

**No student left behind: 'Pedagogies of comfort' or 'pedagogies of disruption'?****Michael Anthony  
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**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the lessons learnt from the short-term emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) approach adopted to tackle the continuation of the higher education (HE) academic programme during the COVID-19 pandemic. It first examines the primary goals of the official South African "No student left behind" (NSLB) campaign, which emphasises the agenda to address a social justice concern about students' participation and access to HE. It reflects on recent research studies around this matter which tended to foreground technical and operational considerations. Instead, this article presents an alternate lens for shifting the discourse of HE, especially postgraduate studies, to activate deep, critical and autonomous engagement in teaching and learning. The theoretical model presented highlights staff and students working outside pedagogies of comfort and expanding into spaces of disrupting previous habituated pedagogies. The article draws on the reflective experiences of facilitating postgraduate education programmes: two PhD cohort programmes in Mauritius and South Africa (involving students who were schoolteachers and HE lecturers) and a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education Studies (involving students from rural university settings in South Africa). The data reveals that despite intentions to drive an alternative mode of critical, disruptive online modalities in curriculum delivery, students subtly pushed back towards working within the comfort zones of their previous conceptions of front-led, teacher-driven pedagogies. A disruptive pedagogy was not fully activated as students professed preferences to revert to the old routine agendas in pre-COVID times. This article argues that this constitutes a missed opportunity to learn from the ERTL era to inform alternative, more robust, critical pedagogies for the long term. The responses suggest that the HE system will continue to bifurcate disparities between those more willing to look to the past and those embracing a learning opportunity for the future.

## Introduction

This article foregrounds a comparative perspective of three postgraduate education programmes adopting an emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) approach during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The strategies enacted by the facilitators and students are introduced against the backdrop of the No Student left Behind (NSLB) campaign, which was declared to support students in their continued pedagogical engagement during the pandemic (Chester, 2020). The ERTL strategy accented sensitivity to the needs of students, their circumstances, and their access to alternative technologies.

The article is structured in four sections to explore the quality of postgraduate pedagogy (teaching and learning) in these selected programmes and their alignment with deep transformation. The first section presents how policymakers and researchers understood their prime motivation underpinning their ERTL actions. It opens questions about a deep transformation, which extends beyond caring about improving access to the online pedagogical space. A meaningful postgraduate pedagogy invokes students to critique ritualistic research conventions and promotes an independent, assertive academic voice. Whilst originally professed as an agenda to foreground transformative equity interests, the article will argue that the NSLB has, in practice, birthed a pedagogies of comfort approach (Boler & Zembylas, 2003), a relatively passive pedagogical orientation.

The second section outlines a theoretical lens of a pedagogy of disruption as a framework to examine postgraduate higher education. By definition, postgraduate education is disruptive, not in a violent sense, but in the sense that it explores working outside of one's comfort zones. A pedagogy of disruption is argued to be an alternative approach to the complacent pedagogy of comfort. Within comfortable pedagogical spaces, students are protected from exploring new directions. Instead, the personal obstacles to their success are foregrounded, and routine expediency and habituated orientations become acceptable. These reflections on a theoretical underpinning of the pedagogical practices respond to the challenge offered by Motala and Menon (2022) that the higher education discourse should expand beyond programmatic expediencies, the completion of the academic year programmes and graduation outputs. This second section opens up a vocabulary of the nature of a pedagogy of disruption as a lever to elevate the quality of postgraduate education as analysed reflectively in the next section.

The third section constitutes a personal reflection on students' pedagogical involvement with the three programmes of postgraduate studies (two PhD programmes and a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education), which realigned their pedagogical strategy to accommodate the pandemic. The study draws on my reflective experiences as a facilitator/co-ordinator of the varied programmes as I engaged with students' reports on the pedagogical challenges they faced. My supervisory engagement with several doctoral students (before and during COVID times) in the PhD cohort also informs these reflections. Data is drawn from students' verbal and written interactions during online cohort sessions and the repeated interactive monitoring and evaluation meetings with programme co-ordinators.

The fourth section concludes with lessons learnt from these three programmes in relation to the theoretical lens of a pedagogy of comfort and a pedagogy of disruption. The interest is directed to learn qualitatively from the short-term ERTL approach to inform long-term prospects for postgraduate education pedagogy. Badat (2020) cautions that ERTL should be understood for what it hoped to achieve in a specific space and time, but that one needs to be more cautious about whether its pedagogical approaches and practices would be relevant to carry over into the future. For example, could the ERTL agenda have created the recasting of lecturers as spectators to the students' agendas? The concern arises from postgraduate lecturers/supervisors like myself who are expected to accommodate low levels of student engagement in their research pursuits, whilst students claim a range of structural and systemic impediments as the motives for underperformance. However, we need to foreground what positive learnings we also acquired from the ERTL approach.

### **No student left behind: A policy backdrop**

The interest in the success of student achievement within the education system has been the keystone of many educational policies globally. One landmark educational reform in the United States has been the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001. It aimed to re-culturate schools as places that welcome all students to transform their potential and achieve successful academic performance in benchmarked signature tests. However, Darling-Hammond (2007) signalled that several unintended consequences followed as bureaucratic education regimes infiltrated the schooling system. She suggested that student assessment and performance scores became the critical driving forces within the system. At least two decades later, in a different social and historical setting, the South African Ministry of Education chose a similarly-named campaign, the *No Student Left Behind* (2020) to drive

their emphasis on equitable access for all students during the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Swart, 2020).

The *No Student Left Behind* (NSLB) (2020) was officially declared as the guiding principle which underpins an emergency remote teaching and learning strategy (Swart, 2020). However, what are some unintended consequences of this laudable policy proclamation? A starting point could be to examine how policymakers and researchers chose to interpret their goals during this period of the NSLB campaign. Concerning the higher education sector, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Blade Nzimande announced his agenda on 20 May 2020 as follows:

As government, we want all students to be protected and safe. As leaders, we need to be more thoughtful and careful before giving people the *wrong message* to the *masses* (Swart, 2020) (my emphasis added).

This media address reflects a concern that the socio-economic inequities of the higher education system continue to prevail. The syntax of a bifurcated education system, one for the privileged and another for the poor, was still a simmering undertone within the university systems as it recuperated from the major disruptions (both physically and epistemically) to the dominant hegemonies of a largely westernised Eurocentric higher education system (Badat & Sayed, 2014). The minister was subtly signalling that higher education institutions (HEIs) should develop a student-centred approach that placed the needs of students and their specific localised realities at the forefront of the transformation and the health pandemic response. Nevertheless, there are hints of a lack of confidence that HEIs would act in the interests of the protection of the students and that other misdirected interests could influence choices made. Without specifying these suspicious 'wrong messages', the minister is seemingly positioning himself as a protector of the public 'masses' in an adversarial struggle with the edifices of HEIs. There is an undertone that higher education was likely to be resistant to embrace new directions serving the interests of all.

However, many of the research studies conducted during this pandemic period of the last two years (2020-2022), as reported in the previous issue of this journal, *SOTL in the South* 6(1) (2022), by contrast, demonstrated a compelling commitment to student-centredness at various levels in the higher education system (Motala, Samuel & Simpson, 2022). Similar rallying initiatives were noted amongst schoolteachers in basic education who went to elaborate extents to accommodate the continued operations of schooling, often using personal resources to enact their teaching commitment (Jansen & Farmer-Philips, 2021). A wide range of national and institutional initiatives was

introduced to ensure students' access to the modalities and challenges of online transitioning. Institutions went out of their way to ensure indigent students' access to connectivities and data. Software and hardware resources were made available to ensure students could continue the academic year programme (Motala & Menon, 2022). Interventions were made to address modalities of curricular delivery to accommodate the students' challenges (Hendricks, 2022). The research reported in the previous *SOTL in the South* volume highlighted the systemic obstacles to addressing the histories of students' lived spatial and economic contexts (Dison, Padayachee, de Klerk, Conradie, MacAlister, Moch & Krull, 2022). These studies reflected that access to the resources of the new ERTL strategy was fraught with challenges. Nevertheless, higher education staff reported significant persuasive personal commitment to responsively meeting students' needs and contexts.

This backdrop signals the chief policy interest to ensure participation and access of students to the higher education system. The care is directed towards understanding the personal lived circumstances of students who are not able to engage with their studies because of social, economic and geographic reasons. The disparities in connectivity to online resources (hardware and software) are clearly linked to economic circumstances, and the HEIs were expected to and did respond to this reality. However, the concern arises about whether the responses of higher education practitioners remained unintentionally circumscribed within primarily technical and operational access priorities. Like the NCLB effects in practice, the NSLB could have infiltrated into the higher education system a preoccupation with keeping the system afloat without an opportunity to examine robustly enough the quality and purpose of pedagogical interactivity.

Jansen (2021) suggests that these kinds of baseline responses were necessary, but are not adequate to tackle the deeper transformation that the higher education system requires. The chief priority of higher education pedagogy, especially at postgraduate levels, should be directed towards activating the quality of scholarship and knowledge development. He suggests that higher education pedagogies ought to be about shifting students out of their comfort zones, epistemologically, theoretically and methodologically. This entails students taking ownership of the learning /teaching space in critical and assertive ways. The preoccupation cannot remain at the level of ensuring students' ongoing participation in the system. It ought to foreground also the theoretical quality of the teaching and learning activated and the scholarly knowledge construction processes undertaken by staff and students. To do so, the higher education (HE) system needs to be theoretically clear about its underlying constitutive pedagogical rationale so that informed teaching and learning approaches might be embraced. The next section will explore one set of potential *theoretical conceptions of a*

*pedagogical scholarship* to steer the direction towards deeper agendas for the higher education sector, exploring how to activate critical learning and teaching strategies.

### From ‘pedagogies of comfort’ to ‘pedagogies of disruption’: Theoretical reflections

This section draws from the theoretical challenges Boler and Zembylas (2003) suggest to work towards confronting dominant worldviews that are presented as naturalised but which more critically reflect hegemonic culturally-constructed values. Their theorisation focusses on how pedagogic orientation (conceptualisation and practical enactment) could circumscribe or escalate individuals within narrow or expanding domains. My interpretation of their argument is layered onto positive psychology directives (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009; Titova, Werner & Sheldon, 2018), which encourage individuals to shift into strategies for growth when working outside their comfort zone. Figure 1 suggests the phased approach to moving individuals from a pedagogy of comfort toward alternative desired critical practices. The diagram depicts the argument that pedagogies of disruption contest normative teaching and learning practices when they are redirected toward goals of social justice framing.



Figure 1: From ‘Pedagogies of comfort’ to ‘Pedagogies of disruption’

## Comfort zones

Comfort zones have a wealth of positive features, and individuals are drawn to remaining within their safe cocoons since the space involves limited additional expended energies from its occupants. Comfort zones include working environments, relationships, or even demarcated choices about one's cultural, political and social preferences (Boler & Zembylas, 2003). For example, one may choose to remain in a specific work institution in a particular job even though one is aware that it is not one's desired job; however, the environment is predictable, and one can exert adequate control over the practices and relationships within that space without much effort. Similarly, one might be involved in a relationship that is toxic and abusive, but the risks of escaping from the ambient rewards and practices shield one from making such choices. However, comfort zones are not all negatively skewed; they could offer security and affirmation, yet they do not provide possibilities for otherness or alterity. Individuals choose to operate in their comfort zones because they benefit from the accepted patterns commonly shared by their immediate communities. This is despite the repeated critique they may offer of the very space they occupy. Nevertheless, their complicity with the habituations reinforces the discourses of that comfort zone, and the potential inequities that it perpetuates are often overlooked or downplayed.

In this article, I reference the notion of the *pedagogies of comfort*, which constitute a zone of safety for practising educators who choose to remain within normative patterns of teaching and learning that dominate within their demarcated space. Individuals are aware of the possibilities for alternative practices but offer little leverage to shifting the hegemonic circumscription. Boler and Zembylas (2003) argue that this comfort zone allows individuals to deflect their critique away from their personal choices toward others depicted as having orchestrated the establishment and sustenance of the customised practices. Seldom do individuals within a comfort zone see themselves as custodians of hegemonic practices which bolster dominant hegemonic practices. The person within the comfort zone resists opportunities to alter their practices because this involves a concerted effort to contest the conventions within the circle. Often proponents of the comfort zone suggest that the pattern of practices are natural practices of the specific tribe to which they subscribe. They do not interpret the culturally-constructed nature of those practices, nor do they examine the underlying power dynamics and relational hierarchies these rituals underscore.

When translated to pedagogical approaches, the choice for teacher-centred, face-to-face pedagogy might be considered to be a comfort zone within which individual teachers have become acculturated.

This comfort zone legitimates front-led pedagogies, and learners/students (as actors within the comfort zone) also sustain the hegemonic boundaries by passively capitulating to the top-down directives of teaching, learning and assessment operations. There is limited engagement in how this approach might be reinforcing conservative denial of learners' autonomy and independent growth.

### **From fear zones to learning zones**

To shift out of their comfort zone, individuals are required to flex their assertive muscles theoretically. Usually, there is much fear associated with this since putting out one's neck to explore alternative pedagogical approaches might result in getting one's head chopped off: exclusion from the tribe is a real possibility. Resistant individuals find excuses for not delving into alternative pedagogical strategies even though they are aware of their potential resourcefulness. This 'fear zone' is considered a 'stretch zone' where new muscles are honed and new inspirations actively sought. Boosting individual self-confidence is required for making this early transition out of the comfort zone. Boler & Zembylas (2003) note that this fear constitutes a theoretical disquiet since new conceptual definitions are required to challenge normative behaviour.

It is when individuals draw on adequate syntaxes from alternative discourses that they can escape the fear zone to enter into a 'learning zone'. The alternative modalities of pedagogy would, for example, constitute the resources that teachers as learners might embrace. This learning zone could entail choosing online modalities that might be deemed more appropriate and that shift discourses toward activating learners as agents of their own growth trajectories; it might entail acknowledging the psycho-social and emotional well-being of learners as a priority for one's pedagogical approach. It could entail raising the benchmark goals of the curriculum programme toward higher-order cognitive demands (see discussion below about targeted outcomes for postgraduate education). Such shifts are not simply a matter of cerebral/cognitive reconfigurations; they require deep enculturation into alternative ways of being and becoming learners/students/teachers/facilitators in alternative pedagogical approaches.

### **Growth zones**

Boler and Zembylas (2003) further argue that a growth zone is reached when individuals have migrated from simplistic cultural normative affirmations to become agents who contest the conventionalised values of their original comfort zone. Within this sphere, both teachers and learners

see the potential for setting their own standards for what constitutes deep learning. This includes moving beyond pedagogical performativity discourses. Learning within this growth zone offers potential for finding new purposes for pedagogy, enacting new dreams of the relationships of empowerment and realising personalised goals that are not capitulating to the worldviews of others but continuously seeking broader redirections.

### **Pedagogies of disruption**

Pedagogies of disruption may be established when teachers themselves self-critically interpret their own complicity in sustaining the restraining regimes of truth that oppress the majority (Spivak, 2016). The critique is not directed to others only but also to the often-self-silenced internal discourses within one's own being (Boler & Zembylas, 2003). Matters of social justice feature prominently in these critical discourses, allowing teachers to see not only the structural features of systemic oppression. They ought to become attuned to their personal entanglement sustaining oppressive relationships that impede learner autonomy. The disruption is not only of the system, rituals and practices of others but internally addresses localised matters within one's immediate environment and about one's agentic discomfort (Barad, 2012; 2014). The pedagogy of discomfort entails teachers troubling the assumptions of whose interests are being served via the choices of the cultural agents in their ambient contexts and the broader macro-systemic present in their unique pedagogical spaces (De Sousa Santos, 2014; 2018). The discomforted teacher is thus one who is comfortable with uncertainty, imbued with a temporariness and reluctance to reach conclusions too quickly and superficially. They see themselves contradictorily implicated in the complexities of alternative pedagogies (Du Preez & Du Toit, 2022). The disruptive teacher consciously searches for solutions of relationality and dialogicality amongst multiple stakeholders to redirect the agenda of teaching and learning in his/her spaces (Connell, 2014).

It should be noted that disruption is considered a *positive* form of questioning and requestioning (Samuel, Dhunpath & Amin, 2016). It is not destructive, not targeted to produce undue anxiety, nor seeks deliberately violent means of engagement. These disruptive spaces can potentially destabilise individuals if they are not consciously planned to mediate facilitative stress. It is recognised that the disruptive space is not constituted of homogenous sets of advocacy strategies but draws on a kaleidoscopic compendium of possibilities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1993). Ultimately, disruption is directed toward teachers finding an autonomous and authentic voice, an ability to critique and defend one's positionalities, and self-manage one's own growth and developmental trajectories. The

adequate levels of requisite stress are considered ingredients to provide optimal destabilising advantages of others and oneself. Pedagogies of discomfort (a polite form) and disruption (a more strident form) are not directed at promoting burnout amongst the teachers. It is firmly dedicated to a commitment to matters of social justice, equity and transformation. It does not promote anger, panic or emotional breakdown. It is a deliberative, managed theoretical stance towards new directions.

The next section of this article uses the context of three case studies to review how students and facilitators of postgraduate programmes responded to working outside of their comfort zones of previous face-to-face pedagogies. The section below examines whether students were subtly directing the programmes to revert to their habituated front-led pedagogical expectations or were they supportive of a disruptive effort to elevate the quality of their pedagogical approach.

### **The pedagogy of postgraduate education: Three spaces for curriculum reflection**

#### **Postgraduate goals and programme design**

In terms of the national qualification framework (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2012), postgraduate students are expected to demonstrate proficiency in interactive networking and communication. Weidman & Stein (2003) argue that postgraduateness involves not just the technical production of coherent, structured argumentative, philosophical dissertations and theses. Postgraduateness is an induction into scientific communities of practice developing scholarly ways of being and becoming. This expectation requires that postgraduate education curriculum and pedagogy should promote intellectual and interpersonal relationships, demonstrating the ability to activate and control emotions and nurture greater awareness of and respect for differences in ideas and people. Postgraduate education is about developing self-esteem, stabilised by a confident but mutating identity. It is also about building character and balancing personal values and beliefs. These vectors of the growth trajectory encompass cognitive-structural, psycho-social and social identity development. They point to the need for postgraduate education to rise above technical rationalities.

Three postgraduate programmes are chosen since they reflect varied elements influencing their design and delivery. The first was a PhD programme (A) which had several decades of prior establishment of a cohort seminar-based approach to doctoral education (Samuel & Vithal, 2011). This local South African-based programme was located within my institution (the University of KwaZulu-Natal – UKZN). It drew on doctoral students across the country and within sub-Saharan Africa.

Traditionally students physically assembled for six annual weekend-long seminars supported by a team of supervisory facilitators who monitored their progress over different stages of proposal development, fieldwork and report writing. The three-year cohort programme was additionally sustained with one-on-one supervision dyads of students and supervisors. Over time, the generic PhD in Education expanded to cohere cohorts of specific fields of study. This article reflects on the specific cohort of a PhD (Higher Education Studies). Students came from diverse disciplinary fields in the university system.

The second programme (B) drew on the UKZN PhD cohort model but was previously, during pre-COVID times, delivered in on-site face-to-face modalities abroad. The programme was located within the Mauritius context in partnership with the local Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE) and UKZN supervisors and facilitators. All students were researchers from Mauritius who were either practising schoolteachers or academic members of higher education institutions in the country. The UKZN-MIE programme constituted a 'home-based' international doctoral curriculum design with UKZN awarding the degree for the programme. Only a few UKZN facilitators regularly engaged in face-to-face cohort seminars with local supervisors, whilst all other UKZN supervisors relied on online electronic communication for supervision sessions. Research fieldwork for both programmes A and B was conducted within the locality where the student resided.

The third programme was a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education (PGDipHE) (C) which involved practising academics across various national higher education institutions. Eight week-long face-to-face modules over two academic years constituted the taught curriculum design at the UKZN campus. The PGDip-HE programme was designed as a form of academic staff development, mentoring and/or induction to expose relatively senior academics to undertake a critical reflection on their responsibilities as higher education practitioners, researchers and curriculum designers.

All three programmes had to shift from previous contact modes of delivery and embrace ERTL as a strategy for coping with the COVID-led imperatives. Programmes A and B already had a network of technological interactivity since most of their supervisory practices were conducted via email correspondence. The marked choice to use Zoom platforms in the COVID-era dominated this later COVID stage, especially within the communal plenary cohort seminar-based collaborations. Programme C students were mainly from historically-disadvantaged institutions and were less accustomed to online pedagogies. Research reports have been constructed around these three programmes separately (Maistry, Samuel & Reddy, 2021; Mariaye & Samuel, 2021 and Samuel, 2021).

The intention here in this article is to foreground the student responsiveness to these shifts in pedagogical strategy under COVID times and the long-term implications for the future of postgraduate studies.

### **From pedagogical curiosity to learned passivity**

Most of the students across all three programmes were practising teachers. The UKZN-PhD in HE Studies [Programme A] and the PGDipHE [Programme C] students were higher education practitioners, whilst the UKZN-MIE PhD [Programme B] involved both HE teacher educators and primary/secondary school teachers. In the initial stages, ERTL was engaged by students with *pedagogical curiosity*. The students were eager to explore the online mode of delivery. They declared that they were interested to see how online pedagogies could take root within their own undergraduate or school learner communities (who were sometimes, for the first time, using online technologies as a default mode). At the onset of the new ERTL mode of delivery, a noticeable increase in attendance was noted, including the online orientation training programme for those who were not comfortable with this mode of delivery and the specific software (Zoom) being used by the host institution.

Some specific comparative nuances need explanation. Firstly, most of these *postgraduate* students did not experience the same challenges that undergraduate (UG) HE students or school learners had to contend with. For example, the doctoral and postgraduate diploma students had access to resources to access the electronic network systems. The registered cohort students were usually not impacted by fundamentally reconfiguring their home-work spaces to access the online ERTL activities. Many PG students already had demarcated workspaces which allowed them relative privacy whilst involved in online lectures and seminars. Notably, PG students still reported that they experienced entry into the private space of their homes (and sometimes offices) as not always comfortable. By contrast, the learners with whom these cohort students engaged were reported to be seriously constrained regarding their access to online technological hardware, limited internet connectivity and an un conducive learning-working environment to tackle online pedagogies in their home spaces. This led some cohort students to be more suspicious of the viability of online pedagogical strategies in their own pedagogical practice, and this translated to their relative hesitance to embrace the new ERTL strategies.

## Weaning trends

All students in all three programmes reported uncertainty about whether their connectivity systems within their local contexts would sustain their pedagogical participation mainly if they resided in geographically remote rural (or, as labelled in Mauritius, pastoral) contexts. Much of the students' scepticism revolved around network instabilities, which did not sustain continued long-term connectivity as they engaged in lengthy sessions of interactive seminars and presentations. The added responsibility of making online presentations left many students anxious: firstly, in presenting their research through digital means, and secondly, concerning receiving adequate feedback. This was evident in the recorded online sessions characterised by many interruptions and students' vacillations in negotiating the technological space smoothly. It appeared that students were more concerned about the technological medium rather than the feedback on their presentations' propositional content. During face-to-face sessions in the earlier pre-COVID delivery of the PhD programmes, students tended to rely more on oral rather than technological participation and feedback. If presentations took the format of PowerPoint presentations, most students were previously sufficiently supported by the immediate technical support of the host institutions or present peers. The ERTL students were nervous if their connectivity let them down. These anxieties were patterned along the disparities between urban and rural contexts, although many central urban dwellers also recognised challenges in their local networks. Cohort programme evaluations of students from countries like Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique in Programme A regretted their choice to relocate back to their home countries during the pandemic. Connectivity was notoriously unstable. Their already approved research designs held them accountable for producing data within their home contexts. They reported feeling marooned and longed to return to face-to-face interaction on campus.

Some degree of scepticism was noted by some students in the Mauritius context (Programme B) who did not trust the security and surveillance that they believed public electronic platforms (such as the Zoom meeting) afforded. The reflections by these relatively few students perhaps had more to do with their lack of confidence in sharing their data publicly. They felt it was potentially risky to share incomplete emergent ideas in an open online seminar forum, suggesting that their personal work was capable of being circulated through the recorded Zoom sessions. Their distrust was largely also about whether colleagues within the cohort might betray their studies' confidentiality and anonymity contracts. Conceptions of individual PG studies being a private and competitive practice are rife within

the island context. This could be another explanation for distrust of online pedagogy. However, the details of the genesis of this argument span beyond the scope of this present article.

In general, the Mauritian students were more familiar with online operations since the schooling system and the teacher education preparation for such schooling contexts were already operating on a large-scale use of electronic teaching and learning for several years in pre-COVID times (Oojarah, 2018). The small island context relied strongly on the use of electronic media that were available through the internet, and the higher education systems were already designing and co-ordinating continuing professional teacher development projects about the practical use of tablets in classroom pedagogy. Most teacher and learning support materials were already digitalised before the onset of the pandemic. Practising teachers and teacher educators involved in the PhD programme were thus already familiar with online modalities and the use of social media networking even before the pandemic.

The South African students (and facilitators, like myself) were overly preoccupied with the ever-looming possibility that they and their colleagues in the cohort collaborative learning space would be cut off the grid because of electricity load-shedding. A nervous declaration usually characterised each commencement of sessions. A round of apologies was recorded about those students/staff who were likely to be affected and cut off from participation in the targeted Zoom meeting sessions.

Nevertheless, a high level of participation characterised the early synchronous sessions designed for the postgraduate programmes. As the facilitator, I chose to structure the opportunities within the synchronous sessions to allow for a range of participatory modes of engagement. Students also took charge of hosting interviews with each other or with the facilitator. They made presentations in multiple groups; they engaged in interactive sessions with supervisor-led initiatives or they watched appropriate videos upon which they commented. Many of the students initially drew on the pedagogy from the PhD course or the PG Dip programme to translate into their own university/school classrooms. The curriculum, therefore, came to embed a form of technological induction for those less familiar with the online modalities, and both students and staff supported each other in this shared learning. Students reported a welcomed reduction of costs and time spent trying to access the UKZN campus directly and physically as they could work from the comfort of their homes to engage with their postgraduate studies.

## Waning trends

However, over time, the curiosity factor waned as students came to acknowledge the higher levels of self-preparation that needed to be done in asynchronous mode in anticipation of participating in the synchronous sessions. Frequently, students were asked to engage with pre-session tasks, which required them to schedule their time to effect such assignments. Simply stated, the students were not prone to undertake this level of close monitoring of their pre-and during-class activities. Students reported that their work-life-home balances restricted them from a deeper engagement with course material and preparation for interactive sessions. Some students, such as those in the PGDipHE (Programme C), tended to experience the modules as far too invasive into their habituated practices of front-led university face-to-face pedagogy. These students wanted the lecturer (me) to provide them with the material to be learnt. The reading and learning resources had been made available on the Moodle website, but students simply did not seem to be able to find the time to draw on these resources. This was evidenced by the low level of downloading material provided on the Moodle website. Perhaps the presentation of activities within the Moodle learning management system could have been more interactive and user-focused. The curriculum expected that engagement with postgraduate studies required deeper discursive engagement with argumentative writing and conceptual constructions. This required students to read and critique the material placed on the website. The Moodle produced an opportunity to present entry-level resources to activate the postgraduate studies, but students failed to engage sufficiently with the material.

Postgraduate constructs are not bounded truths that can be neatly pre-packaged. The learning pedagogy itself had to be activated by the students. However, such degrees of autonomy had not yet been sufficiently developed within the student cohorts with whom I was working. As facilitators of Programme B, we concluded that the epistemic leap into higher-level postgraduate competence was relatively under-developed in spite of the easy access to online modalities on the island context (Mariaye & Samuel, 2021). My own competences in developing provocative interactive online learning material for PG studies that could be engaged asynchronously also needed to be refined. The scaffolding of sets of learning material resources shifting PG students into higher-order thinking should be a design feature within the online Moodle learner/teaching support material. However, I was disillusioned with designing such interactive online material when students were not even taking the minimum time to deal with the elementary material. Perhaps students who were academics themselves did not have adequate time to engage with their studies because they were inundated with keeping their own taught courses afloat.

### **Being there but not being here**

Participation in classroom pedagogies also came to be reinterpreted by students. It was customary for a formal register to be taken. Therefore students were conscious of being present in the opening session of the ERTL. But as the session progressed, they muted their microphones, switched off their video record and then often pedagogically tuned out. I refer to this strategy as '*being there* (technologically connected), *but not being here*' in the pedagogical moment (epistemologically connected). Frequently students claimed opportunistically a culture of excuses to reflect their growing "not being here" strategy: the electricity failed them; their line manager had just called them to a meeting; their students were calling them online or via telephone, and that they had to attend to personal urgencies within their homes and families. None of these reasons is invalid since the ERTL tended to become an arena where multiple roles were enacted simultaneously: worker, student, employer, manager, parent, and housekeeper.

As a teacher, I sometimes felt I was talking into the air. I was not sure that the muted blocks of participants on my screen were indeed interacting with what I was engaging. My strategies for interrupting my presentation modes with numerous calls for commentary or critique sometimes collapsed dismally. Like face-to-face pedagogies, consciously deliberative action was needed to ensure active learning participation. Students soon learnt that it was possible to feign participation in the online space. Such students participated reluctantly, anticipating the day when we would return to 'real-time pedagogy'.

An aside: many of the responses in an essay assignment given to Programme C students to reflect on the challenges and successes of higher education tended to be dominated by rural university practitioners suggesting that online pedagogies were an impossibility for their own students. They decried that unless connectivity and data bundles were readily made available to the rural undergraduate students, and unless all students were adequately provided with specialised online hardware, the new alternatives were a pipedream. Many did not reflect how they, as lecturers themselves, were under-prepared to make alternative pedagogical transitioning. Nor did they provide a critical analysis of the budget implications of either the institution or the government whom they saw as obliged to provide the resources.

This argument underscores Jansen's (2021) critique that unless we address the active resourcing (human, physical, financial, administrative and leadership resources) within historically-disadvantaged

institutions systemically, the future is likely to widen the gap between the already differentiated Higher Education system. On the one hand, there will be middle-class, more affluent institutions that embrace and run ahead with the potential of online pedagogies (and who have the resources to do so). On the other hand, the larger group of under-served universities will remain low-level teaching institutions struggling to cope with inadequate resources. The repeated power struggles and student protests at disadvantaged institutions will intensify, and the lack of decisive leadership within historically-underprivileged institutions, Jansen (2021) argues, will likely extend the gap between the successful elite universities and the 'failing institutions'. Similar arguments are presented by Wangenge-Ouma and Kupe (2022), who contend that the post-pandemic environment requires nuanced re-assessment, re-thinking and adapting innovative responses to ensure long-term resilience and sustainability of the higher education sector in developing countries.

### **The unintended consequences of ERTL and lessons learnt for prospective postgraduate curriculum**

The comparative reflection on the three programmes in the previous section has foregrounded the *learned passivity* that came to the surface within the switch to ERTL. While attempting to accommodate students in alternative formats of curriculum pedagogy, some students (Programme C; South African PGDipHE) were indicatively pushing for more conservative approaches to teaching and learning. In theory, they acknowledged the values of a student-centred pedagogical approach, but resisted alternative pedagogies for themselves in practice. They indirectly demonstrated a preference for 'front-led' sessions where teachers told students what to do. The transference onto the *teacher to teach* was evident in their expectations of wanting to be told as PG students how to write assignments and make introductory PowerPoint presentations, some of the skills which ought to have been part of their undergraduate or school training. They engaged rather superficially in their preparation for the online classroom. This more conservative passive choice of learning drew from heritages of their own under-preparedness in interactive pedagogies and/or their beliefs in the inappropriacy of technologically-driven alternatives.

However, another group of learners (Programme A; the South African PhD) had longer prior experiences of interactive learning pedagogies in their previous experiences of cohort models of doctoral supervision. These students were part of an institutional ethos where doctoral cohort programmes were a regular feature, including open public seminars attended by a range of academics and students who demonstrated their robust, public critique of (postgraduate) research. These

students embraced a re-imagined teaching and learning approach that drew on their prior interactive and communal learning experiences. It seems that foundational values about the critique and dispositions towards critical pedagogical engagement sustained the transition into alternative online pedagogies. Working outside their comfort zone was perhaps more easily embraced. They were able to draw on the stretch into a growth zone (Boler and Zeblyas, 2003).

Exposure to a technologically-rich environment did not necessarily yield a productive, interactive pedagogy during the ERTL period for the students in Programme B (the Mauritian PhD). They were already familiar with the baseline technological literacy required to navigate their pedagogical involvement. However, the underlying philosophical rationale of their pedagogical involvement was driven primarily by their inherited deference to the role of the teacher/facilitator to provide them with 'right expected ways of thinking'. This could be considered a form of enculturated *learned passivity* despite the use of technological media to engage their participation. They adopted the technological mode but did not alter their theoretical pedagogical worldviews. The deeply-held conceptions of an authoritarian-led educational system also (like students in Programme C) tended to counteract the possibilities for creative and dialogical engagement. This underscores the "pedagogies of comfort" (Boler & Zemblyas, 2003) approach, which is reflected in the students' desire not to be disturbed or interrupted from their habituated pedagogical conventions. These are likely to be students who may profess a return to the old normal ways of pedagogies post the pandemic era. Even though students in Programme B (Mauritius PhD) had the technological experience in alternate modes of delivery, their choice for a safe cocoon overrode their practice of deep involvement in the alternate curriculum.

The above reflection is not to say that the facilitators merely capitulated to the ethos imposed onto the learning/teaching space by the students. The facilitators (myself included) chose to activate overt discourses with the students about the nature of the involvement of students as learners. (The disciplinary basis of the courses was - in most cases - after all higher education studies.) The students across all three programmes welcomed the opportunity to reflect on their own shaping of the discursive space of the online classroom. This also allowed them to reflect on their own UG students and learners' active or passive choices in their teaching /learning spaces. However, it appeared that the pragmatic realities of their students' personal working and lived contexts with their jobs, their workplaces, and their emotional, social and academic well-being were all in turmoil as a consequence of the alterations that the pandemic had activated. They cognitively understood the options but pragmatically resisted their adoption for their own actions.

Few students dropped out of the programmes because they were not able to cope with all the competing demands expected of postgraduate online education. The workload was simply overwhelming. Most students held on because they cognitively knew which directions they ought to undertake, but in practice enacted a restricted, expedient and passive level of involvement. Noticeably, students within Programme C (PGDipHE) yielded relatively under-developed assignments, not drawing sufficiently on the range of materials. The overall goals of achieving the diploma certification, which will enable a possible staff promotion (Programme C) or the doctorate title after a PhD graduation (Programme A and B) sustained their perseverance.

The institutions within which Programmes A and B operated were relatively stabilised by the levels of physical and technical support they received. By contrast, students in Programme C were constrained by institutional resourcing of the technological hardware and software made available to their learners (who were mainly from indigent contexts). Students reported that their leadership/management in the rural-based institution in this latter programme did not adequately address how to support their academic staff to enable them to move towards alternative models of pedagogy in an emergency context. Moreover, the strong preference for traditional front-led pedagogies in their institutions supported the view that ERTL of the lockdown period was only temporary. Their deep involvement in any alternative was therefore restricted. This scenario reinforces the theoretical model's argument presented earlier: to shift students out of their comfort zone, beyond fear and into a learning /growth zone requires conscious scaffolding and support to make the change. The journey towards an alternative requires both practical and theoretical resources. The need for systemic investment to activate the involvement of higher education teachers and students echoes critiques in the opening sections of this article about the conservative NCLB campaign. It appears that creative pedagogies and programmes were desired. However, insufficient theoretical consideration was given to what enabling and constraining systemic, psychological, social, cultural, economic and pedagogical factors prevented such from being achieved. Students seemingly lacked deep, conceptual and theoretical understanding of the opportunities that the alternative pedagogies offered.

So what have we learnt qualitatively from the ERTL short-term strategy for long-term prospects? First, the comparative reflection has shown that both staff and students might be indirectly and unintentionally complicit in sustaining the continued rituals of our past practices. Technical and operational levels of curriculum design, management and delivery might dominate in these spaces if left unchecked in the future. Whilst new technological modes have been utilised in all three

programmes, the more profound fundamental shifts towards disruptive pedagogy have not yet fully been realised. The mode of delivery itself is only a catalyst to activate deeper qualitative change. At the moment, the discourse of alternative, disruptive pedagogies hovers as an abstract possibility. Insufficient analysis is being undertaken about whose interests the old or the short-term curriculum strategies actually serve. The social justice agendas are offered only as symbolic rhetorical ideals.

There is a need to attend to the practical and theoretical resourcing needed to enable staff and students to move out of their comfort zone. This activates the second concern to tackle robustly what student and staff development is required to sustain the movement towards a new deeper pedagogical direction. Building the capacity of academic staff to re-imagine, critique and offer new pedagogical strategies requires an investment of both physical and theoretical resources. If such is not provided adequately, then the past will continue to linger on in our higher education institutions. This collective developmental agenda requires examination of the pedagogical goals, their theoretical underpinning and their pragmatic realisation in practice. Students' agendas of getting away with superficial engagement in higher education (postgraduate) pedagogy will dominate the space if curriculum designers do not provoke them into more critical, self-reflexive discourses. A low-level higher education scenario will be characterised by comfortable expediency and perfunctory pedagogical engagement.

Thirdly, a pedagogy of disruption requires staff to acknowledge the multi-layered nature of the higher education system. We live in complex times. We are embedded in a political, socio-cultural, historical, and institutional space fraught with tensions, paradoxes and possibilities. We ought to negotiate this critically and creatively. The *pedagogies of disruption* approach offer the option to re-imagine all participants within the space: firstly oneself, then managers, academics, other staff and students. This does not mean that pedagogies of disruption replace the need to care for students battling to make the journey to greater fulfilment. Disruption entails ensuring they are not offered lower forms of pedagogical possibilities. Disruption includes caring and activating the deeper potential of all involved in higher education.

The article has argued that *policy, curriculum theory and pedagogical initiatives* should be brought under scrutiny in a disruptive examination of the discourses that sustain our higher education environment. We are all under the microscope. A strategic self-reflection includes not just a deep critical engagement with the problematic habits and routines of others but equally how we personally sustain current hegemonic inequities and social injustices (sometimes unknowingly). Our focus is not

about defending the boundaries of our comfort zones, not about not leaving students behind, but perhaps about *how behind our students and our teachers are* in deep quality higher education. The future is disruption.

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