Understanding Higher Education

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A Covid Postscript

In the time since we finished the first draft of this book, a great deal has happened. In early 2020, the first cases of Covid-19 began to appear and by March of that year large portions of the world had ‘locked down’ in an attempt to limit transmission of the virus. For higher education, lockdowns meant that face-to-face teaching was suspended and a rapid move to online teaching took place.

Online teaching has long been touted as a panacea for many ills in higher education including, amongst other things, the need to teach larger numbers of students as systems massified and universities grew in size (Dutton, Ryznar & Long 2018), the need for flexibility (Dhawan 2020) and the need to accommodate the preferences of so called ‘Generation Z’, who, we are informed by Wikipedia, ‘have grown up with the internet and portable digital technology from a young age’ and who are thus deemed to be ‘digital natives’. The arrival of Covid-19 has provided the impetus for universities to draw on the use of technology at a pace and in ways that those arguing for it could never have imagined possible.

In the context of all this change, we need to ask: is the position we have taken in this book still relevant? This short postscript added to the book just before publication aims to argue that what we have said in the preceding chapters is even more important, even more relevant, now than the day we finished writing it in late 2019.

In the book, we adopt what is essentially a socio-cultural view of learning which acknowledges the way dominant forms of both knowledge and knowing can serve to privilege some and marginalise others. At the same time, we argue for what theorists such as Wheelahan (2010) term ‘powerful’ knowledge-coherent, structured bodies of knowledge which allow knowers to move across contexts and to imagine worlds that do not yet exist. These bodies of powerful knowledge need not be the same as the knowledge of the powerful although, at the moment, it is the knowledge developed in the north and west which dominates in the academy at the cost of other forms of knowledge which have been side-lined, ignored or deemed illegitimate.
Our position draws on what we term a ‘model of the learner as a social being’ which we contrast with that of the ‘Decontextualised Learner’ and the belief that it is factors inherent to the individual which lead to access to and success in higher education.

As African universities began to draw on technology more extensively than ever before as Covid-19 swept across the world, two concerns came to occupy the minds of university leaders: (i) the need to provide students with access to devices and to data and (ii) the need to train staff to teach online. For many students in Africa, access to technology was usually possible thanks to the availability of computer laboratories on campus because ownership of a personal device is a dream beyond their means. While enormous strides were made in providing students with both devices and data in South Africa at least, and many institutions quickly made plans to develop the capacity of their academic teachers to work with online learning platforms such as Moodle and Blackboard, arguably not much attention was paid to what the inability to access face-to-face teaching would mean beyond these immediate practical and technical considerations.

A recent call for papers for a colloquium hosted by the South African Council on Higher Education with the theme of *Safeguarding the Quality of Provision with the Shift to Online Teaching and Learning in the Times of Covid-19* (CHE 2021) notes an Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) policy brief which shows that ‘the continuing digital divide poses a major threat to equitable access to higher education and lifelong learning globally’.

The same document (CHE 2021) goes on to cite Pedro and Kumar (2020) who identify the following requirements for high-quality online teaching:

- Appropriate and updated technology for supporting synchronous and asynchronous activities for online programs/courses.
- Efficient technical support, help-desk activities and online related facility management services.
- Online access to self-help technical support materials.
- Allocation of administrative staff specifically prepared to support online programmes and courses.
- Sufficient and well-qualified instructional design services.
- Access to diversified and high-quality media support services.
- Appropriate support for online teaching staff by providing e-tutors and other support services to ensure a reasonable faculty workflow in online programs.
- Availability of online library services as well as library staff, specifically for supporting online programs/courses.
- Availability of other student-related services for online education (career guidance, writing centres).

All but two of these requirements relate to the technicalities of online learning. In those two that do not directly relate to technicalities, one notes ‘the provision of e-tutors and
other support services’ and another ‘the availability of other student related services’. All of these requirements, we would argue, draw on what we have termed ‘the model of the Decontextualized Learner’.

It is important to note, moreover, that these requirements are identified as relating to the provision of ‘high-quality online teaching’ where the definition of quality is understood to be ‘fit for purpose’. From the perspective we have advanced in this book that teaching and learning is profoundly social, cultural and political, the question which needs to be asked, therefore, is whether the technicalities identified above are sufficient to make online teaching fit for purpose in the wide range of contexts that characterise higher education in Africa.

As we have noted throughout this book, as higher education systems massify they also diversify (Trow 1973). What this means is that an increasing number of ‘first generation’ students, young people from homes where they are the first to experience higher education, have entered and will continue to enter universities. The arrival of Covid-19 meant that these students were forced to return home and engage with the online learning provided by their universities. For some students this meant returning to crowded environments with no quiet study space. Even more significantly, it involved returning to environments where reading and writing were not the dominant practices and where other activities were privileged in order to maintain the family home economically, socially and culturally. In some cases, returning home impacted on women in particular as they were called upon to take up childcare, housework and cooking responsibilities which impacted in no small measure on the time available to study. Regardless of the extent to which the requirements for ‘high-quality online teaching’ were met, it is unlikely that students from homes not headed by educated middle-class caregivers would readily be able to achieve the sort of meaningful engagement with learning materials necessary for high-quality learning.

The social, cultural and political view of teaching and learning we have offered in the book also leads to another understanding of why the focus on technicalities offered in Pedro and Kumar’s (2020) identification of the requirements for ‘high-quality teaching’ is inadequate. In Chapter Four, we drew on the work of Gee (2008) who argues that being ‘literate’ in any particular context involves taking on a related ‘way of being’ or social role. This idea is also taken up in the work of Maton (2014) who argues that curricula construct different kinds of ‘knowers’. Many of the more diverse groups of students now entering African universities draw on social roles and understandings of what it means to know that are far removed from those which are privileged in academia. For these students, developing the roles required to be successful in higher education depends on accessing values and practices around what can count as knowledge within the field and how it can be known. Gee (2008) is insistent that a literacy is acquired through immersion in the contexts in which it is practiced and cannot be developed through direct teaching (for example, in ‘study skills’ courses). This means that, for many students immersion in the life of a contact university is highly beneficial. Typically, universities with face-to-face teaching on physical campuses allow for this immersion. Students are exposed to peer-
learning as more senior students demonstrate ways of doing things, many extra-curricula learning spaces are open to them and they interact with lecturers on a day-to-day basis. The task of developing these literacies or social roles is made all the more difficult by the fact that literacy practices differ across different knowledge fields. In Chapter Five, we drew on the concept of knowledge structures, such as Bernstein (2000), who argues that, in some knowledge areas, knowing involves using a particular ‘language of description’ to see the world. These languages of description differ according to the particular theoretical lens being used by researchers to ‘see’ the world. Access to these languages of description comes from engagement with those who use them, with the academics teaching courses and modules, with technicians running the laboratories and the texts communicating the knowledge of the field. Throughout this book, we have been critical of the extent to which access to such languages of description is often provided tacitly rather than explicitly but nonetheless, these ways of being are modelled to students in their interactions with academics in the field and through the feedback they receive on their work. It is unlikely that a generic ‘e-tutor’ or those working in student support structures (i) are able to identify this specialist understanding and (ii) are able to model it for students.

In the book, we problematise the way current approaches to teaching fail to take account of the social and cultural in teaching and learning, arguing that, if only academic teachers were more aware and more explicit about the differences in performance we see between different social groups might be eased. The current system of face-to-face campus-based education is poor enough at introducing students to the practices they need to succeed but we very much doubt that online learning can even begin to compensate for the loss of the ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ that face-to-face teaching can model. This is even more the case if the shift to online teaching is understood simply as needing to meet sets of technical requirements.

There is a distinction to be made between, on the one hand, carefully designed online teaching that takes issues of student interaction and epistemological access seriously, and, on the other hand, the rapid move to emergency remote learning that all of us were thrust into in 2020. While we will always be proponents of the benefits of face-to-face teaching, our concern is not with online education per se but rather with the rise of technicist understandings that taking classes online is a simple matter or a solution to many of the financial and logistical constraints being faced by our universities. The call we have made throughout this book for more social, critical deliberations about curricula, students, epistemological access and epistemic justice, and higher education generally are intensified for the online environment and we note with despair some of the more simplistic accounts of what emergency remote education has meant for our students.

Furthermore, our concern that the rapid shift to online learning is often understood in purely technicist ways is accompanied by our concern that the pedagogical changes in the face of the pandemic are often discussed as if they are neutral rather than inherently political (Czerniewicz 2020). Questions about the datafication and unbundling of higher education need careful attention as do issues of escalating marketisation made possible through uncritical adoption of technology (Giroux 2021).
In short then and as, hopefully, vaccine programmes kick in across the continent and begin to lessen the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, we challenge all those who argue that the past year or so has resulted in a fundamental shift to the way universities go about doing things through movement to online learning unless we can find ways of online teaching acknowledging and accommodating the social, cultural and political we have argued so passionately for. From this perspective, Covid-19 has not impacted on the relevance of the chapters we wrote before those first cases of disease emerged in December 2019. If anything, it has just made them even more significant and relevant to what we need to do as we move forward.