A SWITCH FROM TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM TO REMOTE TEACHING AND LEARNING, A COERCED VIRTUAL PLANE!

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Abstract

The paradigm shift from the traditional classroom to remote teaching and learning situation because of a covid-19, a new normal, has seen several teachers and students coerced to a 'virtual plane'. For this reason, this study seeks to explore the pros and cons of traditional and remote teaching. The central question has asked how the remote teaching experience has been compared to the usual classroom teaching and learning for both colleagues and students. I used reflexivity for diverse designs such as interviews and questionnaires for data collection. The study revealed that while the overall impact has been manageable, however, the general sentiment between colleagues and students is that traditional classroom instruction is the better method. The respondents agree that a switch from usual to remote teaching has not been easy. In addition, while online teaching and learning can simplify things for those who already used Blackboard Board, others had a lot to learn. This situation has been exacerbated by the fact that most black teachers and students come from less affluent schools and universities, who still collect printed assignments.

Keywords: COVID-19, new normal, remote teaching, traditional classroom, virtual plane, reflexivity.

1   INTRODUCTION

The variability and developing nature of human knowledge is just one of many reasons why professional teachers remain learners themselves, learning from not only books and journals, but reflecting regularly on their own teaching practice. in this reflective piece, I reflect on the paradigm shift from the traditional classroom to remote teaching and learning situation because of the covid-19, a new normal, which has seen several teachers and students across the globe being coerced to a 'virtual plane'. To this point, this study is intended to explore the gains and losses of remote and traditional classroom learning and teaching, as we know it. The central question asked is, "*how has the online teaching experience been compared to the usual classroom teaching and learning for both colleagues and students*"? I used reflexivity for diverse designs such as interviews, focus group and questionnaires for data collection. I hope to return to reflexivity in the methodology section.

Several researchers have afforded the scholarship with detailed background about the differences between remote teaching and online teaching. However, this manuscript is a reflective slice about Blackboard collaborate ultra (bb) teaching method, also known as *remote teaching* with a colleague Dr Caga and a friend, Chris Weagle, including my three postgraduates students. It focuses on remote teaching, specifically during the period of the covid-19 pandemic but aiming to flag bb teaching method strengths and weaknesses in particular in a South African university. Adamson (2021) affirms that the shift from the traditional classroom-based language courses with in-person interactions to utterly online i.e. the digital remote learning due to the covid-19 crisis headed towards the redesign of the curriculum creation of online resources, modification of the methods of examinations and assessment, the virtual classroom management and learners' belief and attitude etc.

Like a bolt from the blue, both teachers and learners have to defy the odds through adaptation as they were used mostly to traditional teaching, with covid-19, they had to discover new technologies and effective online pedagogies to achieve their learning objectives. Falih, Ella, David and Faleh (2016) observed that in the 1800's, access to higher education was very limited because of geographic distance between potential learners and educational institutions until 1892 when Pennsylvania state university introduced a correspondence study program classes. Followed by the University of Chicago, which became the first institution of higher education to broadcast courses over the radio in 1922. The pendulum swing from the "old" mode of education to the modern version of online learning took approximately four decades.

The world organisation for economic co-operation and development (OECD, 2020) reported that closures related to the current covid-19 pandemic meant that students from diverse backgrounds who are more at risk of increased vulnerability are less likely to receive the support and extra services they

need, and the gap between students that experience additional barriers and that do not might widen. Closures could also have considerable effects on students' sense of belonging to schools and their feelings of self-worth – these are key for inclusion in education (OECD, 2020).

During the coronavirus crisis, many countries have been using digital pedagogical tools and virtual exchanges between students and their teachers, and among students, to deliver education as schools closed. Vulnerable students might however have little access to such tools and require further attention and support. To respond to the challenges they face, countries have developed specific and sometimes innovative policy initiatives such as providing equitable and inclusive access to digital learning resources and good learning conditions, ensuring that socio-emotional needs are being met, offering equitable and inclusive access to extra services for vulnerable students, and ensuring support by and to teachers (OECD, 2020).

Around 91% of enrolled learners worldwide closed their schools in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus. this then meant that children and youth from low-income and single-parent families; immigrant, refugee, ethnic minority and indigenous backgrounds; with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations; and those with special education needs suffer by being deprived of physical learning opportunities, social and emotional support available in schools and extra services such as school meals. They risk falling further behind and becoming isolated with school doors closed.

Universal response to school closures has been the creation of online learning platforms to support teachers, students and their families. However, not all students have the same access to information and communication technologies, as it varies greatly across countries. while the most vulnerable students might not have access to digital learning resources, some governments and civil society organisations have provided them with computers or tablets as well as internet access, teaching through television, phones or radio. A number of countries offer useful insights into some of the most equitable and inclusive solutions to provide access to digital learning resources and effective distance education (OECD, 2020).

The covid-19 pandemic came at a time in South Africa, when a lot of what teachers do in the classroom has become routine and it is not easy for them to 'see' it (Kepe, 2017). Some teachers tend to think about everything at once when they are planning a lesson, instead of focusing to a particular aspect of a lesson. With covid-19, teachers, have to slowdown and reflect on what has gone well and not in their lessons, reflecting on practice (Schon, 1983). a teacher needs to plan a lesson, teach that lesson and reflect on that lesson, think about other teaching experiences and theories, evaluate that lesson and plan further, taking his/her evaluation into account for further planning. In this way, a teacher will be engaged in a 'reflective cycle' and will think about their practice in terms of theories of teaching and think about theories of teaching in terms of their practical experiences.

When professionals, are faced with a problem, Schon (1983) observed that they tend to refer not only to a body of knowledge they had acquired in their training, but also to certain practical experiences as well. Thus, the practical experience of teachers in this manuscript during this turbulent period of the world pandemic is viewed as a valuable source of knowledge about teaching and learning. This is in line with the *norms and standards* that require teachers to be able to achieve 'reflexive competence'-that is, to be able to reflect on their classroom practice, to reflect on the relevant theories that could inform their practice and then to plan lessons based on both their practical and theoretical understandings. Carr & Kermmis (1986) note that teachers need to be aware of the causes and consequences of their action through action research in their teaching practice.

Central to the idea of action research, I would argue is reflection on practice, so that teachers are able to analyse, discuss, evaluate and if necessary, improve their own practice. Now in history, the coronavirus has vitalized for the massive number of the institutions to rethink their traditional educational strategy, adopting technological innovations such as remote teaching, but doing so through reflecting on their classroom practice, to reflect on the relevant theories that could inform their practice and then to plan lessons based on both their practical and theoretical understandings.

Deveci & Wyatt (2021) advocate for 'a progressive national curriculum that will extend beyond rote learning to encompass critical thinking and practical abilities, equipping [the] youth with essential skills and knowledge for the modern world' during and post covid-19. They argue that schools need to teach students necessary reflective and critical thinking skills. Like in their case (UAE), the South African government has been observed to be providing insufficient attention to such skills, prioritising rote learning and other deductive teaching methods. The authors argue that such practices fail to prepare high school students for example, to take full advantage of university education.

Reflection-in-action is the reflection occurring while an action is taking place, which Schon (1983) in Deveci & Wyatt (2021) juxtaposed with reflection-on-action (i.e. the retrospective reviewing of an experience). Reflection intensify both teachers and learners intellectual independence, increasing tolerance for different points of view, and freeing the participants from the snares of dogmatism paving the way for autonomous thinking (Deveci & Wyatt, 2021)

Covid-19 has virtually exposed the glaring and endemic proportions of inequality in our country. It has exposed the strength and the weaknesses of the well-resourced, affluent, and less affluent institutions of high learning that lack resources. Traditional classroom teaching as we know it has been there since the dawn of schooling; to an extent, that adapting to virtual learning has proven to be a daunting task. Traditional teaching entails learning approaches with contact sessions in a controlled classroom environment that is made conducive for learning by the presence of the teacher/lecturer for his/her students. It affords the learners or students an opportunity to engage not only with the subject matter but also with the teacher concern.

2   METHODOLOGY

This section presents the research methodology and design to answer the research question. The question has asked: how the remote teaching experience has been compared to the usual classroom teaching and learning for both colleagues and students. The theoretical framework and epistemological theory of the research question informed the study. Moreover, a variety of member roles confronts qualitative researchers when they are in the research setting. Such roles vary from being a group member: an insider to a stranger: an outsider. While there are a variety of definitions for insider-researchers, generally, insider-researchers choose to study a group to which they belong. However, outsider researchers do not belong to the group under study (Breen, 2007). In light of the value and belief systems captured in the previous definition, I opted for an insider role in this case study. I believe that such a position has the following advantages:

1   Having a greater understanding of the culture studied;

2   Not alter the flow of social interaction unnaturally;

3   An established intimacy, which promotes the telling and the judging of truth (Bonner and Tohusrt, 2002).

Given the previous stance, as an insider, I am familiar with the hierarchical structure of my institution and know how it works. I also know how best to approach any situation since I have a great deal of knowledge that would have taken an outsider a long time to get to know. Because of this, I was aware that I could unconsciously make wrong choices based on prior knowledge, which might tilt towards bias. However, I safeguarded against this and focused primarily on the subjective views of the participants, though these views cannot be said to be completely independent of my bias (Unluer, 2012). I solicited their opinions to see if they were consistent with the literature about remote teaching against the usual classroom teaching and learning. Two lecturers (one female and a male) and three postgraduate students (two females and a male) to consider the gender balance comprised the study. All the participants have consented to publish their names in this manuscript without hesitation. Because of the limited required space in this manuscript, I have used only one data strand per participant. I based the selection of the participants on the argument that on a qualitative study that "there are no guidelines in qualitative research for determining how many instances are necessary to support a conclusion or interpretation. This view is always a judgement call (Taylor & Bogdan 1998). To this end, a single incident or instant can be sufficient to build a conceptual category. Because of this, the best insights may have come from quite a small amount of data. In addition, I used three sources to collect data: questionnaires, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, and a focus group of three students. I started with the questionnaires, but I noticed some gaps and went for face-to-face semi-structured interviews to supplement those and probe further. With this in mind, I used the interview strands from the lecturers and focus group. All the participants communicated their opinions both verbally and non-verbally. I conducted the focus group session in an informal setting for collecting information on a designated strategy of eliciting information from a smaller group of four learners. I used open-ended questions better understand the problem and concerns of the participants about remote teaching and in-person classroom teaching and learning.

I collected responses from the focus group and lecturers using the tape recorder to capture data. As it relates to this study, Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger (2020) suggest focus groups are group interviews to explore participants' expertise and experiences, including finding out how and why people behave

the way they do. The semi-structured interviews involved engaging the participants in a two-way conversation, asking those questions for collecting data to learn their ideas, beliefs, views, opinions and behaviours about the remote teaching experience versus the usual classroom teaching and learning (Kepe, 2017). I observed the ethical protocols.

I used open-ended questions during the interviews to promote and standardize the wordings of the questions and control responses from the participants to limit the [my] influence of the researcher on the particular encounters. At the site, I became inconspicuous to control reactivity and become a bystander or made use of alternatively, participated as fully as possible in any given event or activity, to become almost invisible in my role as a researcher. The study explored the nature of the phenomenon, its eminence, manifestation, the context in which it appears and the perspective from which it can emerge. Adamson (2021) notes that qualitative methods of ethnography, narratives, collaborative auto ethnographies and case studies are particularly suited to this endeavour. Hence, I have set this study as an ethnographic paradigm because it is empathetic towards investigating remote teaching experiences compared to the usual classroom teaching and learning rather than quantitatively measuring and reducing it.

I espoused reflexivity to bracket myself. The study explored defies of remoting teaching and learning during the global pandemic. In any qualitative research like this one, I am doing reflexivity is of paramount importance because it helps the researcher become objective during data collection, data analysis and discussion of the findings. Geertz defines reflexivity as "a story they tell themselves by themselves" (1973 p.448). Davies (2008) refers to it as social reflexivity. Reflexivity should be accountable for the diverse designs for data collection (triangulation) during knowledge generation (Kepe, 2017). Reflexivity as such is at the centre of social science in particular, where the connection between the researcher, the research setting and the social world is much closer. It is also, where the research objects can be seen as being conscious and self-aware through the influences of the researcher on the research process. Given that this study is reflexive, ambiguities are inevitable even as an insider, because of the more intimate relationship between [me] the researcher and the researched as, "long-termed and multi-stranded and the complexities introduced by the objects of research have even greater scope' (Davies, 2008 p.2). The relationship between myself as a researcher and participants informed a subsequent theory and conclusion expressed through interaction. Given this, the ''turning back'' (both individual and collective) might have led to a form of self-absorption, in which the boundaries between subject and object might have disappeared, with one replacing the other, thus denying the possibility of social research (Kepe, 2017). Nonetheless, this study was intended to explore remote teaching compared to traditional classroom teaching situations. Such an examination was informed by reflexivity and assessed by a critical scholarly community to express the reality that is neither accessible directly through actions and texts of the participants nor simply a reflection of the individual researcher's mind (Kepe, 2014). In any case, reflexivity focuses on the individual researcher rather than on the research as a social process. Crick (1982) affirms this by saying that ''the ethnographic enterprise is not what one person does in a situation, but how two sides of an encounter arrive at a delicate workable definition of their meeting" (p.25) as in this study. Hence, I deemed triangulation fit for this study to increase confidence, create innovative ways of understanding the phenomenon and integrate theories. This stance might reveal unique findings and provide a clearer understanding of the problem (Thurmond, 2001). I also used a focus group to engage with my postgrads students to attain balanced views from them. I believe reflexivity should be accountable for the diverse designs for data collection (triangulation) during knowledge generation. For this study, I analysed data by arranging it in a logical and chronological order using themes. Categories were identified to cluster the data into meaningful groups. In addition, all ethical protocols were observed as we applied for ethical clearance from the University of Fort Hare.

3   RESULTS

Data on how the remote teaching experience has been compared to the usual classroom teaching and learning for both colleagues and students were solicited from my colleague Dr Caga sharing her experience as a lecturer, my friend Chris Weagle and three postgraduate students from my English class. Both the lecturers and the students as participants consented on their names to be published and even wished for their photographs to be inserted in the manuscript. The followings excerpts express views from the lecturers' point of view.

3.1 Interviews

✦ *Excerpt 1*

Lecturer 1, Chris Weagle opined:

> *In my own experience, remote teaching with Blackboard makes it hard to monitor the students to see how much they are working or paying attention. The first reason is the absence of facial cues and body language. This type of instruction has to be done together in the same room or else it is too hard to see who understands and who does not, or worse, who isn't even working. If classes could be conducted via 5G in virtual reality, I think there would be a viable solution to the emotional distance created by remove learning. Furthermore, digital and information literacy instruction is harder to supervise than in an actual computer lab. This type of instruction has to be done together in the same room or else it is too hard to see who understands and who does not, or worse, who isn't even working. If classes could be conducted via 5G in virtual reality, I think there would be a viable solution to the emotional distance created by remote learning.*

Chris, in the main, opines lack of supervision gauge or evaluate their level of understanding. This then tends to affect the quality of assessment because students take advantage by working in groups as opposed to individual performance, although the assessment may be an independent construction. This compromise quality especially because students are under no obligation to switch their videos on. He suggest a use of the 5G during a virtual session.

✦ *Excerpt 2*

Lecturer 2, While Dr Caga notes:

> *The Blackboard (BB) Collaborate Ultra Method can feel affectively disconnected at times. Furthermore, digital and information literacy instruction is harder to supervise than in an actual computer lab. As a result, using BB can feel affectively disconnected at times.*

Both Weagle and Caga share similar sentiments that facial cues and body language communicate hugely in face-to-face interaction. In addition, the fact that students are not obligated to switch on their videos during virtual platforms contributes as an impediment that affects the quality of assessment in particular. Therefore a lag in the video, students disconnection, Low bandwidth in rural areas, absence of direct supervision, breakout rooms, Website crashing, Distractions, multiple users of information technology because of the COVID -19 and children attending virtual schools all have put the students at the receiving end. As a result, guided instructions by the teacher/lecturer are weakened or completely misunderstood.

3.2 Focus group

The followings excerpts express opinions from the students' point of view. All the three students who participated in this study are postgraduates.

✦ *Excerpt 1, Portia Jafter posited:*

> *It is essential to consider both the benefits of the traditional approach with the virtual learning ones in their entirety. Let us deal with the latter. The Covid-19 global pandemic required the unscheduled adaptation from the former to the latter one. Even during the pandemic period, nothing could replace consistent a meticulous traditional sit-down summative assessments. An assessment conducted virtually would need thorough preparation and hands-on monitoring.*

> *There would always be glaring hiccups concerning both approaches unless they are well integrated and braided. A combination of the two hybrids was evident and helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic period, whereby readings or teaching-learning materials were uploaded on BB online to be accessed by the students anywhere and at any time. This situation then assisted mitigate dealing with many documents that can otherwise be lost or mixed up. In addition, she notes that lecturers can also be prerecorded by the lecturer before and after the lessons. These recordings then could be played in class during the initial lesson slot. In this way, all unforeseen circumstances that may lead to the destruction of the teaching time could be minimised or completely circumvented.*

Jafter tried very hard to strike somewhat of a balance between remote teaching and the traditional face-to-face traditional classroom situation. However, she still insists that the former required unscheduled adaptation compared to the latter part. She cites glitches, especially when it comes to resources.

✦ *Excerpt 2 Siviwe Siphoko opined:*

> *While online learning is so convenient nowadays, however, nothing should replace traditional face-to-face teaching, as the social environment quite often requires in-person interaction because a learning environment that does not involve human physical interaction defeats the very essence of productive learning. Bunking of class, protest settling score with lecturers behind the screen were the order of the day and lack of commitment was evident from some of us as students. Unless lecturers can try new ways of stimulating interest which has got lost due to many reasons such connection problems and non-availability of data, mainly.*

Like Jafter, Siphoko cites the absence of interaction between them and the teacher and among themselves as students. Again, this talks to the teacher's irreplaceable role as a mediator of knowledge, as that time to be listened to individually has suddenly vanished. They are now supposed to be independent something they have not attained yet, even at the university level. They still do need support and to be pushed to their limits in terms of critical thinking, which is lacking to the majority of them. Lack of discipline has also surfaced largely.

✦ *Excerpt 3 Vuyokazi Mlahleki opined:*

> *In my view, remote teaching is not without limitations as the lecturers during this period appeared to battle to have complete control of classroom management, including maintaining discipline. Absenteeism is also a problem despite the presence of a class register on Blackboard.*

All the three postgrads students cited above agree that the BB virtual platform has more disadvantages than advantages since many of the students in the institution originate from rural areas and less affluent backgrounds. This situation became evident during this pandemic as most homes lack access to digital tools. In addition, the same students in the institution come from large families, where it may not be easy to concentrate because of loudness in their homes. In addition, during the BB virtual sessions, most students are unable to hear the lecturers. Even in settings where there might be a blended hybrid, some students are too loud and talking over one another. The paradigm shift from traditional in-person to digital learning has exposed the inequalities within the institution and across the country. In the same vein, it has conscientious those in authority to reinforce information technology and other pedagogical digital tools.

4   DISCUSSIONS

The study revealed that while the overall impact has been manageable, however, the general sentiment between colleagues and students is that traditional classroom instruction is the better method. The participants agree that a switch from usual to remote teaching has not been easy. In addition, while online teaching and learning can simplify things for those who already used Blackboard Board, others had a lot to learn. This situation has been exacerbated by the fact that most black teachers and students come from less affluent schools and universities, who still collect printed assignments. Chris had this to say: *Information literacy instruction is harder to supervise than in an actual computer lab. As a result, using BB can feel affectively disconnected at times remote teaching with Blackboard makes it hard to monitor the students to see how much they are working or paying attention. The first reason is the absence of facial cues and body language.*

This type of instruction has to be done together in the same room or else it is too hard to see who understands and who does not, or worse, who isn't even working. If classes could be conducted via 5G in virtual reality, I think there would be a viable solution to the emotional distance created by remove learning. Furthermore, digital and information literacy instruction is harder to supervise than in an actual computer lab. This type of instruction has to be done together in the same room or else it is too hard to see who understands and who does not, or worse, who isn't even working. If classes could be conducted via 5G in virtual reality, I think there would be a viable solution to the emotional distance created by remote learning. Adamson (2021) affirms a view that the shift from the traditional classroom-based language courses with in-person interactions to digital remote learning due to the Covid-19 crisis tilted towards the redesign of the curriculum creation of online resources. Such as modification of the methods of examinations and assessment, the virtual classroom management and learners' belief etc.

While Caga observed: The BB method can feel affectively disconnected at times. Furthermore, digital and information literacy instruction is harder to supervise than in an actual computer lab. As a result, using BB can feel affectively disconnected at times. The OECD (2020) affirms her observations concerning remote teaching that it has exposed the disparities and complexities between the developed and emerging countries, where vulnerable students from diverse backgrounds experience increased vulnerability, as they were likely to receive less support and less services they needed. Because of this situation, the gap between the students that experience additional barriers and those that do not might widen during this turbulence and uncertainty with a global pandemic.

Jafter notes that *while, the digital online method can simplify things for those who already used some in emerging countries where inequality is rife as South Africa have a lot to learn, especially some of the institutions of high learning, which lack resources*. In such situations, Schon (1983) suggests that teachers need to be able to achieve 'reflexive competence'-that is, to be able to reflect on their classroom practice, to reflect on the relevant theories that could inform their practice and then to plan lessons based on both their practical and theoretical understandings. In line with the Norms and Standards (2000), this study proposes that teachers require being able to achieve 'reflexive competence'-that is, to be able to reflect on their classroom practice. To reflect on the relevant theories that could inform their practice and then to plan lessons based on both their practical and theoretical understandings, as this may help supplement and repair the gaps that were there caused by digital defies. Deveci & Wyatt (2021) advocate for 'a progressive national curriculum that will extend beyond rote learning to encompass critical thinking and practical abilities, equipping [the] youth with essential skills and knowledge for the modern world' during and post COVID-19.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This study has drawn a vivid picture of how the remote teaching experience has been compared to the usual classroom teaching and learning for both colleagues and students. It has illustrated how COVID-19 has virtually exposed the glaring and endemic proportions of inequality in South Africa and across the borders. It has exposed the disparities, gains and losses that traditional classroom teaching, as we know it has had since the dawn of schooling to an extent, that adapting to virtual learning has proven to be a daunting task. Traditional teaching entails learning approaches with contact sessions in a controlled classroom environment that is made conducive for learning by the presence of the teacher/lecturer for his/her students. It allows the learners or students to engage not only with the subject matter but also with the teacher concern. The study has further revealed that remote teaching with Blackboard makes it hard to monitor the students to see how much they are working or paying attention. The first reason is the absence of facial cues and body language. The study has shown that effective digital online teaching requires instructions to be done together in the same room or else it is too hard to see who understands and who does not, or worse, who is not even working, or else classes could be conducted via 5G in virtual reality. In this way, there would be a viable solution to the emotional distance created by remote learning. Furthermore, digital and information literacy instruction is harder to supervise than in an actual computer lab. This type of instruction has to be done together in the same room or else it is too hard to see who understands and who does not, or worse, who is not even working. Through the contribution of the participants, the study suggested classes to be conducted via 5G in virtual reality, as viable solution to the emotional distance created by remote learning.

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