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Pedagogy of care in online teaching and learning environments at tertiary institutions through the eyes of Freire

Abstract

Making the most of online or hybrid teaching platforms is essential to making sure that, in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), higher education settings in developing universities and places are not left behind. While a number of the technological platforms adopted during the Covid-19 lockdown have the potential to reach more kids, they have also overloaded educators and pupils. Therefore, it seems ironic that the same technology that makes it possible for higher education to offer online courses also frequently impedes student progress and places restrictions on the pedagogy of teachers. Regardless of format, the teaching and learning encounter should not come at the expense of caring for the actual student in the ever-changing hybrid teaching model that most tertiary institutions have since adopted. Therefore, the interest of this article is on how 'care pedagogies' might improve online teaching and learning at developing universities. In this sense, the role of university teachers should be reflected not only by the number of students engaged in class content, but also by the embodied cultural capital that students bring to online, face-to-face and hybrid learning spaces.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, developing universities, engagement, pedagogies of care, social capital, teaching and learning, technology

1. Introduction

Working in educational environments where substantial socioeconomic disparities exist and flourish necessitates the reduction of numerous inequities as a fundamental component of care pedagogies in order to transform our society (Fataar & Norodien-Fataar, 2021). This was seen more lively during the Covid-19 pandemic period, where loss and inequality was obvious to see (Pietersen, Langeveldt & Van Wyk, 2023; Yan & Fan, 2022). Scholars writing on the topics of educational institutions, curriculum and ICT posits that's, "in South Africa, the 2020/2021 academic calendar has begun amid the pandemic, as educational institutions were confronted with the urgent need to improve their



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modes of online curriculums and course navigation, online examinations, increase student inclusion for remote learning, and strengthen their capacity for ICT solutions in the time of crises” (Badaru & Adu, 2022: 67).

This crisis in online teaching and learning platforms has been on the rise and has, to some extent, helped us to understand to what extent online engagement between the university teacher and student leads to quality impact (Pietersen, 2022), particularly towards a positive caring reality that can be understood as complex or not so complex (La Fleur & Dlamini, 2022). This is why this paper contributes to the need to frame care pedagogies within an online blended teaching and learning environment in order to address the quality and impactful engagement, or lack thereof, between lecturer and student – a relationship that is so often ignored within an online context (Lucas & Vicente, 2022). This is important, because it is so critical that the issues of inequality that may exist in a post-pandemic environment are addressed (Neuwirth, Jovi & Mukherji, 2021).

Given that online higher education teaching and learning are mainly ‘faceless’ (Fouche & Andrews, 2022), this article contends that the responsibility to offer an online democratic space of care is limited and is largely left at the door of the lecturer and teacher in that space, but should rather be institutionalised (Pietersen, 2022). If not, the question may be asked if this responsibility is adequately discharged by parties involved, and to what degree this plays out in these educational spaces. In asking such questions, social class, by implication, comes into play because, firstly, the huge impact of social class in online teaching and learning is brought to bear (Czerniewicz *et al.*, 2020). It does not seem that social classes are ever considered when engaging with students, other than university teachers being largely interested in achieving module/course outcomes (Mpungose & Khoza, 2022). Put differently, “the use of digital technologies such as LMS evokes students’ beliefs that are based on their unique experiences with the online environment (habitual perceptions); their social interactions with their society (social perceptions); and their formal perceptions that are based on researched facts (factual perceptions)” (Makumane, 2021).

Noddings (2006: 113) posits that this kind of socially connected awareness on the online platforms in the higher education space is difficult to “proximate ... under whose gaze I fall” if there is no deliberate position to create interactions and engagements. This includes university teachers being able to navigate online teaching and learning platforms, and not simply setting up ‘technological’ strategies to support students’ needs in the 4IR space only to ‘tick the box’ (Naidoo, 2020). This might have to happen in a stop-and-start manner, because continued evaluation might be taken into consideration to grow and develop in the teaching and learning process, for both students and university teachers (Pietersen, 2022). However, it might be difficult and end up being a burden to develop for the very same reason that the 4IR has necessitated this digital transformation for the way forward, in terms of flexible online teaching and learning at developing universities (Zawacki-Richter *et al.*, 2019: 27).

Max Weber (2017) places this kind of transformation on the ontological locality of caring – a liminal space that has ethical implications. This brings up the associated issues of wealth, power and prestige/status that are not a problem per se; rather, it creates a mismatch between the lecturer and the student on an online platform, which is presumed to happen when technology is something adopted by both parties in the 4IR (Chirinda, Ndlovu & Spangenberg, 2021). It is, therefore, crucial that it is never assumed that care takes place in the online higher education space that is impactful and speaks to helping the helpless when teaching and

learning happens on online platforms. This is what this research problematises, and there is real apprehension for opponents to this idea for various reasons. For example, Selwyn (2019: 16) surmises that "... as with digital technologies in general, digital data do not offer a neat technical fix to education dilemmas – no matter how compelling the output might be".

However, in a country like South Africa, to have access to data and technology, one needs to consider the large gaps between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' in a society (Makumbe, 2020). One might even go as far as separating people into the working (proletariat), middle (bourgeoisie), and upper classes to understand these difficult, but real complexities. Separation and differences cause much conflict to arise with the 'poor' fighting for equality for all (Pietersen, 2022), and the rich fighting to maintain their prestigious position within society as technology and online increases (Johnstone, 2022). This positions the relationship between 4IR, students, university teachers, and online teaching and learning unequally, and it brings to bear the founding fathers of the sociological conflict theory (Gredley, 2022). Put differently, the relationship between the lecturer and the student is important to frame around the lens of caring for the whole individual student in the online space, because making sure the needs of the person being cared for are satisfied is the definition of caring and the associated moral component of competence, however difficult it may seem (Feldman, 2020).

1.2 Conceptual framework

This article engages in an open form of critical enquiry, taking into account Freire's theory of the oppressed, as these give way to the extent to which university teachers are inclined or disinclined to engage with advances in technological teaching and learning on-line framed against a care pedagogy, not just because it may be complex, but because it is necessary (Stephens, Townsend & Dittmann, 2019). This is described by Freire (2018: 87), noting that "reflexion and action in close interaction are the necessary conditions for dialogical action, and if one of them is prevented, the word becomes an empty word, one that cannot denounce the world for denunciation is impossible without commitment to transform, and there is no transformation without action".

University teachers and students have a certain belief about the teaching and learning space that is not always experienced in the same way. For example, issues with the type of online teaching and learning platforms can be tricky, because they often can be tools of opportunity or create further challenges to advancing online teaching and learning for students (Dias *et al.*, 2020).

2. Literature review

2.1 University teachers and their students: impact of caring for students and their learning

A caring engagement with university teachers immediately in the online teaching and learning space may matter to some degree, but in many respects, this is ignored by many university teachers (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Also, the obliviousness of this kind of 'phantom' power may lead to directly influence a lot, if not all, of our online teaching and learning decisions negatively (Feldman, 2020: 12). How does this happen? Well, one of the most common complaints about online teaching and learning is the lack of empathy and understanding shown by

some university teachers towards their students. The online space can be a very isolating and lonely experience for some students, especially those who are introverted or who have personal issues that make it difficult for them to connect with others. In such situations, caring university teachers can make all the difference in the world, providing much-needed support and guidance to struggling students because it is socially just to do so (Pietersen, 2023).

Unfortunately, some university teachers do not seem to understand the importance of building a personal relationship with their students. They may focus solely on delivering their university modules without taking the time to check in with their students and find out how they are doing. This can create a feeling of detachment between students and their university teachers, leading to a breakdown in communication and a lack of motivation among students (Cristine *et al.*, 2022).

In addition, the lack of accountability in online teaching and learning can exacerbate the problem. Some university teachers might simply post lectures online and expect students to do the rest without any guidance or support. This approach to teaching can be demoralising for students, especially those who are struggling with the material. The lack of feedback and encouragement from university teachers can make it difficult for students to remain engaged and motivated (Hargreaves, 2021).

However, if these decisions to engage students are executed well, the use of 4IR technology in online higher education and the care for students may yield long-lasting positive results beyond the online classroom (Lambrechts, Sinha & Marwala, 2020). The question then becomes: what connection do university teachers have beyond clever technology to enhance teaching and learning to make this possible, in these on-line education spaces, to send the signal that caring is taking place?

2.2 Pedagogic literacy in digital technologies: student challenges.

Pedagogies of care require thorough acknowledgement and engagement by university teachers with students from diverse backgrounds, who may have access to technology, but are not well versed in this. How is this brought to the fore? Although some students may have access to the latest technology and are tech savvy, others may lack access or familiarity with digital platforms, particularly in developing countries or low-income communities. Therefore, it is essential for university teachers to acknowledge the challenges faced by such students, particularly in a digital environment where technologic literacy is vital (Williams *et al.*, 2022).

However, some university teachers ignore this reality, assuming that all students are familiar with technology or can quickly adapt to new digital platforms. This assumption is misguided, as it fails to consider the unique challenges faced by students from diverse backgrounds. As a result, students who lack technology skills or access may feel left out, isolated and frustrated, leading to a negative learning experience (Ferri, Grifoni & Guzzo, 2020).

Furthermore, students who struggle with technology may be at a disadvantage compared to their peers, particularly in a digital classroom. For example, they may have difficulty accessing online resources, participating in group discussions, or submitting assignments on time. University teachers who ignore the acknowledgement of these students can exacerbate the problem, leading to a lack of motivation and engagement among students (DeCoito & Estaiteyeh, 2022).

Therefore, it is crucial for university teachers to acknowledge and support students from diverse backgrounds who may be struggling with technology. This can be done by providing training or resources to help them improve their skills in digital literacy. University teachers can also use simple and user-friendly platforms and tools that are accessible to all students, regardless of their technical abilities (Coman *et al.*, 2020).

Therefore, a choice should be made by lecturers when it comes to exercising a duty of care online, to the students that they teach (Baker-Bell, 2020). This is to say that flourishing students do well when they are related in various ways by technology, which comes about through the instruction, but more so when the whole person is developed. However, this can only be achieved by students, content and university teachers engaging with one another in order to move beyond standardised education where great technology is offered in online spaces (Robinson, Al-Freih & Kilgore, 2020), but no differentiation is given, and expanding opportunities and increasing student engagement is ignored; thus, pedagogy of care for the student's whole being is ignored (Godsell, 2022). This seems to be highlighted by the recent pandemic and still lurks in many universities' online classrooms. This can be expressed as follows, "the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have exacerbated these inequalities and disproportionately impacted students of colour. While such inequalities do find a way of filtering into the classroom, in an on-line space they tend to be magnified, thereby hindering learning outcomes and problematising their academic identities" (Sequeira & Dacey, 2020).

Inequalities that shape and add character to students' lives are the differences which direct university teachers' attitude towards students in a negative way. This leads to not delivering a quality student experience on the online teaching and learning platform (Floyd *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, the question to university teachers becomes: how do they dissipate this duty of care? Put differently, university teachers have a responsibility of care, and if they do care, what are their areas of care that they may need to work through on the online platform in order not to fail students (Neuwirth, Jovi & Mukherji, 2021).

This kind of care can be located in two factors, namely the agency (student) and responsibility (lecturer). This may be summarised as follows in educational matters, "what caring democracy equalises, then, are not acts of caregiving, but responsibilities for care, and as a prerequisite, the discussions about how those responsibilities are being allocated ... and assuring that everyone can participate in those allocations of care as completely as possible" (Tronto, 2010: 6). Having considered what Tronto advances, opponents of acknowledging habitus and doing something about it in the education space to give greater care to students and not just zoom in on technology, can be ascribed to Charles Taylor's thesis in *Politics of Recognition, which* ventures sublimely on how social recognition has authenticity in human identity. He exclaims that, "our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining, demeaning, or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being" (Taylor, 2021).

This research would agree with Taylor's recognition thesis. His theory extends to a multicultural society where all are equal and tolerant of one another and have all the access to resources to thrive. Where this research disagrees with Taylor is that in the education space, and particularly in the online higher education space, not all things are equal because of our colonial past (Maigari, 2021). Not all students are able to access higher education institutions;

not many students have access to technology; not many university teachers are open to engagement on these issues, etc. At many higher education institutions, most students are first-generation students, with 61% of them have been the first individuals in their family to attend a university, 7,05% have a mother that has already attended university; 3,32% a father; and 19,92% have had either a brother or sister attend a university before them (DHET, 2020). These students, who have little or no family collegiate history, may enter the university with limited knowledge about the jargon, traditions, and patterns of expected behaviour, all factors that are embedded inequalities and speak to a lack of resources and access that move beyond the narrative of equal distribution (Gallo, 2020). However, Taylor's thesis implies that multicultural recognition may need 'redistribution', particularly in education, because higher education is still largely for the advantaged, as indicated by the challenges in student access to technology, access to resources, and more. Therefore, if a pedagogy of care is set against these issues, conditions may become far more tolerant and a space to create students who will be successful is inevitable (Miller, 2022).

2.3 Toward a pedagogy of care to engage teaching and learning stakeholders

Measures to engage teaching and learning stakeholders would be in line with the intention of what good education should be in the 4IR. Therefore, it is important for developing universities to take advantage of this 'action-reflexion process' (Pietersen, 2022). This process lays bare how students participate positively and actively in an online learning process, even on virtual platforms, where the stories of students and who they are as persons from different backgrounds lend richness to the teaching and learning process (Longo, 2020). This ultimately allows all stakeholders in the teaching and learning process to strengthen and modify these practices (Davids & Waghid, 2018). This is where Freire's theory may help to support a pedagogy of care, because he is deeply aware of habitus when it comes to education, and particularly religious education. This is an approach that encourages a 'reflective process' where both university teachers and students from university departments, such as developing universities, are able to value the cultural and historical sources of individuals and include them in curriculum formations and teaching and learning processes (Davids & Waghid, 2018).

2.4 Equality and the pedagogy of care in online teaching and learning

The adoption of technological platforms should be used to benefit the education system at a greater level to understand and influence the student, using a 'pedagogy of care' approach (Haleem *et al.*, 2022). The job of a good teacher or lecturer should be reflected not only by how much students engage with class content, but also in the embodied cultural capital that students bring to online, face-to-face, and hybrid learning spaces. This requires that developing universities carefully manage this online teaching and learning space from an equity perspective, just to ensure that it does not result in increased differences in the social composition, ultimately circumventing the country's high inequality status (Langeveldt, Pietersen & Van Wyk, 2023). Tronto (2010: 32) posits, to this end, that the process "starts from the premise that everything exists in relation to other things ... and assumes that people, other beings, and the environment are interdependent". This includes providing student with opportunities to perform well by giving active feedback online, and it addresses the notion that students can contribute to active learning (Gqokonqana, Olarewaju & Cloete, 2022). It speaks to the fact that there exists some kind of level of care and engagement beyond just performing on the advanced online technological platforms as offered (Makina, 2022).

Online teaching and learning can be understood insofar as university teachers caring for students can be viewed as proportional. This is to say that the challenge academic staff face in online educational spaces can almost be interpreted as 'half-way' caring (Simon, 2012). This means that university teachers are always only interested in the descriptive course input and output in these teaching and learning spaces. In other words, instead of viewing the frequency and percentages of how students came to various conclusions on course material, and how they interact with materials on on-line teaching and learning platforms, university teachers should inspire motivation in students in these spaces, the kind of motivation that maintains engagement and participation, which includes conscious (what we see) and unconscious (what we hear and feel) behaviour (Bekele, 2010). Deliberate caring on the part of university teachers to maintain student success and forward momentum in the teaching and learning is a process and a necessary one (Pietersen, 2022).

3. Conclusions

In this article, the research explored how university teachers should move towards affecting a positive change in the lives of students and instil traits in them that will significantly pave a path in their lives, including creating an engaging online technological (4IR) space to be successful and not allow it to deliberately undercut attempts to reach every student by not caring for them holistically as persons (Oke & Fernandes, 2020). For developing universities to become a transformative, socially just environment in the online technological space where care pedagogies are disposed (Ahmed *et al.*, 2021), university teachers must consider the South African society and how it has developed and progressed due to the number of increased graduates in South Africa since the abolishment of apartheid. The 4IR should be seen as a tool to potentially be a landscape, where intentions are not docile and self-gratifying, without interrupting such spaces, keeping in mind the pedagogy of care and how pedagogy of social capital and other issues are brought to bear (Maringe & Chiramba, 2022). Therefore, creating a caring online learning and teaching space is non-negotiable. Engagement in care goes beyond just tapping into the one-dimensional technological advances required in a 4IR higher education institutional space, but develops the whole person.

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