Original Paper

From Post-Doc to Lockdown Teaching and Learning:

Pedagogical Lessons for Religion and Mission in the Changing

Post-COVID-19 Context

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Abstract

Online education offers flexible, although sometimes limited and unaffordable higher education and allows people to work while studying. Critical to improving access to online learning programs within the African context is the expansion of internet connectivity especially for people living outside of urban communities. This paper (Note 1) employs the postcolonial lens and the concept of "sacred pedagogy" to examine the experience of transition from Post-doctoral research to teaching online during the time of CODID-19 disruptions on the academic programs. The discussion concludes by highlighting the that given the evolving and fast-changing COVID-19 world, teaching and learning methodologies should be participatory—not one fits all—but accommodative of students from poor communities so that they are encouraged to fully participate and express their values and opinions within the academia.

Keywords

COVID-19, University of Pretoria, Teaching and Learning, Sacred Pedagogy, Faculty of Theology and Religion

1. Introduction

The global impact of coronavirus has resulted in a renewed call for justice in global institutions as Black Lives Matter (BLM) mobilized people to stand up against racism and hegemonic structures that institutionally sustain white supremacy. These protests emerged in response to the death of George

Floyd who died in police custody in Minneapolis, the United States, where protesters also demanded decolonization of institutions and pulled down or defaced statues of colonial figures considered to be symbolic representations of institutional violence against victims of colonialism. As COVID-19 presents an opportunity to re-set the world order (Ramaphosa, 2020, p. 1) there is a growing realization for a need to transform institutions and focusing on educational legacies of colonialism need to be expanded to institutions of higher learning through interdisciplinary studies. The growing interest in interdisciplinary collaboration is illustrated in the interest of scientific associations and funding agencies who promote interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and innovation (for example see: Moran, 2002; Morrison et al., 2003; Stefi, M., & Stefi, K., 2004). AsHenrik et al. (2005, p. 10) have succinctly observed; …despite its pervasive nature in knowledge production, interdisciplinary research suffers from insufficient institutional capacity. To build up such capacity, the criteria with which funding agencies assess research proposals should be revised to dismantle the barriers to interdisciplinary communication and building bridges across sectors and disciplines.

To address these gaps, these scholars made the following policy recommendations for the Academy among others:

Recommendation 1: We recommend that the Academy strengthen and actively publicize its current research policy, which discourages strict and narrow categorizing of research into disciplinary or interdisciplinary and promotes integrativeness and interdisciplinarity as positive attributes of all research supported by the Academy.

Recommendation 2: We recommend that the Academy begin a focused effort to strengthen the institutional capacity of interdisciplinary research with the dedicated build-up of interdisciplinary evaluation procedures, research processes, and research capabilities.

Recommendation 3: We recommend that the Academy revise their assessment criteria of research proposals to reward those research coalitions that prove to have dismantled barriers to interdisciplinary research and built linkages across disciplines and research sectors.

Recommendation 4: We recommend that the Academy develop a system for monitoring the accumulation and build-up of institutional capacity for interdisciplinary research in research coalitions funded by the Academy. Indicators of institutional capacity for interdisciplinary research should measure the degree to which researchers cross organizational boundaries in science, familiarize themselves with unfamiliar territories of knowledge, lower language barriers between scientific traditions, facilitate the emergence of interdisciplinary research questions, dismantle methodological prejudices, encourage the birth of novel research communities, and inspire the society at large with interdisciplinary approaches (Henrik et al., 2005, p. 195).

Given the above recommendations for academia, it is no surprise that COVID-19 disruptions require an urgent shift from traditional academic practices. It is estimated that about 1.5 billion students globally were affected, as COVID-19 pandemic impacted the education sector through widespread disruption of schools, colleges, and universities worldwide- creating uncertainty concerning their learning processes

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and graduation time frames. Consequently, education institutions had to consider embarking on online teaching and learning by adopting academic methods which will ensure that academic programs remained operational through the COVID-19 global health emergency. These methods include, among others, the interactive online based classes, and comprehensive online assessments which utilise google and Microsoft Teams and setting up electronic library resources to stimulate student focused and self-paced learning.

This article examines the experience of transition from Post-doctoral research to teaching module TEO102 online during the time of CODID-19 disruptions. The phenomenological employs a post-colonial lens to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the module and highlights key areas of the Faculty theme, objectives, and vision to draw lessons and actionable recommendations as a contribution to the evaluation of the Faculty's vision and objectives.

1.1 Online Teaching during COVID-19

While online education offers flexibility, it is often limited and unaffordable for the poor. Critical to improving access to online learning programs within the African context is the expansion of internet connectivity especially for people living outside of urban communities. This paper employs postcolonial theory alongside the concept of "sacred pedagogy" to examine the experience of transition from Post-doctoral research to teaching online during the time of CODID-19 disruptions. By examining the impact of COVID-19 on Theology and Religion studies, the paper also explores the impact of these disruptions on the current restructuring of Faculty theme, objectives, and vision. The paper briefly explores the current state of the field of Religion and mission studies and draws on Faculty programs to highlight the impact of COVID-19 on online academic practices within the field of mission and religion studies. By exploring these challenges, lessons are drawn to provide actionable recommendations as a contribution to the evaluation and restructuring of the Faculty of Theology and Religion's vision and objectives.

From March 2020the world has seen disruptions caused by lockdown in a bid to contain the spread of the Coronavirus which were followed by world wide protests against racism which were a response to the death of George Floyd in the United States of America (U.S.A), as Black Lives Matter (BLM) mobilized people to stand up against institutional racism and white supremacy. At the center of these protests was the demand for the decolonization of global institutions through the removal of names and the pulling down of statues that represent colonial figures.

The disruptions caused by COVID-19 exposed economic disparities between the developed and developing countries-laying bare the economic gaps between nations, regions, and communities that have little or no access to information and telecommunication technologies/gadgets such as computers, cell phones, and tablets and access to internet connections (Note 2). Despite these challenges, Universities were challenged and pushed to reflect on institutional practices, and even consider how they were structured in terms of priorities in "investments and budget allocations, staff training, and

establishing rules to support the urgency and requirement for online-based learning platforms" (Anuwar, 2020).

Thus, in enhancing academic support in the context of COVID-19 where students and lecturers had to stay apart, most university students were exposed to a new paradigm—with those privileged to have access to technology better positioned to utilize Open Educational Resources (OERs) that are already in the public domain and Open Online Courses available in the public domain. Despite the marginalization of the poor, technology has emerged as a major ingredient in this paradigm shift and presents opportunities for content development and learning analytics that are student-centered and stimulate self-learning. The content of online courses must reflect independent learning. "It is also for this reasoning that student learning activities must be engaging and encourage collaborative learning. Universities must not only be concerned about the students getting high grades but more importantly taking care of the weak students whose academic journey must be made equally rewarding" (Tan Sri Anuwar Ali, 2020).

Faculty themes, objectives, and vision

The faculty of theology and religion is currently restructuring through its four departments; Old Testament, New Testament, Systematic and Historical Theology, and Religion Studies and Missiology. The previous vision of the faculty was: *To be a faculty recognized for its creative engagement with life-giving theology and religious insight, of service to academia, church, and community.*

To review this vision, the faculty hosted an annual lekgotla from the 3rd to the 4th of May 2018 at 137 Murray Street Guesthouse in Brooklyn where they reflected, inter alia, the envisaged product of the faculty programs; Life-affirming theology, Values/ethicists, Pastors, Students, Spiritually formed students, Research, Specific knowledge/skills and building up people in Faith. I order to achieve this the following inputs were identified; Life-affirming theology in a broader context, Academic lectures, Spiritual leadership, Critical thinking from a religious perspective, and Theological knowledge and research.

These values and objectives were reviewed at a virtual faculty lekgotla held on the 10th of July 2020 during the lockdown period. The cluster of Religion and Mission studies identified Religion and violence as a departmental theme and hosted a post-graduate virtual seminar where most students presented their preliminary proposals with the majority focusing on religious tensions between Christianity and Islam in North Africa and Asia.

This was an important and relevant theme but what I found limiting about this focus on religious tensions was that it ignored the South African situation of xenophobia and how religion was embedded in regimes of exclusion that framed migrants as outcasts, not worthy or deserving of human dignity.

After a hard lockdown and as institutions prepared to resume operating in the context of COVID-19, a message posted on FB by the University of Pretoria Communications department on the 23rd of April 2020 read as follows:

WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER: The end of the extended lockdown is in sight, and hopefully, we're all

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gearing up to get back into pursuing academic goals when teaching and learning resume online from Monday 4 May. Once we have all our tools, internet access, and the necessary devices, the next step becomes ensuring we're mentally strong for the challenges that lie ahead in navigating what will be a new experience for most students and lecturers alike. This week on our Well-Being@UP site, Professor Salome Human-Vogel, Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Education, provides tips on how to look after your mental health while also focusing on your academic goals.

On the 7th of July 2020, the University of Pretoria website posted findings of a survey in an article "*UP shows strong adaptability to online teaching and learning-survey*"- (Note 3)which showed that "the vast majority of lecturers and students at the institution managed to move relatively seamlessly into remote (online) teaching and learning mode". This was "[i]n response to the national COVID-19 lockdown and in keeping with the recommendations of the Department of Higher Education".

My experiences during the period of my appointment in the face of the lockdown were generally smooth, given that most programs from Human Resources (HR), ClickUp, and Online Teaching resources facilitated a smooth transition even though I was not physically taken through orientation at the campus. Surprisingly, there was an online virtual app that took me through a tour of the campus. According to the UP -Survey Report (7 July 2020);

The transition was relatively smooth because in 2015—under the leadership of the then newly appointed Vice-Principal: Academic, Professor Norman Duncan-UP transitioned to a hybrid approach to teaching and learning. The hybrid system requires all modules to have a predominantly contact teaching and learning component, as well as a significant online teaching and learning component. Consequently, when the University had to pivot to largely online teaching and learning, it was anticipated that it would be relatively easy for lecturers and students (particularly those who have been at the UP for more than a year) to adjust.

2. Sacred Pedagogy

Life-affirming theology in a broader context is reflected in academic lectures, spiritual leadership, and critical thinking is possible within the "sacred pedagogy" which transcends ordinary academic engagement. The concept of "sacred pedagogy" was developed by Yves Congar who edited a series of reflections treating the liturgical developments in the Vatican II (Note 4) and observed that while the world is not sacred in itself, there is an important difference between acknowledging the good offered by technological advancement and discerning the "sacred". For Congar, a line needs to be drawn between what Christians consider to be the body of Christ—which is the only sacred reality (Note 5) and the "body of Christ which is the ecclesial body, his Church—and his "Eucharistic" body whose mystical presence is celebrated. According to Congar, the world can become "sacred" in the sense that all of God's creation can be seen as signs of God's presence—not an ontological transformation but perceptual transformation on the part of the believers. In other words, faith and guidance of the Holy Spirit enable the Church to take up these worldly realities (pedagogically) and present them in such a

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way as to lead the world to the grace of Christ, a process that Congar calls "sacred pedagogy". Therefore, when the faculty invokes prayers and devotions at the start of its meetings, critical and constructive academic engagement should be viewed as an invitation and extension of the supreme God who manifests through technology and online teaching methods and resources.

3. Religion and Education

The interface of religion and education is not anything new. The 16th-century Protestant Reformation was inspired by a quest for public education in Europe as reformers promoted literacy as means to ensure that people could read the Bible for themselves. Given that they viewed the Bible as "supreme authority and essential for doctrinal interpretations, the reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin advocated the building of schools alongside missionary centers and facilitated the translation of the Bible into local languages- an example of this was Luther's translation of the Bible into German.

Some scholars such as Gawthrop, Richard, and Gerald Strauss (1984) have argued that the "Second Reformation" of the German Pietist movement in the 17th and 18th centuries was even more influential in promoting literacy. Christian historians Richard L. Gawthrop and the late Gerald Strauss observed that in addition to stressing the need for personal Bible reading, the Pietists persuaded German authorities to mandate Bible reading as "the chief instrument of religious instruction in primary schools, [which was] a powerful impetus to the spread of mass literacy" (Gawthrop et al., 1984). Although the spread of Christianity can be credited for the expansion of educational programs, it is important that to highlight that Christianity and science also have a history of the conflict as illustrated by the 17th-century clash between astronomer Galileo Galilei and the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the condemnation by prominent religious leaders of Charles Darwin's 1859 theory of human evolution. According to a study on Religion and Education around the World, (Note 6)

> In 1633, the Roman Catholic Church's Inquisition sentenced Galileo to house arrest for the rest of his life and banned his writings after finding him "vehemently suspect of heresy" for contending that the earth revolved around the sun. The church regarded this view—later accepted as scientific fact—as contrary to Holy Scripture. England's highest-ranking Catholic official, Henry Cardinal Manning, denounced Darwin's views as "a brutal philosophy—to wit, there is no God, and the ape is our Adam." Samuel Wilberforce, the Anglican Archbishop of Oxford and one of the most highly respected religious leaders in 19th-century England, also condemned the theory of evolution by natural selection. The defendant in the Scopes Monkey Trial, high school teacher John Scopes, was convicted of violating a Tennessee law banning the teaching of human evolution in government-funded schools.

In the African context, the establishment of missionary schools alongside the colonial project led to ambivalence and suspicions relating to education as some view it as a western project of subjugation and control. In sub-Saharan Africa, numerous scholars have described how missionaries worked alongside colonial administrators during colonial times to not only spread Christianity but also construct

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educational facilities which influenced local attitudes toward education and promoted western culture at the expense of indigenous religious, cultural, and social epistemologies (Nunn, 2010). It is these euro-centric values and approach to education which tainted missionary activities, with a lasting impact which scholars have concluded, have had a long-lasting positive impact on access to schooling and educational attainment levels in the region.

While research by scholars like Baylor University sociologist Robert D. Woodberry (2012), for instance, suggests that Protestant missionaries in Africa "had a unique role in spreading mass education" (Note 7) because of the importance they placed on ordinary people's ability to read scripture, It is also important to consider the negative impact which western influence had on the African knowledge systems and organization. Therefore, it is critical that the post-Covid-19 teaching and learning strategies address these historical injustices.

4. Lessons Learned

There are a few things that I find liberating and transformative when I reflect on learning from the perspective of Religion and Theology as "sacred pedagogy" because we often think religion has little to contribute to education. We need to debunk the myth that the Faculty of Theology and Religion has little to offer in decolonizing our educational system.

First, the interface of religion and education is not anything new. The 16th-century Protestant Reformation was inspired by a quest for public education in Europe as reformers promoted literacy as means to ensure that people could read the Bible for themselves. Given that they viewed the Bible as "supreme authority and essential for doctrinal interpretations, the reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin advocated the building of educational institutions alongside missionary centers and facilitated the translation of the Bible into local languages—an example of this was Luther's translation of the Bible into German.

Secondly, it is also important to highlight that although the spread of Christianity can be credited for the expansion of educational programs, it is important that to also highlight that Christianity and science have a history of the conflict. This is evident in the 17th-century misunderstandings between astronomer Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church. A similar clash was also observed in the condemnation of Charles Darwin's 1859 theory of human evolution by religious leaders of that time.

In the African context, the establishment of missionary schools alongside the colonial project, led to ambivalence and suspicions as numerous scholars have described how missionaries worked alongside colonial administrators to not only spread Christianity but also construct educational facilities which influenced local attitudes toward education and promoted western culture at the expense of indigenous religious, cultural and social knowledge systems (Nunn, 2010). Therefore, we have to acknowledge that for a long time, teaching and learning have been euro-centric and based on western values.

Thirdly, the shifting of learning to online classes during the lockdown offers flexibility, but it is often limited and unaffordable for the poor. Critical to improving access to online learning programs within

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the African context is the expansion of internet connectivity especially for people living outside of urban communities. COVID-19 disruptions present an opportunity to decolonize the education system and Religion has an important role to play, given the positive influence it had when education was introduced in Africa.

To envision Life-affirming theologies within a broader context of critical thinking within the Faculty of Theology and Religion presents a possibility to reimage teaching and learning as "sacred pedagogy"—something which transcends ordinary academic engagement. Religion and spirituality can be resources during crisis times.

For example, when the faculty invokes prayers and devotions at the start of its faculty meetings, it locates critical and constructive academic engagement within the sacred space of teaching and learning as an invitation and extension of God's mission. I wish to highlight the following observations;

> 1) Understanding online teaching and learning as "sacred pedagogy" enables me to reimage obstacles as new opportunities and possibilities

> 2) When the Faculty offers academic and spiritual support, staff are invited on a journey to explore teaching and learning as a "sacred space" which is an extension of God's mission to communities in times of crisis

> 3) Extending teaching and learning outside of campus/ lecture rooms, disrupts the traditional understanding of education and presents an opportunity to locate teaching and learning within family structures and local communities. People do not have to go out to learn, but they do so in their local communities

> 4) The above point resonates with the understanding of the church. Whereas we previously confined mission activities at churches, Covid-19 has forced us to locate missions where people are. Therefore, community-based teaching and learning decolonize the education system and disrupt euro-centric models of education.

COVID-19 has taught us that teaching and learning are a sacred extension of God's mission and should not be confined to lecture rooms. In one of the recent publications (Mpofu, 2020) I highlighted how COVID-19 presents opportunities to reimage our communities through "new modes of socio-economic organization", including churches, and how we do mission:

...the church should emerge from COVID-19 well equipped for a new age of mission. COVID-19 disruptions present an opportunity for the emergence of alternative ways of being church and new modes of socio-economic organization… By disrupting traditional self-serving practices of the church, COVID-19 presents an opportunity for a paradigm shift for us to "go sharply into reverse … [and] rehabilitate ourselves" [and] restore our "old natural selves". Such transformation will require a multidisciplinary approach that takes our African context and the experiences of the poor seriously. (Mpofu, 2020, p. 5).

Going sharply into a reverse mode with the educational sector will require participatory methods which effectively engage young people from poor backgrounds. As one educational specialist observed,

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"Education must be not only a transmission of culture but also a provider of alternative views of the world and a strengthener [sic] of skills to explore them" *Jerome S Bruner* (http://www.ideas-forum.org.uk/about-us/global-citizenship). *Highlighting how people and communities are linked through global networks, this publication also notes how* the "interconnected and interdependent nature of our world, the global is not 'out there; it is part of our everyday lives, as we are linked to others on every continent—despite current COVID-19 disruptions which have resulted in travel restrictions. The world is connected in many ways which present opportunities for development;

- Socially, economically and culturally through technology sharing
- economically through global and regional institutions of trade
- in areas of geography and environment as information is shared
- politically through international relations and global institutions

These networks within our rapidly changing world present young people with enormous opportunities to develop skills through education and training, despite the many challenges and obstacles they have to overcome especially during the COVID-19 period, which highlighted the need for universities to evolve. As Kupe (2020) observed:

5. Hybrid Teaching and Learning

In times of crisis, we are compelled to change our strategies and move away from conventional approaches. Confronted as we are with the global COVID-19 pandemic, along with climate change, unemployment, poverty, and food security, education, and economic crises, there is no place for 'business as usual—because nothing will be "as usual" again…universities need to be engaged in creative and innovative research, teaching and learning strategies, to address the many different spheres required to solve the complex, intersectional African and global crises that the pandemic has further exposed. The strategies we adopt for a better world [will] require bold thinking and agile shifts (Kupe, 2020, p. 1).

Creative and innovative strategies are urgently required for post-COVID-19 research, teaching, and learning in African universities where higher levels of unemployment, poverty, and food security compound education and economic crises. One of the creative ways in which the University of Pretoria has addressed these complexities is by promoting hybrid teaching and learning. Hybrid teaching and learning is now a global trend for addressing challenges posed by COVID-19. The University of Pretoria already had online teaching programs in place when the government announced lockdown measures, and these proved to be effective for providing high-quality education in the context of social distancing. However, as Kupe (2020, p. 2) warned, there is a need to adopt new models in ways that consider the circumstances of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. "The model… is certainly not a one-size-fits-all model, and we are adapting it as required" (Kupe, 2020, p. 2).

The hybrid teaching and learning model which combined teaching and learning strategies included the following practical steps among others;

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1) Investing ZAR100 million (US$6 million) in IT infrastructure to create the UP Connect portal. This enabled students to access learning resources at no data cost during the COVID-19 pandemic given that 96% of undergraduate modules were already online when COVID-19 struck.

2) Conducting surveys during the transition to assess how lecturers and students managed to adapt as part of monitoring and evaluation.

3) Facilitating the availability of lecturers during regular, scheduled lecture periods so they could explain difficult concepts and respond to questions through 20-minute "Blackboard Collaborate sessions, and 20 minutes of online discussions provided through learning management system known as "clickUP", and 20 minutes dedicated to emails and telephonic engagement with students.

44) The university also loaned laptops to students who did not have suitable devices (1,937 in total) and students who experience connectivity and electricity supply challenges at home were allocated a telephone tutor (Kupe, 2020, p. 3).

Measures highlighted above ensure that the hybrid teaching and learning approach is not a "one size fit all model, but teaching and learning methodologies should be participatory - not one fits all - and engaging with students from poor communities so that they are encouraged to explore, develop and express and their values and opinions. In this regard, the role of the educational institutions should be to support students as they learn to assess evidence, negotiate and solve problems and make informed decisions.

5. Conclusion

This paper discussed the concept of "sacred pedagogy" as a postcolonial lens to draw lessons from the transition from Post-doc to teaching during the COVID-19 Lockdown at the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Theology and Religion. By examining the impact of COVID-19 on Theology and Religion studies, the paper also highlighted how COVID-19 affected higher education and discussed a shift to hybrid online teaching and learning model which was implemented at the University of Pretoria. The discussion concluded that in an evolving and fast-changing COVID-19 world, teaching and learning methodologies should be participatory—not one fits all—and engaging with students from poor communities so that they are encouraged to explore differing opinions and be able to effectively engage without any prejudice. Therefore, educational institutions a space of critical but accommodative engagement where students feel supported as they explore and navigate the learning environment.

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Notes

Note 1. This paper was developed from concepts shared on the 4th of August 2020 at the Flexible Futures Online Conference hosted by the University of Pretoria.

Note 2. For more details see;https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/covid-digital-divide-learning-education/

Note 3. Accessed 11 July 2020 from: https://www.up.ac.za/news/post_2906988-up-shows-strong-adaptability-to-online-teaching-and-learning-survey?fbclid=IwAR3I3HoAGbhYWKYlgnTzy0dKwMrHrHqLrGpbtezDhXbIqD9rLp_f50bgH0.

Note 4. Yves Congar, *Vatican II: La Liturgie après Vatican II—Unam Sanctam*, 66 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1967).

Note 5. Ibid., 123.

Note 6. Accessed 22 July 2020 from: HTTPS://WWW.PEWFORUM.ORG/2016/12/13/HOW-RELIGION-MAY-AFFECT-EDUCATIONAL-ATTAINMENT-SCHOLARLY-THEORIES-AND-HISTORICAL-BACKGROUND/?FBCLID=IWAR1S-YA6DZSICH9OHC-VEVYKMRMKVNKCUESQVTVO3EEHR5OOGQ7_CJUGIXI.

Note 7. This impact was varied between the protestants and Catholics.