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It gives me anxiety! Black Academics' experiences of teaching large classes during the Covid–19 pandemic in a South African university

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt the teaching and learning in international higher education. Those of us in the global South have particularly been hard hit, struggling to balance working/functioning economies, a struggling healthcare system, education, commerce, trade, transport, and the community spread of what was later found to be a very infectious disease (Porter et al., 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Shamasunder et al., 2020). In this paper, we explored and theorised the experiences of academics who taught large classes at a research-intensive university in South Africa. We purposely recruited and interviewed eight academics for this case study. We drew on Chela Sandoval's (2013) philosophical notion of "decolonial love" to theorise what an inclusive, democratic and ubuntu-orientated teaching of large classes could look like for us in the global South, beyond the pandemic. The findings revealed that academics continue to be frustrated/challenged/made anxious with teaching large classes due to inadequate infrastructure (digital), lack of resources, and general unpreparedness with the virtual/online teaching and learning. The findings also revealed that large classes were problematic as academics struggled to provide critical engagements and discussions during the hard Covid-19 lockdown, and with some lamenting the frustrations of "teaching to themselves" due to the lack of student engagement. We conclude this paper by proposing a decolonial love approach to the online teaching and learning of large classes, underpinned by the ethics of care, compassion and understanding in curriculum imaginations.

Keywords: *decolonial love, higher education, large classes, massification, teaching and learning*

1. Introduction

The global community continues to struggle to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, with significant parts of the global South still lagging behind in vaccination rates, vaccine creation, trademark patents, and other epidemiological innovations compared to our counterparts in the global North (Aboagye, Yawson & Appiah, 2021; Cooper, Van Rooyen & Wiysonge, 2021; Loembé & Nkengasong, 2021). This structural inequality reflects what decolonial scholars

refer to as the coloniality (Quijano, 2007); that is, the deeply entrenched and institutionalised epistemic and ontological inequality in our global village. This coloniality reflects the underside of western modernity in its attempt at socially constructing the "global cosmopolitan village" whose very foundations are premised on inequality, underdevelopment, epistemic/ontological racism, cognitive harm, brutal and neoliberal forms of capitalist accumulations, ownership, control and management. One of the global sectors that continue to be affected by the pandemic is the field of education, with many students and academics struggling to make sense of what has later been called a "pandemic teaching" and its "COVID curriculum" (Littlejohn, 2022; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Toquero, 2020). While a significant amount of literature that focuses on teaching and learning during this pandemic has emerged (see Pham & Ho, 2020; Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2021; Aboagye et al., 2021; Means & Neisler, 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021), it largely misses Black academics' narratives on grappling and engaging with online teaching and learning in large classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, we aim to explore and theorise the experiences of academics who taught large classes in a research-intensive university and to propose a decolonial love approach to the online teaching and learning of large classes.

2.   Teaching large classes

There is little consensus as to what constitutes a large class. Some scholars define a large class based on numerical terms (Hornsby et al., 2013; Jennifer, 2014), while other scholars define a large class based on environmental factors like classroom size or pedagogical needs (Chikoko, 2015; Allais, 2016). In this study, we define a large class as any class that has 150 or more students in one seating. This numerical threshold was taken from an average number of students per participant's class. In fact, some of the participants had classes as big as 600–1000 students per seating. All these numbers are because of massification in higher education. As higher education institutions continue to experience massification (see Mok, 2012), the struggle for academics to grapple with complex large classes continues, more so during online learning. In his 1973 seminal work, Trow describes massification as a massive enrolment increase in higher education. This trend has continued and accelerated in the last few decades, resulting in the rapid expansion of students' enrolment in higher education due to massive democratisation of institutions of higher learning (Mohamedbhai, 2011; Allais, 2016). In South Africa, the demand for higher education continues to be greater, as the state sees the sector as important in seeking to redress past injustices. As a result of the massive enrolment increase in higher education, its effects are felt well beyond the classroom to physical infrastructure, staffing, educational quality, graduate employability and academics having to deal with large classes. For Exeter et al. (2010), the teaching of large classes needs the same skills and commitment as when one is teaching smaller classes. These include the need to motivate students; to be systematic, organised and develop stimulating assessment tasks; and to use innovative ways like peer assessment in assessing students (Msiza, Zondi & Couch, 2020). These challenges have been exacerbated by the devastating impact of COVID-19 that has forced, and continues to force, many institutions of higher learning to switch from traditional face-to-face teaching and learning to virtual classrooms. This sudden transition has exposed socio-economic inequalities that have long existed within the higher education system. Prior to the pandemic, the South African higher education sector was already inundated with many challenges of transformation, access with success and enabling epistemic justice (Hlatshwayo, 2019).

The 2015–2016 national student protests demanded institutional reforms, changes in governance structures, sound funding mechanisms, and education relevant to contextual and societal needs (Mbembe, 2016). When the pandemic hit the South African shores, higher education institutions were made to choose between responsiveness and accessibility. We observe that higher education institutions chose responsiveness over accessibility. This was because academics and students were left with no choice but to continue with the business-as-usual approach to teaching and learning, except that this time, business was to happen online, regardless of the cost (Dube, 2020; Guangul *et al.*, 2020; Motala & Menon, 2020). Higher education became more interested in how best to respond to the pandemic, deliver course content, and conduct assessments online, ensuring that in the midst of all the chaos brought about by COVID-19, access to quality education remained a priority. Ndzinisa and Dlamini (2022) concludes that responsiveness in South African higher education came at the cost of accessibility, and this inevitably further entrenched the vicious cycle of epistemic injustice and inequity. This is because the majority of the South African students come from poor backgrounds that make it extremely difficult to truly participate in virtual classrooms without computers, reliable wireless connectivity, quiet spaces, and free time away from taking care of family members (Hodges *et al*., 2020). Lack of access to fast, affordable, and reliable internet connection hinders the process of online learning, especially for those living in rural as well as marginalised communities (Ndzinisa et al., 2022). Unequal access to digital capital creates a split of the "haves" and "have nots"; thus, aggravating epistemic injustice and digital inequity. In a society devoid of adequate infrastructure and equality, social justice and epistemic justice should be the cornerstone of any educational policy decision.

In all likelihood, COVID-19 had negative effects for all involved (university management, academics and students alike). Universities tried to save the academic year by switching to emergence remote teaching, regardless of its pitfalls within the South African context. This was made possible by the universities who tried to achieve epistemic justice to a largely underprivileged student population by providing data and laptops to facilitate a seamless transition to emergence remote teaching and learning (Motala & Menon, 2020). However, this shift was overnight and caught many institutions unprepared, with little or no room or time to plan a phased introduction. The scale and complexity of the process included familiarising staff and students with the tools of online teaching and learning, revising the academic calendar, revising course modules, developing appropriate online assessment tools and ensuring that the changes to academic programmes were approved by the relevant academic structures (Motala & Menon, 2020: 87-88). Furthermore, the success of this emerging remote teaching transition was not equal amongst South African higher education institutions. South African higher education system is largely a bifurcated system consisting of historically White universities that are more resourced and privileged, and historically Black universities characterised by paucity of resources. As a result, historically Black universities have been and are in definite need of more support than historically white institutions, owing to their historical legacies. These challenges within the system were blatantly exposed by the responses of each institution to the disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic (Badat, 2020). The pre-existing structural challenges that were already confronting the sector, together with the racialised inequality, institutional differentiation and fragmentation ensured that the response to the pandemic was largely skewed and tended to reflect the painful dichotomous reality between historically White and Black universities (Motala, Sayed & De Kock, 2021). Badat (2020) argues that historically White universities tended to cope and responded better to the pandemic due to their financial and infrastructural muscle than their historically Black

counterparts. Thus, this unplanned transition to emergence remote teaching meant to facilitate academic justice for all invariably left and/or excluded many of its intended beneficiaries.

Moving teaching and learning online enabled flexibility of teaching and learning anywhere, anytime, but the speed at which this move to online teaching and learning was expected to happen was abrupt. Hence, this transition process left many academics and students behind. For students, online learning had its own challenges like (a) a sense of isolation due to lack of interaction between peers (Moore, 2020); (b) difficulties with hands-on learning activities (Matoti et al., 2018); (c) academics' limited presence (Maringe, 2020); and (d) timely support (Trust & Whalen, 2020). A sudden move from traditional face to face learning to online resulted in a big shock to academics and students, regardless of whether these stakeholders were ready for it or not. For many academics and students, online learning was unsought for and therefore unplanned. They became unwilling participants in this abrupt transition from face-to-face settings to virtual classrooms. The current virtual classroom was the inevitable platform, academics and students had to figure out, in real-time, how to make the best of an unprecedented situation.

In a small class characterised by active learning, students' misunderstandings are revealed and given attention, whereas in a large class, it is difficult to monitor learners' gaps in knowledge (Ndzinisa et al., 2022). This is because, in a large class setting, learning is lecture centred, often resorting to traditional forms of teaching and learning, with minimal student engagement. The poor engagement and performance of students are exacerbated by the fact that, in many large class settings, students are usually heterogeneous in terms of language and aptitude, making it difficult for those who cannot express their opinions and raise their concerns in class (Maringe, 2020) This argument is further supported by a study conducted by (Matoti *et al*., 2018), which found that 60% of the students who participated in their study reported that the presence of many people in class deterred them from asking questions.

In a face-to-face class, interaction is often restricted to students on the front rows. In an online class, engagement and interaction is reserved for those with high self-confidence and the ability to engage. The sad reality is that not all students have that confidence to engage in front of many people. At the same time, academics are usually unable to pay adequate attention to all students; hence the material used or taught becomes easy for some students, but difficult for others (Matoti *et al*., 2018). As a result, students' opportunities to learn are lessened, and only a few good students improve their learning, while many average or weak ones make little progress and fall further behind.

Having briefly commented on the challenges of teaching and learning in large classes brought by the increasing massification of the higher education sector. The section that follows discusses the theoretical insights of this paper.

3. On decolonial love as an emancipatory ethic

Sandoval (2000) states that decolonial love refers to the kind of love that looks at, and demands, affirmation/recognition/respect of humanity in its totality, despite all our differences (see also Maluleka, 2021). For Sandoval (2013), Maldonado-Torres (2007), and Maluleka (2021), decolonial love is the ethical imperative that responds to coloniality, and epistemic and cognitive harm. Put differently, it is the much-needed oto-epistemic panacea to the prevailing structural challenges confronted in the global South. According to Ureña (2017), the relationship between love and decolonisation is a crucial one, in that it reminds us that the "revolutionary

possibility of love requires identifying and deconstructing historical alliances between love and reason and between benevolence and imperialism; otherwise, we collaborate with a violent legacy" (Davis, 2002: 146). Maluleka (2021) opines that decolonial love is fundamentally important in that it shapes/influences pedagogical choices for academics through recognising historical injustices, alienating pedagogical practices, and attempting to rethink what inclusive and democratic teaching could look like for our students. Overall, decolonial love "demands [of] lecturers and students to work towards a transformative future that transcends coloniality and its power matrix" (Maluleka, 2021: 84).

Decolonial love in its constitution is an ethical response to colonial and colonising Cartesian reasoning/rationality that seeks to separate the being (ontology) from the knowledge (epistemology), through the now famous assertion *cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am") (Le Grange, 2019). The "I" in the now famous western philosophical tradition symbolises the colonising, heterosexual White man who, because he is White and straight, has recognised/recognisable access to reason, culture, spirituality, theology, understanding and rationality. Those who are not men, or white or straight then fall into what Fanon (1963) and Santos (2007) call the zone of non-being. They are seen to lack culture, knowledge, and thought; and their lived experiences are characterised by mythologies and superstitions.

In the book, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Sandoval (2013) introduces what she calls "academic apartheid", to offer a critique of the segmented/differentiated and non-cumulative manner in which knowledge building has occurred in western epistemic traditions (Ureña, 2017: 87). Drawing on Barthes and Derrida, she aims to "[construct] an alternative and dissident globalisation in place of the neo-colonising forces of postmodernism" and attempts to map out for us, the common goals of those who have "developed separate terminologies for a theory and method of oppositional consciousness" (Sandoval, 2000: 3). In this paper, we draw on Sandoval's decolonial love to think through and reimagine what an inclusive, democratic and emancipatory pedagogy could look like for academics struggling to navigate and negotiate teaching and learning during/post the COVID-19 pandemic. We now turn to outlining the methodological decisions we made, and where we attempted to make an intervention.

4. Methodological decisions

In this paper, we explored and theorised the experiences of Black academics who teach large classes at a research-intensive university in the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. Studying Black academics allows us to understand their experiences, achievements, and challenges that they face as an underrepresented group at higher education institutions better. Therefore, researching Black academics can contribute to addressing historic and systemic inequities in South African higher education. The university has ±52 000 registered students. A higher percentage of the students are funded by the National Student Financial Scheme (NSFAS), which is a government student bursary targeted at those students from low-income households, where the average total combined household income is not more than R350 000,00 per annum (Matukane & Bronkhorst, 2017; Pillay, Bhorat & Asmal, 2021). Our selected methodological approach was a qualitative case study (Babey, 2013; Yin, 2019). Eight Black academics were purposely selected and took part in the study, from diverse discipline backgrounds such as Geography, Curriculum Studies, History, and English. We generated data through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The interview questions and focus-group discussions were open-ended to allow the academics to share their experiences of teaching large classes during the COVID-19

pandemic. Both interviews and focus groups were conducted on Zoom and Microsoft Teams, given the COVID-19 social distance restrictions, as well as the university ethical clearance regulations regarding all research conducted virtually.

The interviews and focus-group discussions were audio-taped with consent from the participants. Each interview session lasted for approximately 60 minutes. We then transcribed the interviews and analysed the findings thematically. This involved coding all the data to identify themes and patterns, and reviewing key themes (Clarke, Clarke, Rance, 2014). Each theme was analysed to gain an understanding of participants' experiences. These themes are presented in the next section. Each theme consists of a matrix of quotes that Leeds-Hurwitz (2019) refer to as "thick description" of academics' experiences. Before conducting this study, we applied for approval from the university's ethics committee. It should also be noted that for this research project, we did get the necessary gatekeeper permissions and informed consent before the study could commence, both from the university itself as well as the research participants. To ensure participants' anonymity we used pseudonyms to report the findings. In the following section we discuss the finding of this research paper;

5. On technology, frustrations and anxieties

Writing in a paper titled, "In search of the 'new normal': Reflections on teaching and learning during COVID-19 in a South African university", Motala and Menon (2020) argue that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in South African higher education is characterised by what they term as "business unusual"; that is, forging full steam ahead despite all the students/academics' wellbeing and the need to ensure that the university is better prepared for the digital curricula/teaching and learning/assessment. For the Black academics who took part in the study, there was a growing sense that the "business unusual" mentality socially constructed an environment where the university prioritised continuity and salvaging of the academic year over adequate academic preparedness or students' and academics' own well-being. There was lack of adequate infrastructure for this online teaching and learning.

> *The infrastructure … was a little limited compared to XXX where I am now. There was a shortage of resources, and the university was not well funded. We did not get professional support as young lecturers. As a result there were so many challenges … there are so many gaps that have not been filled. For example, many students have not been provided with laptops, or with enough data for proper learning. I cannot reach majority of my students that I want* (Zandi).

> *With the large numbers in class, we cannot have the synchronous class like we are doing right now because the university licence only allows 300 students. So, in my class, I have 600 students; meaning I cannot have a live class or live session with all my students. The most troubling thing about this scenario is that while teaching and learning continues with other students, most are left behind* (Rozina).

For Zandi and Rozina above, the infrastructural challenges during COVID teaching and learning had implications for student access and success at university. This is seen in how the lack of access to laptops, data provision, connectivity and others all affected the ability of students to have access to curricula and to participate successfully in the modules/courses/programmes. This not only made their jobs difficult in teaching and learning, but reproduced new forms of marginality in how some students were left behind.

One of the authors lamented the acceptance of this "new normal", and suggested the need to have a comprehensive and compassionate conception of teaching and learning that reject the "emergent assumption that students (and academic staff) will be able to cope and adjust to this new reality without due consideration as to whether they have access to a safe shelter, working computer/laptop, data, internet access, food, and other factors that greatly influence and shape learning" (Hlatshwayo, 2020: 134). For Kudzi below, online learning could potentially be beneficial to second- or third-year students who would have acculturated and adjusted to the demands of higher education, and would be able to navigate and negotiate their marginality (Vincent & Hlatshwayo, 2015). According to Kudzi, greater emphasis and focus should be on the first-year experience, as students largely come from township and rural areas, and lack proper access to electricity water/WIFI connectivity. He commented:

> *What I can say about online learning or online teaching maybe it would be sort of beneficial and easier to handle when you are working with second years, third years and fourth years. But when it comes to first year students who are coming from high school it could be a challenge, like the second years have been on campus, they have interacted with lecturers, they know how to go about the assignments and conduct themselves. When these kids are coming from high school could pose to be tricky … they have never seen a laptop, they have never had their personal piece. That technical expects to logon online or even if they from rural areas no connections and the network is bad. Those are challenges that as a lecturer you are beyond your control, how do you handle that?* (Kudzi)

Scholars such as Dube (2020), Lembani *et al.* (2020), and Oyedemi and Mogano (2018) concur and suggest that students from predominantly rural areas tend to struggle with online teaching and learning due to the peripheral nature of their geographical location, lack of digital/technical connectivity, and class marginality in their lives. For Dube (2020), this was compounded by students' educational and family backgrounds that created a complex lifeworld which rendered them unable to access/compete/ participate successfully in curricula. For academics and current study participants such as Nomsa, it was not only students who had difficulties with technology and other online learning management systems, but also she as the lecturer who struggled with technology, in terms of how to pedagogically use it for teaching and learning. She often relied on students to support her in her classes. What Nomsa was grappling with below, and Martins *et al.* (2021) found in their own research, was the sense that academics themselves continue to be "underprepared" for the online teaching and learning large classes,

> *I still now and then encounter some challenges especially with the use of technology. For example, in my discipline we teach language, so we normally use videos to engage students in discussions When I want to play a video to teach literature and short storis. I find that my inability to efficiently use technology compromises my teaching strategy because sometimes I will … fiddle with technology to find that I cannot play want I wanted to play. Sometimes my students will help me. I find that it is still a challenge for me to mauve across technology and to use technology efficiently … I still struggle here and there* – emphasis added (Nomsa).

What is perhaps most surprising and deeply concerning about teaching large classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, was the growing feeling(s) amongst academics that they were not only struggling with the large numbers in their (virtual) classrooms, but their increasing use of words like "anxiety", "overwhelming", "tiring", "boredom" and "cumbersome" to express their frustrations with teaching large classes. This indicates some growing alienation amongst

academics, who were feeling invisible, unsupported and alone in the online teaching of large classes. Knowles (2020), and to some extent Maringe (2020), reflect on academics' challenges in pedagogically responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, and suggest that what ought to be done in this unchartered territory, is an existential appreciation/recognition/acceptance that we cannot do everything; that we need to breathe, take our time and apply the ethics of care and compassionate understanding, not only to our students, but also to ourselves (see Knowles, 2020). Smangele provided painful reflections on the difficulties teaching large classes virtually:

> With teaching large classes, I will say I'm not comfortable with it, it's very overwhelming, its stressful, it gives me anxiety because I'm a perfectionist in the sense that when I teach it gives me pleasure to get each and every student's attention and vice versa so that I am aware that student A has indeed heard what I am talking about unlike in a class of 423 students. The most difficult part is that they don't understand … Teaching large classes is tiring and cumbersome … The other thing is that you do not get to use a variety of methods compared to say in smaller classes where you can simply walk around, giving group activities and also following individuals to check whether they are indeed doing the work. In a large class environment, this is impossible rather you get tired emotionally and irritated by time wasters … This upsetting, tiring and also a time waster because you have to stop teaching and call students to order, it also takes out of your teaching mood hence I'm saying there are number of challenges with teaching large classes. Its physically draining to tell the truth – emphasis added (Smangele).

For Smangele above, teaching large classes online induced anxiety, fear and desperation as she felt curtailed and limited about what she could possibly do or achieve in her classroom. She felt overwhelmed, and at times defeated by the demands of teaching a massive class with very few online pedagogical, epistemic or institutional tools and resources. For Smangale, she was at best frustrated by both, what she called the "time wasters" and students' inability to understand or access the curriculum material transmitted online. In a paper titled, "The COVID-19 pandemic, online teaching/learning, the digital divide, and epistemological access", Du Preez and Le Grange (2020) reflect on the pitfalls and challenges of implementing the emergency remote teaching in a country such as South Africa, ravaged by socio-economic and racialised inequality, with millions of Black people still struggling to access a viable and working technological device, connectivity, food, shelter and a conducive environment (David *et al*., 2018; Francis & Webster, 2019; Group, 2018). Echoing Smangele's remarks above, Du Preez and Le Grange problematise this pandemic teaching and its obsession with dumping curriculum material online as insufficient and designed to frustrate and deprive students' epistemological access to the curricula.

Maluleka (2021) proposes "decolonial love" for teaching and learning to resolve some of the challenges, complexities and frustrations that Smangele, and to some extent, Du Preez and Le Grange articulate. For Maluleka (2021: 84), this decolonial love entails the "humanising task of building a world in which genuine ethical relations become the norm and not the exception", thus, demanding that academics and students work together to confront/resolve the historical injustices to achieve true and meaningful social justice in educational engagements/outcomes. It should be noted that Smangele was not alone in her frustrations with this pandemic teaching. Mbali below, another academic who took part in the study, commented on how she was "bored" and "frustrated" by the lack of critical engagement with online/digital/virtual spaces, and that she felt like she was talking alone, staring at the laptop:

> For me, I am so bored because I like the engagement in class so now having to engage through a laptop by myself in really frustrating. With the large numbers we cannot have the synchronous class like we are doing right now because the university licence it is only

> *allowing 300 students. So, in my class I have 450 students so I cannot have a live class you know a live session with them so I usually record sessions with them, even some time I would in the middle of the recording I would say I am so bored and I will be thinking that oh they will hear me. It is really frustrating for* – emphasis added (Mbali).

Overall, academics who took part in the study demonstrated great frustration, challenges and "growing pains" with teaching large classes virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned, the intersectional challenges of lack of (functional) technological devices, lack of connectivity, lack of a conducive environment, lack of support, no emancipatory pedagogy, and the inherent structural challenges in the country deprived students and caused many to be left behind by this current climate in the South African higher education system. Maphalala, Khumalo, and Khumalo (2021) reveal that some students were indeed left behind in the abrupt shift to the emergency remote teaching. The latter reveals how the higher education institutions struggled to respond adequately to the digital divide; as some academics used limited pedagogic strategies and had inadequate proficiency in the use of the learning management systems (both in training and in its application). Tshepo, one of the research participants, concedes that online learning in these large classes did not have any engagement at all; and that the pedagogy was largely characterised by the recording of slides, uploading them, and hoping that students ask questions at some point:

> *There is no engagement when [students] maybe they are lazy or maybe they find the slides easily to understand I don't know. But that engagement is the one that is lacking and it is the key to understand if your students] understand what you are saying. We do give them the platforms to say guys' here is the platform for you to send us the engagements, debate and questions on what you do not understand. You will find only one student responding to that call whilst others do not want to ask questions. It is not like in the actual class where you say something and some students that do not understand ask questions* (Tshepo).

It should be noted that academics' anxieties, fear and frustrations in teaching large classes during the COVID-19 pandemic need to be located to the growing literature on the chaotic and unplanned nature of this health crisis in higher education (see, for example, Aboagye *et al.*, 2021; Bolisani *et al.*, 2020; Corbera *et al.*, 2020). In a paper titled, "Teaching in a pandemic: an exploratory study into university instructors' perceptions of work-from-home opportunities and challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa", Badaru *et al.* (2022) remind us that academics had to contend with working from home while balancing their personal lives, social isolation, fatigue, teaching and learning and an unstable connectivity. For Boncori (2020), this is a broader reflection of the "never-ending shift" where the personal space has become the professional space, resulting in academics perpetually working, and never "clocking off". In another publication, we have reflected on our experiences in responding to what we called the "pandemic teaching" in a research intensive university in South Africa, struggling to balance our own health, teaching and learning, assessments and making sure that students were not left behind in the curricula (Hlatshwayo, 2020).

As demonstrated in this article, we have been foregrounding and exploring the narratives/ voices/ reflections of academics as they grapple with they negotiate online teaching large classes. What we have not done yet, is to bring to the fore, the philosophical and theoretical lenses from Sandoval's (2013) decolonial love so as to help theorise and propose what is to be done regarding teaching large classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. We now turn to explicating this perspective more closely.

6. Decolonial love in the COVID-19 classrooms

According to our research, we see and read decolonial love as an ethical commitment to this existential/ontological/epistemic restitution and integrity; one that takes seriously the relationship between the teacher and students. Building on the work of Sandoval (2013), Maldonado-Torres (2016) and Maluleka (2021), we argue that teaching and learning in large classes during the COVID-19 pandemic moment need to be shaped and underpinned by the ethics of care, compassion and understanding. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic is a global healthcare crisis, one that continues to disrupt and change people's lives, with some even paying the ultimate cost (Bai *et al.*, 2020; Friedman, 2021; Landa, Zhou & Marongwe, 2021). Thus, our thinking around higher education interventions needs to be located within this deeper and troubling context.

Decolonial love in relation to the crippling challenges/frustrations/anxieties that Black academics are struggling with at the moment demands that universities re-think/re-consider/reimagine the obsession with the "business unusual" operational discourse, as this mentality seeks to suggest that the academic calendar is more important and more valuable than academics and students' wellbeing. Decolonial love as an emancipatory ethic could help us with potential solutions during this challenge. Firstly, the humanity of the academics (and students) needs to be recognised. Instead of pursuing the business-as-usual approach and salvaging the academic year at all costs, the wellbeing and health of the academics and students need to be prioritised. Secondly, the implementation of the emergency remote teaching with large classes need better preparation, planning and implementation. While we acknowledge that the very idea and social construction of the ERT are inherently unplanned, disruptive and at times chaotic, better planning is still required so as to ensure that real and meaningful pedagogy is still happening in large classes. This means that genuine commitment to decolonial love demands that we seriously reconsider the importance of monthly workshops/forums/spaces that academics can have access to when feeling overwhelmed, defeated and frustrated. These spaces should largely be informal and unstructured, to give voice and support to academics on what is to be done and could potentially constitute the "communities of practice" (Ching, 2021) for helping/supporting/working with academics as they navigate and negotiate large class teaching during the COVID-19 period. Thirdly, the Council on Higher Education needs to come to the party through prescribing national guidelines and frameworks on what well-funded, viable/progressive/inclusive teaching looks like; one that does not leave any student behind. Failure to do so results in what is increasingly becoming a skewed and unequal higher education system in South Africa. This is because different universities have their own institutional policies/approaches/strategies how they cope and respond to large class teaching in the pandemic period, potentially creating a bifurcated and largely unequal sector.

Another potential way to enact decolonial love in our teaching and learning practices in large classes would be heading Freire's (2018) advice on the need to reimagine the pedagogic relations between the teacher/student. This would demand that teachers (in this case academics) accept and understand their own fallibility and technological limitations. They would see students as co-constructors of knowledge and employ an emancipatory pedagogy to understand the different and endless possibilities of technology for facilitating critical engagements online. It should be noted that this is not a naïve call for a horisontal conception of curriculum/knowledge/pedagogy where the teacher/student is equal in knowledge/expertise/experience. Rather, it is a decolonial recognition and appreciation that academics are not the

paramount and supreme holders of knowledge/curricula/pedagogy. Students can, and should be, allowed to access, critique, enhance and support all forms of curriculum imaginations in the classroom. This demands that we recognise that although academics come to the curricula with recognised specialised knowledge, students themselves have the capacity to enrich the curricula experience through drawing on their own life worlds, languages, perspectives and narratives. We suggest that will strengthen both the curriculum and the pedagogy.

7.   Conclusion

The long-lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to reverberate across the global South, with the higher education system being one of the most critically affected sectors that are still struggling to respond to this pandemic. In this paper, we shine a spotlight on the South African context through exploring and theorising the experiences of Black academics struggling to navigate and negotiate the teaching of large classes during the pandemic period. The experiences of these academics were largely negative, with a large number of them using words such as "overwhelmed", "bored", "anxious" and "frustrated" to describe their complex challenges associated with teaching large classes. We drew on and proposed Sandoval's emancipatory ethic of decolonial love, to reimagine what inclusive and compassionate teaching and learning could look like in practice. In this paper, we make several arguments.

Firstly, we suggest that the business-as-usual approach that characterised the response to the COVID-19 pandemic in South African higher education was unsustainable and only prioritised the academic calendar at the expense of the academics and students' wellbeing. This includes seeing, recognising and valuing the existential humanity of the academics and students themselves.

Secondly, we argue that we need better emergency teaching responses and preparation when it comes to large classes. Comprehensive preparation, planning, and implementation are required in ensuring that no student is left behind.

Thirdly, we also argue that the CHE, together with the National Department of Higher Education and Training, needs to come up with more system wide emergency remote teaching proposals that respond to the differentiated and unequal higher education sector in South Africa. Failure to recognise and appreciate these differentiates will only reinforce and entrench the inequalities in the sector, with historical Black universities continuing to lag behind when it comes to the quality of teaching, research, funding and infrastructure, amongst others.

Finally, we see the pandemic as a portal (Roy, 2020) to how it could enable us to reimagine the pedagogic relations between the academics and students, with students being given a chance to play an active role in the social construction, design and development of the curriculum itself. At the moment, curriculum is often presented as *a priori* to students (Du Preez & Le Grange, 2020; Le Grange, 2016; 2019); that is, curricula as already given – with students largely being allowed to play a role in the assessment and evaluation of the module at the end of the curriculum. We suggest that students could begin to play a role in the actual design, construction and possible enactment of the curriculum.

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