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Address to the guests and staff of the NWU at the annual Teaching-Learning Conference
Title: Cresting the Wave: the impact of Covid-19 and academics' professional development at NWU

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Abstract:

This paper considers the impact of Covid-19 in interrupting understandings of normalcy in relation to teaching and learning practices and approaches adopted by the University in the context of Covid-19. The extent to which selected practices have disrupted teaching-learning are considered, in ways that require reflection and change in relation to the (present as well as potential) affordances of technology. Analogies are utilised as a means of understanding differences between orbital and progressive waves of thinking about teaching-learning beyond the contingency mode of the Covid19 period, and the implications thereof for academics as university teachers.

Welcome Note:

Good morning and welcome to our delegates attending this second day of the Conference focussing as it does on academics and university teachers. Thank you in advance to our speakers as well as the support team coordinated by CTL for the energy and efforts made with the programme. We look forward to the engagements and deliberations

1. Introduction: understanding waves

When listening to me this morning I would be grateful if you could retain in your consciousness the images of waves on the sea, moving towards, and breaking on, a shore. The analogy of the wave is not arbitrary because you will all know that the discourse surrounding Covid-19 has been one which has been preoccupied with the wave: first, second and third waves with crests, troughs and dissipation. In a definition I have borrowed from the *Water Encyclopedia:* (Lehr et al. 2005) a wave is considered "a cohesive force" characterised by "capillarity". "Capillarity holds the water molecules of the ocean surface together, allowing fish and objects to be supported. Capillarity is the initial restoring force for any body of water". In terms of Covid-19 and society, capillarity is our cohesiveness as a learning community we term the University, in the context of waves associated with the virus. In pre-Covid-19 times the kind of winds that blew across our sector were those associated, for example, with social developments (Apartheid, its demise and the rise of the democratic era, the rise of feminism and the decline of imperialism in its colonial forms), or economic developments (for example, the demise of socialism and the onset neoliberal capitalism - see Baatjes, 2005 on this theme). These winds have been dramatic disruptions and are for the most part able to be traced, historically across decades of social or scholarly development and may thus be characterised as "capillary waves" forming initially as ripples and gathering momentum before dissipating gently on the beach. Covid-19 is something akin to a quake, creating additional pressures beneath the water to exacerbate certain challenges on the surface, whilst seeming to offer innovative approaches or solutions, to others. In this talk I focus on the relationship between teaching, contact and technology in the context of Covid-19, to explore some of the implications for us from a professional development of academic staff perspective. At present, and in the context specifically of Covid-19, this focus remains under-explored and in a recent survey about Covid-19 impact on education, by 31 higher education institutions (Bergan et al. 2021), all but two of the chapter contributions focussed on the "what we did to get through Covid-19", or what we should do afterwards, rather than on reflection concerning "what worked well" and why. This suggests that globally our sector is still very much concerned with immediate contingency responsiveness, whilst increasingly the need is felt for critical and scholarly reflection on the quality of such responsiveness, in educational terms.

Winds and gravity, what occurs above as well as below, give rise to progressive and orbital movements in waves. But even if the visual images of waves suggest progression in a direction, this itself is illusory: the water does not actually move that much because the water remains cohesive from crest to crest. The orbital nature of waves is not evident to the eye, but occurs instead within the motion of water associated with waves. Ask yourself in this analogy what represents the shoreline in terms of educational experience with Covid-19 (i.e. the breaking points)? In education terms are our coastlines those limitations against which waves crash or shores on which they dissipate? Issues like quality, performance and relevance? Access, sustainability and social inequality? Typically the steeper the incline of the land leading to shore, and the stronger the wind, the more velocity a wave will gather as it rushes towards its breaking point. The natural inclination of wave capillarity is stasis; a level and flat body of water, but crucially, progress or movement comes with disruption.

2. Covid-19 as progressive and orbital waves: society and higher education

In the same way that understanding the discourse of the wave in relation to the pre-Covid-19-normal and the new normal, any nostalgia for a return to the old normal should be met with careful reflection and scepticism. In relation to the old normal, Solnit reminds us that "ordinary life before the pandemic was already a catastrophe of desperation and exclusion for too many human beings, an environmental and climate catastrophe, an obscenity of inequality" (Solnit, 2020). Pre-Covid-19 was also the age of academic mobility in the form of the international conference circuit in exotic locations, the mobility of student and staff exchange, all of which disappeared in 2020 and 2021 and which frankly was costly in terms of the carbon footprint. Yet in the post-mobility international period, internationalisation remains just as important if not more so, because of the need to create partnerships to address many of the world's still pressing challenges. What has also been observed in relation to a nostalgia for the old-normal is the wish, expressed by parents and funders, for a return to large group teaching, even when, just like those wild conference circuits of yore, the cost and the consequences of such, outweigh several perceived benefits. Thus we can see in the Covid1-9 wave behaviour that orbital (ie circular) motions exist to some degree in tension with the progressive directions taken before Covid.

Other social issues such as gross inequality and current still high unemployment place human existence still in state of precarity, even if the availability of online education taps into a deep desire for "more flexible modes of learning and [increased] access for long marginalised groups" (Munck 2021, 33). This educational promise is important to reflect upon now because despite the negative impact of Covid-19, The Economist (2020), for example, has predicted that learned behaviours which have proved more effective during the Covid-19 period, are not likely to be relinquished easily. What to retain, and what to relinquish is thus both an educational and social opportunity for the university.

If we extrapolate from that claim, to the world of higher education, we see this same phenomena in relation to online learning in which many academics have not only become adept in terms of managing online learning, but also reluctant to return to contact teaching in general, and large group lectures, in particular. Thus for the successes of managing the transition during a period of crisis to online teaching and learning (Regerhr & McCahan 2020), a darker side is evident. Not all newly learned behaviours are positive in student academic life either: even if NWU has been successful (note the StuDocu World University Ranking 2021 in which NWU was ranked by students as top in SA alongside UJ) in providing learning programmes online, reluctance among students to engage with online learning material, at their own pace and within their own control, has also been observed. And as noted earlier, reluctance of academics to return to in-person contact with students is similarly evident. Added together and it becomes clear these are two sides (academics and students) of the same coin (contact), but with distinct differences and one compelling similarity. What is held in common between the two sides of this coin, is contact: but it is not the contact which we had before Covid-19. I would like to consider how might we define that contact in education terms in the pre-Covid-19 period, so as to understand the complexity of the contact needed from a professional development perspective, going forward. This investment is also not an investment necessarily in a return to the old-normal in terms of contact, but may have implications for the development of academic's teaching-learning competencies and skills going forward. It is worthwhile then, problemitising contact in light of the old as well as the new normal.

3. The old-normal (orbital) and new-normal (progressive) massified classrooms during Covid-19

First, is that the notion of pre-Covid-19, contact, within a massified education system, is illusory and problematic both in terms of teachers' experience of massification and also student academic performance as well as experience arising from Coivid-19. Massification in the context of the classroom, is also considered a challenge

in the scholarship of teaching and learning the world over (consider, for example, the work done by David Pedder on large group teaching-learning since the 1990s). For higher education institutions massification has infrastructural, physical and experiential components: Huge lecture venues were built over the last twenty years across South Africa at the cost of millions, and lecturers have been engaged with group sizes easily exceeding what could reasonably be managed in terms of achieving contact with students to the extent that learning could be guided, rather than managed, facilitated rather than simply transmitted. Thus the infrastructural massification of university classrooms, replicated the overcrowding of schools and conformed ironically to the prescripts of neoliberalism (in which education is a commodity to mass produced and mass-consumed- see Vally, 2007 on this theme), rather than to any notion of education as prized in relation to its relevance, accessibility and quality. In this context, the majority of children did not, and could not have received the attention needed to succeed at school with variables at play like the quality of teachers, teacher-training, poverty and class inequality, syllabi written and taught in only two of the country's 12 languages, literacy and numeracy seeming to improve annually, but resulting still in mass illiteracy and declining participation of learners in the sciences and mathematics (CHE, 2013). Gathered up together these are now as a swell on the ocean of society; amplified, and not reduced, in the pre-Covid-19 mass lecture theatre in which the same challenges reveal themselves in the online modality (see Howie for a discussion on literacy levels and Covid-19 in Shoba, 2021).

How thus to enable access whilst simultaneously guaranteeing engagement is the challenge. Envisioning the University as a community-based and community centred resource depends on the extent to which access to technology, knowledge and academics can not only be made possible, but also transformative (aspects of these possibilities are explored insightfully by Tella & Motala, 2021). At best we have been able "'keep things afloat", but this in itself is not enough momentum to carry us forward as a sector in terms of better teaching and more inclusive and decolonised curricula. In the new-normal, the massified classroom has not disappeared. It has rather been re-engineered using technology in two different modalities: the first is the mass-zoom classroom in which online teaching and learning can occur for groups in excess of what any lecture theatre can hold, whilst the second is an asynchronous and pre-recorded lecture available anywhere, anytime to the students to view and listen to. While the sector focused previously on erecting buildings pre-Covid-19, Covid-19 technological affordances had not been planned for, or experienced (with the exception of the distance education modality) on such a wide scale, and unsurprisingly both the old-normal and new-normal approaches to large groups have remained essentially teacher-focussed, in which the transmission mode of teaching was and is, the 'fall-back' position even though transmission teaching has been widely discredited, in favour of communication, collaborative and cooperative teaching learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). Nevertheless, we have excellent and recent examples of the successful uses of technology as shown at NWU in the Education, Health Sciences and Law Faculty excursions (a funded project of the University Capacity Development Grant) for highly interactive and effective small group learning within the larger group in a way that was simply not possible, as effectively, in the old-normal of staggered lecture venues and fixed furnishings. It is important here to recognise that it is not class size in itself, that is problematic, but rather the pedagogies adopted by the teacher where class size becomes the 'excuse' for transmission pedagogy. This vulnerability presences the need for intensified professional development as discussed in sections to follow.

4. The pedagogic proposition afforded by technology: the quality and evidence of engagement

The pedagogic implication for academic professional development is not necessarily a technology proposition in the first instance, in relation to improving the quality of teaching *per se,* as much as it is concerned with creating the possibility for engagement, between teacher and students and between students and each other: attentive engagement, and the pedagogies that enable it, become most prized. Indeed, if considered from an education perspective, the critical success factors enabling the Education, Health and Law excursions to be successful teaching-learning experiences for students and staff, involved design of the teaching-learning activities in ways that the education technology could best support a variety of engagements: (break-away virtual small groups, real-time chat-recording, group notes using perhaps google-docs). Access to technology (in the form of design) for students and access to technical support (for the academic staff so as to enable them to interact and also monitoring teaching learning engagement) thus go hand in hand. That there are definite advantages over in-person teaching in lectures, from a student experience and learning perspective, is without a doubt, but creating opportunities for a variety engagements, and then being able to monitor these, remains a challenge.

A key question at this moment, and specifically in relation to technology and academic professional development, to ask and answer is to what extent can educational technology better enable engaged attention from the academic and better engagement between students, as we attempt to move forward with Covid-19, rather than move beyond it. Pre-Covid-19 academic professional development attended to enhancing the performance of the academic as someone able and adept enough to manage the learning of hundreds of young adult learners not, for the most part at the reading age adequate to either absorb, let alone understand the complexities of curricular content. Teaching in these quantities has always been underpinned with concerns about the quality of learning (Pedder, 2006) and the pedagogy used by teachers to ensure engagement.

In pre-Covid 19, the way in which we have addressed the need for professional development is in relation to the complexities of managing large groups, but what if technology could be tailored not only in terms of enhancing the capacity of the academic to hold the attention of multitudes whilst being able to monitor engagement between students through increasingly nuanced learner and learning analytics. The scholarship concerning large group pedagogy reflects this: the challenge with large group teaching-learning has been dominated over the last 30 years by research concerning how to mitigate the risks of students becoming disaffected, disengaged and lost the mass-lecture theatre. What is also revealing is the extent to which the uses of education technology, as part of academic professional development, have been motivated or promoted by the idea that technology assists the academic to achieve meaningful contact with students in the context of massified education. If true, this would address the most persistent complaints from both sides of the 'contact coin': from students about academics that are remote and inaccessible; from academics about students being disengaged and expected to be "spoon-fed". Unthinking reversion to the old-normal is an orbital wave movement to an educational approach, that even if it appears progressive thanks to the application of technology, is and was problematic.

And so like the wave which appears to have an inevitable forward moving momentum, with its swell and its cresting, there is also an uncomfortable possibility: that we revert to the comforts of the old normal without taking stock in social, economic as well as educational terms, of the catastrophic nature of the old normal, only to find that the body of water has not moved, and instead orbits to reproduce the systemic inequalities which remain unaddressed in the aftermaths of the initial waves of Covid-19. This is not the minor concern only for educationists, for as Solnit (2020) notes "Those who benefit most from the shattered status quo are often more focused on preserving or re-establishing it" a fact borne out in South African universities as shown by Jansen (2017). Universities can repair social inequality by contributing research and graduates to the economy, who in the work they find, or the work they create, can address inequality. This allows us to understand better the link between society and education. There is needed now a fundamental shift from "what I teach" to "how I teach what" and that is the focus on the professional development of academic on the one hand, and the dedicated educational technology support, on the other hand. Put simply, Covid-19 has galvanised progressive as well orbital practices and perspectives, and the need for a dedicated scholarship of teaching and learning on how to take advantage of the progressive momentum, through the pedagogic examples we have seen develop over these last two years, is urgent unless we are comfortable with disappearing beneath, rather than cresting the wave of change as NWU.

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