responsibility alone. This responsibility resulted in enormous pressures on the two lecturers, with both participants reflecting on possible detrimental effects of their approaches. Without adequate supports, these lecturers' care for their students influenced their own health and wellbeing and created a real potential for burnout, especially in the second year of the pandemic:

“While it was so incredibly enriching to gain insight into the understanding of students as the course progressed, and to be able to identify exactly what issues students were experiencing as they went through the content over the weeks, this was an intensively labour-demanding process for me. I quite honestly felt burn-out at levels I did not even realise existed.” (Lecturer 1).

“I identified with both the loneliness and the exhaustion [of the students], and in myself these became intertwined in a sense of hopelessness I saw the struggles via WhatsApp messages, getting increasingly frantic, and increasingly out of office hours. I struggled to separate out the generalised anxiety and offer support for my specific course”. (Lecturer 2).

Lecturer 2 emphasises that a sense of panic was experienced by the whole teaching team who: “were all focused on trying to contain the anxiety to allow learning to happen” (Lecturer 2), and were: “working over and above the call of duty, and the commitment – and desperation – was palpable”. (Lecturer 2).

She goes on to explain that this was no easier in the second year of the pandemic:

“In some ways teaching this course in 2021 felt harder than 2020. Lecturers and students were both exhausted, even this early in the year. In a way it felt like it had been winter since March 2020”. (Lecturer 2).

Student engagement, self-regulation and reflexivity

Student engagement emerged as the second significant theme, with both narratives revealing a strong preference for teaching-learning interactions (Case 2015a) and engagement as a fundamental element of their ERTL learning environments. For Lecturer 1, this preference was evidenced in her description of the activities that were embedded to facilitate regular connection and engagement with students:

“I designed activities to monitor how they were coping with learning online and to engage with them on their learning progress. Asynchronous lectures were mostly provided using online videos. Workbooks, in the form of pdfs, were constructed to enable the students to respond to prompts and thereby construct their own study notes, and reference was made to relevant chapters in the

textbook. Three virtual sessions were run synchronously, which students could voluntarily attend. Additional weekly activities were designed to enable engagement between the students and myself on the students' expectations of the course in relation to their learning development." (Lecturer 1).

Similarly, Lecturer 2 significantly reworked the course interactions and activities, using various online formats: the university's Learning Management System, Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp.

"they chose WhatsApp as a platform because it was immediately accessible to everyone ... facilitating the space for students to have a meaningful voice in the content, structure and assessment strategy of the course". (Lecturer 2).

Both lecturers' courses thus included synchronous and asynchronous activities, numerous opportunities for engagement among students and with tutors, and a strong emphasis on assessment and feedback as mechanisms for driving and monitoring student learning. In this way, the course activities and assessments served as key cultural conditions for learning during ERTL, expanding the space for student agency (Case 2015b).

The reflections of Lecturer 2 indicate that the online learning environment presented some significant challenges for teaching and learning, particularly with regard to the ability of students to transfer knowledge across different assessment contexts and formats. She was able to translate some of the intensive writing feedback in the content course onto the online platforms and in the methods course worked with a "decolonial" charter, which was very successful, and a podcast, which was less successful. While students performed well in the immediately-scaffolded writing activities of the content course, the final examination showed that the skills had not been adequately appropriated by the students. Consequently, Lecturer 2 found that the core objective of the course – i.e., longer-term critical thinking about history – was not achieved in many cases.

In the method course, more enduring connections were built through WhatsApp and these manifested in critical engagements and interventions both inside and outside the course. Lecturer 2 concluded that tutorials and WhatsApp chat groups provided better spaces for engagements than online lectures. The tutorials were intended to: "support the conceptual development around argumentation, as well as content discussions" (Lecturer 2), and they also became important "to contain the anxiety to allow learning to happen" (Lecturer 2).

For Lecturer 1, the use of prompts in the form of questions about the learning experience in three specific moments of the course enabled her to provide: "individual, personalised feedback [which] is not possible within a normal 45 minute teaching session in the traditional contact class". (Lecturer 1).

The feedback helped build a foundation of trust with the students, while affirming that lines of communication between student and lecturer were open. The prompts also enabled Lecturer 1 to evaluate how well the design of content was being received by students and shaped her future preparations according to the needs of this cohort of students. In this way, Lecturer 1 was able to reflect the learning enacted by the students, the relationship between the students and the lecturer's mediation, as well as the mediation by the resources provided.

“To me, this meant that they were actively engaging with the content. They possibly also valued the structure of the prompts which aimed to guide them on how to negotiate meaning around the more difficult content. It is likely that the prompts provided them with insight into how questions could be structured on assessments at university”. (Lecturer 1).

The two lecturers' narratives align with reported findings on emergent pedagogies during ERTL, with Baker et al. (2022) and Bao (2020) suggesting that foregrounding activities and assessments was a commonly observed occurrence during ERTL. These published findings together with our analysis suggest a potential shift towards learning through a range of activities which promote engagement and learning-oriented assessment practices.

DISCUSSION

Case (2015b, 848) argues that “the curriculum operates as the key manifestation of the structural and cultural conditioning of the space for student learning” and that higher education should “facilitate the development of an enlarged sense of agency for students” (Case 2015b, 841) through teaching-learning interactions. We add to her position by arguing that the lecture is a key structural and cultural element of the university space that was disrupted during the pandemic and can be transformed going forward. Furthermore, we argue that care and concern for students has not been a primary cultural element of teaching and learning in higher education, for structural reasons, and that it should be an integral part of pedagogies going forward.

Our analysis focussed on two lecturers who understand the importance of lecturer-student interactions as mechanisms for supporting students to engage with content and to get insights into students' emotional health and well-being. They engaged with students prior to the pandemic and worked hard to continue such engagements online. They each developed new strategies to do this, some of which were successful, and all of which required immense effort on their behalf, leading to experiences of “loneliness”, “exhaustion” and “burnout”, while not always managing to contain the anxiety and loneliness of their students. While these experiences were obviously exacerbated by the pandemic and ERTL, it is important to consider

how lecturer-student interactions might be affected by different blends in blended learning going forward. Both lecturers argue that while the online space can achieve some additional support for students that might not have been thought about prior to ERTL, there is a strong need for in-person interaction, on campus. This is why blended learning will serve traditional contact universities better than full-online or hy-flex teaching and learning.

For students to benefit from university, they do need to engage with their peers and their lecturers. Lecturer 2 noted that 2021 was much harder than 2020, because students and lecturers had not had a chance to get to know each other at all (and because the pandemic seemed never-ending). The other authors of this article all resonated with this point, based on our experiences. So any form of blended learning should make space at the beginning of a course for in-person interactions for lecturers and students to get to know each other. Online elements of courses should also allow for periodic “touching base” during the course, so that people get together and see each other in the context of academic activities, for both academic and emotional support. In-person interactions are likely to be even more important in courses that need safe spaces to deal with issues including race, gender and sexuality. The creation of safe and ethical spaces that are inclusive of multiple voices is critical for developing reflexivity, but can be difficult to achieve in purely online learning and teaching spaces.

So, while our analysis shows that it is definitely possible to have strong lecturer-student interactions online, it also shows that these should be paired with in-person interactions. We expect that the appropriate blends of in-person and online activities will be different in different courses and at different levels of study.

Both lecturers reflected on the negative impact of limited or inappropriate material resources for many students. Lecturer 2 notes:

“it was clear that access – whether to connection, electricity, data, device, or conducive workspace – was a consistent hurdle issue for many students. This remains an important barrier in online or blended learning.”

We note the above as crucial in any ongoing discussions of blended learning, and we believe that the university sector is engaging with the challenge of inadequate resources. As Czerniewicz et al. (2020) point out, although resource constraints were exacerbated by the pandemic, they are by no means a new phenomenon and have plagued South African higher education since before the pandemic. Blended learning is expensive and often shifts the expenses and the burden to the students. Without a proper cost-benefit analysis of blended, online and hy-flex teaching and learning in particular institutions, we may perpetuate rather than undermine current structural resource inequalities.

The two narratives also focused on the additional human resources needed for appropriate blended teaching and learning. Lecturer 2 noted how at times the entire “teaching team of the course focused on trying to contain the anxiety to allow learning to happen”. This tension between wanting to connect with and support students, and the potentially negative impact of doing so on their own and colleagues’ time, was experienced by both lecturers. Some institutions have additional resources in place to support students with emotional and social wellbeing. It is not clear whether these resources were increased for supporting ERTL, but there is no doubt that if we want to support strong teaching and learning going forward, they are necessary. Given that the culture of the academy has been that such support has not usually been a primary focus of lecturers, we argue for better integration of student support services into the core academic project within the broader institution.

Our analysis shows that the two lecturers developed a wider range of activities during ERTL, and would continue these into somewhat transformed post-pandemic teaching and learning spaces. This wider range of activities is undoubtedly a positive aspect to have come out of ERTL, even for lecturers who were employing a similar range of activities pre-pandemic. The narratives suggest that learning can be achieved, and possibly enhanced, provided that the learning journey is structured in a way that scaffolds learning through student engagement, appropriate prompts and guidelines, and assessments that are strategically designed for the purpose of learning. However, Lecturer 2’s narrative also suggests caution in that a number of activities did not transfer well to the online space. Some of these difficulties were caused, or exacerbated, by structural constraints of the University and the country. While the pandemic supported some aligned shifts in pedagogies and assessments, the challenge going forward will be whether these will be sustained, and what kinds of structural and cultural supports are afforded to students and teachers to achieve useful implementation.

Given this wider range of activities, our analysis suggests that a key learning from ERTL should be that the focus on one-hour, daily lectures that structure and organise courses, can be set aside, in favour of other methods of course design and organisation. ERTL has shown that activities and assessments are just as if not more important than transmission of content. While there is no doubt a need for students to engage with content through texts and lectures, these should be chosen carefully and for appropriate purposes, at the appropriate times. Good lectures that focus on a key concept, the relationships between concepts, or overviews of a course, can and should be given, in-person or online. These can range from short snapshots of key concepts, to longer accounts of key ideas in a course, but these should be seen as one of a range of course activities, not necessarily the central organising activities in a course.

Decentering the lecture is consistent with resilient pedagogies, which involves the design

and use of mode-agnostic activities that can be easily adapted in times of disruption. The notion of resilient pedagogy, as opposed to resilient lecturers and students, is appealing in light of the burdensome experience of transforming courses from in-person to online. We recognise that our argument goes against one of the most widely-practiced and deeply structural aspects of university education. In Hays (1994) words, lectures are deep and durable structures of university life. It seems hard to imagine a university education without them. Yet any form of transformation requires forms of agency that are willing to disrupt widely-held practices. If enough of us act together to transform this aspect of structure, we may well develop new durable forms of pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

We began this article sharing a set of metaphors which described our experiences of ERTL in 2020. “Constructing a house without a plan” perfectly sums up the emergency response of moving all teaching and learning online. Moving forward, blended learning will require a mindful reconsideration curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. While our narratives describe “walking into pristine forest – not sure where you’re stepping and don’t know where you’re going” they also demonstrate an enlarged sense of agency by lecturers (Case 2015b, 841) as they navigated the “disaster movie” in which we were all acting. The narratives suggest that both lecturers and students were able to, in this moment of disruption, be creative, innovative and imaginative with the tools that ERTL provided. We have argued that this disruption has provided seeds for transformation in post-pandemic teaching and learning.

The two narratives demonstrated not only the constraints and challenges of the emergency response but enablements provided by forms of online pedagogy. Transformative practices resulted from a wider range of activities and assessments. These creative, flexible and inclusive pedagogies suggest new ways of teaching and learning in the academy, and paying greater attention to the affective domain. We have argued for decentring the lecture, as the central organising principle of the curriculum. In decentering this key structural and cultural element of the university space, this article has shown that we can support multiple opportunities for students to engage with disciplinary knowledge and that we can enable care and concern to be integrated into higher education pedagogy and thus become a stronger cultural element of teaching and learning in our institutions.

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