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Navigating learning realms in a time of COVID-19

B. Moolman and J. Carlse



As lecturers, we have heard and participated in many conversations about teaching online in the current environment of the pandemic of COVID-19. As lecturers we are having the conversations, attending webinars and designing lesson plans in preparation to teach online. Teaching online can only be 'successful' if we have students who are ready to learn online, yet what does it mean to learn online now during a global pandemic? We are wondering if the students will be able to access – a virtual classroom, access in the broad sense of the word, technological access, such as bandwidth, data, internet connection as well as social access in terms of space (living arrangements), time (care work and home responsibilities) and psycho-emotional readiness for this huge shift (in many circumstances).

What does it mean to learn in a time of a global pandemic? Learning is a cognitive, social and psycho-emotional process through which we are stimulated to think, create, imagine, analyse and to believe. Learning (usually defined as academic) is best facilitated through a nurturing and enabling environment that is under 'normal' circumstances provided primarily through the educational institutions such as schools and universities. We know that the educational environment, in this case the university is not separate from the broader society but most days we can go about 'our business' without much 'interference' from society. As a university we can and we do acknowledge that the university is shaped and influenced by society but it does not necessarily fundamentally change how we go about doing what we do. Or it hasn't, until now.

The COVID-19 pandemic is effecting and affecting the primary function (or at least one of the primary functions) of the university, not the provision of education as a commodity but rather the enabling of learning. Notwithstanding that students 'under normal circumstances' engage with an on-going socio-economic environment of systemic inequalities that impact their educational experience and increasingly, students' mental health. Navigating difficult socio-economic, educational terrain is not necessarily new to student. Students are resilient. Yet, as educational institutions we have to ask ourselves – what is our capacity to enable learning? And what constitutes a 'readiness' to learn for students? What does it mean to learn within, firstly a highly anxious social climate of COVID-19, secondly, within a virtual community (online) and within our homes (sphere of the personal and intimate)?

A highly pressured social environment (including lockdown protocols) creates different learning challenges and opportunities, often depending on whether our individual, family and/or community is in, or has been in quarantine or contracted the virus; and whether we are able to sustain the basic quality of life necessary to survive the pandemic (do we have enough food, do we have money to buy food...for multiple lockdown periods?, do we have health protections? will we or/and our family members be employed at the end of the month and in the coming months?). For as long as the global pandemic of COVID-19 is with us, these challenges will persist and possibly intensify.

Entering the virtual online learning space – in a time that feels like there is limited room for negotiation – how do students navigate a technological environment, where learning is dependent on knowing and navigating tabs, files, folders, chats, data, a stable internet connection, etc. – it feels like there is little to no choice for students (as learners). Yet I am certain that some students will thrive but there might be many more who don't. Remote teaching and learning is not enabled only through the provision of low-bandwidth options, delivery of laptops, ensuring access to the online environment – this moment that we embark on remote teaching and learning is also about cultivating a nurturing and enabling learning environment – some of which is beyond the scope of technology.

Our homes are often communal living spaces that hold the daily life experiences of family members and house-mates. It is in most instances a shared space of anxieties, fear, uncertainties, confusion, joy and excitement. So how do we integrate the home environment as a primary space for [academic] learning in a country of persistent, systemic inequalities? Family members might be so far removed from university contexts and institutionalized learning or might never have had access to this form of education and hence feels totally alienated and unable to support their children. Our homes and families can be comforting, our support can be immediate but it can also be an unfamiliar, anxiety-provoking space that students are unsupported, ridiculed and humiliated. It might be a noisy space (as mine is now as I write this) or a quiet space or a combination. – so how do students adapt as learners to their homes, in many ways their first learning spaces, where they took their first steps and where they spoke their first words – can home become (again), a comforting, nurturing and enabling learning space? But what happens if it is not? Who is liable for the students learning? And if at least 2 of these 3 elements (pressured social environment, a challenging virtual space, and uncertain home spaces) are beyond students' control, can students be 'ready' to learn?

As we approach this new moment in student learning (actually new learnings for all of us, not only students), our connectedness (and relationships) with students becomes more important – as teachers we cannot afford to 'hide behind' an obscure institutional culture. Cultivating solidarities across spaces, and ideologies, histories, class, race, gender, sexuality, etc. is a necessity, in order to enable learning as one of the primary functions of the university.

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Mmamoshedi Mothibe April 21, 2020 at 2:34 pm - Reply
I find this quite challenging, in that it provokes thinking deeper than just ensuring that online teaching material reaches students. We are currently focussed on making sure that our students receive the online material that we will upload for them on various platforms, and yet that is no guarantee that learning will actually happen, or happen to the extent that the outcomes will be achieved. Yes it calls for more engagement.

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