South African universities have taken to online teaching: but it can't be permanent

By Sioux McKenna   13 Sep 2021

The uptake of educational technology in South Africa's higher education sector has been [highly uneven and very slow](). Before the pandemic, most courses offered in South African universities had some form of Learning Management System presence. Students could access course guides and readings, upload their assignments, and possibly communicate with their lecturer and peers via forums. But beyond that, [many academics seemed to resist]() making use of the technology, even though it could allow for greater engagement and interactive learning.

Source: Retha Ferguson from [Pexels]()

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And then 2020 happened and suddenly everyone found themselves thrown into the online world. The country's higher education sector can be proud of the rapid pivot that was made as universities rushed to ensure that academics had the skills to teach online and that students had the hardware, software and data needed to learn from home. Collaborations between universities were central to the successes. Educational technologists [across the sector]() worked tirelessly to support staff and students.

The online pivot has opened the eyes of many naysayers to the benefits of blended learning, whereby students can work at their own pace. There is much that the sector can reflect upon as universities start to return to face-to-face teaching.

But emergency remote learning [shouldn't be confused]() with carefully crafted online curricula. Many academics and

students were struggling with the technical skills of it all and had little time to consider knowledge creation. It was often a case of getting through the syllabus rather than ensuring true epistemic access – helping students to understand how each field generates knowledge.

Education inequalities are worse online

While the pandemic experience has undoubtedly hastened the uptake of educational technology in higher education, it does not point to an entirely online future. There are at least three reasons for this.

Successes were partial. While those of us working in higher education can be proud of how we've maintained our educational responsibilities in the pandemic, this was not without costs. Academics have spoken of burn-out and depression, and many students have had to endure extreme mental health issues.

Most universities have done their utmost to ensure that students stay in the system and succeed in their studies. At times this has meant cutting sections of the syllabus, offering additional assessment opportunities, and adapting the examination schedule. There is no doubt that students lost out educationally in the pandemic. Certainly, it has meant fewer opportunities for vital extra-curricular learning and peer engagement.

The digital divide is real. The extreme inequalities in South Africa and globally have been laid bare. Universities and the department of higher education and training found themselves in a financial and logistical nightmare of ensuring that all students had access to hardware and data. Negotiating with service providers for reduced data costs was time consuming. Students who rely on the residence system found themselves shouldering family responsibilities, and often working in homes that were not conducive to studying. And rural students without access to signal were truly left behind.

Most accounts of the digital divide focus on physical access. What has been overlooked are the challenges of providing epistemic access online.

Epistemic access is hard in person. Online it's even tougher.

The higher education sector is not particularly good at ensuring that students do more than get through the content. But the real role of higher education is to bring students into a transformative relationship with knowledge. This entails far more than the transmission of facts.

Academics should be role-modelling the norms and values of the field and how it is that we come to read and write in such different ways in mathematics, marketing or medicine. Teaching like this helps students understand how knowledge is made and how they can contribute to it themselves.

Teaching towards epistemic access *with* epistemic justice is even more complex. This means trying to understand what students bring with them and what they value and hope for. It means thinking about the ways a discipline may be excluding students.

Teaching with all this in mind is a minefield. It involves deep reflection on the often taken-for-granted norms and values of the field and how to make these explicit to students. It involves being vulnerable and open to learning from students. It involves providing opportunities for students to "try on" the practices of the field in a carefully scaffolded manner, with regular feedback.

Doing this in person is immensely tough. Doing this online is at another level.

Making sense of philosophy, physics or physiology may be possible in a carefully crafted online curriculum, but taking on the disposition of a philosopher, physicist or physiologist through online engagements is of another order. Education is about so much more than taking on facts. It is about becoming a specialist kind of knower who can contribute to their field in ways that serve the public good, and who is willing to take on the responsibilities of their educational privileges alongside the personal benefits it brings.

Wikipedia offers immediate access to knowledge on almost every issue taught in universities. YouTube videos of science experiments and medical procedures abound. It's not access to knowledge that is the problem, it is access to education.

Education should change who we are and how we understand our role in the world.

Technology offers all manner of opportunities to enhance the educational experience, and we should reflect on our successes and sustain these. But taking universities entirely online is only ever going to be a stop-gap response to the pandemic. The sooner students are safely back in class the better.

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