



Teaching and Learning Resilience and Adjuvant Lessons from the COVID-19 Crisis: A Reflective Practitioner's Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus (COVID-19) was devastating to society. In addition to the untold anguish it unleashed on humanity, the pandemic considerably affected teaching and learning. The disruption to the school calendars resulted in a new shift that was constraining for both students and educators during the early stages of the pandemic. It is, therefore, unsurprising that many studies examining this pandemic's impact tend to focus on its negative consequences. Thus, a less explored topic is the positive spin-offs of the crisis and how humanity transcended the abyss (in the Hegelian sense) amid agony. Therefore, this article fills this gap by examining some of the positive contributions and future possibilities resulting from society's efforts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. In terms of the method, the study draws on the author's teaching experience and student feedback using an interpretative framework based on Driscoll's What Model of reflection and insights from Resilience Theory and Reflective Practice. The findings highlighted humanity's ability to bounce back in any crisis despite its magnitude and some of the innovative teaching and learning strategies that resulted in students being integral co-creators in the teaching and learning process. Based on the findings, the study ultimately proposes a five-stage crisis resilience model along a continuum of various cycles. The study contributes to embryonic scholarship that uses the pandemic as a lens to explore value creation and liberating avenues for humanity.

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INTRODUCTION

As a commodity of a different kind, education remains critical to any society and is often one of the first casualties in any crisis that affects humanity. This reality was more apparent at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic with its unprecedented disruptions and challenges to all facets of human lives. The education industry was not spared with restrictions, suspension of face-to-face classes, closure of university libraries and residences and the general panic over the use of new technology which was being prioritised by many institutions to salvage what was left of their academic year. In this unprecedented new situation, educators had to ship in or ship out as it was becoming clearer that the pandemic was not going to go away very soon. Its onslaught prompted educators and learners to resort to innovative ways to ensure that the practice of teaching and learning is not completely dissipated for the future of man without education. Due to the significance of education to humanity, the sector opted

to stay put while other service industries closed down. These included the automobile industries, restaurants, tourism and hospitality sectors.

As Assiouras et al. posit, “During abnormal circumstances, actors in an ecosystem should adopt more collective value co-creation and institutional logic(s) to protect and improve their well-being.”¹ This is exactly what educators and students did. Education is a key facet of modern society. For example, it is one of the key indices of the Human Index. It is widely believed that it has the potential to take the recipients out of poverty. The effects of the pandemic were considerable, and it was hard hitting especially for the marginalised members of society who are often excluded from technological uptake that favours those who have money. This was especially true in a two-world society such as South Africa.

However, from the author’s experience it was clear that during crises, humanities are forced to rethink coping mechanisms that often become a mainstay and part of the future. (Mutation). Because the literature is very sparse on this societal resilience, especially on the key indices that develop during crisis, this study vacillates on two corollary positions one being the devastation of the pandemic and another being the good that comes out of the bad situation it has caused. Thus, to address these research gaps, the study explores how COVID-19 disruption prompted some of the mechanisms that are useful for the future, firmly practicalising the notion of digital humanities.

By investigating how people coped during this epic crisis the study brings into focus the aspects of resilience and reflective practice. This is important because many studies examining this pandemic's impact tend to focus on its negative consequences. Thus, a less explored topic is the positive spin-offs of the crisis and how humanity transcends the abyss (in the Hegelian sense) amid agony as well as future opportunities that it presents, particularly for multilingual students whose languages remain excluded in the current technological uptake. In that sense, the paper uses the COVID-19 disruption as a window into some of the societal resilience and vital coping mechanisms that the society devised. By so doing, the paper contributes to embryonic studies that are starting to use the pandemic as a lens to explore value creation as well as knowledge creation that creates liberating avenues for humanity. It thus departs from a predominant tendency by focusing on some of the positive contributions and future possibilities resulting from society’s efforts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. In particular, the study pays attention to some of the innovative teaching and learning strategies that resulted in students being integral co-creators in the teaching and learning process. It also highlights some of the work that still lies ahead and proposes some of the ways to assist educators dealing with multilingual students to steadily incorporate these languages in their teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much has been written on the pandemic and its ramifications. Studies by Chibuwe et al.² focused on Media and the pandemic, the uptake of the Pandemic in the digital age. This cross-country study made use of data interview data collected from journalists in Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe to determine how the pandemic disrupted news production and the opportunities that this disruption provided. They concluded that the pandemic disrupted news sourcing routines and compromised the quality of news production but concluded that the situation provided a good opportunity for the media to improve relations with other news and reclaim their declining trust. This study is important and its resonance in the current study lies in the fact that it explores some of the opportunities provided by the pandemic. Another related study was done by Cunliffe exploring the effects of the pandemic on the tourism industry.³ The study is also important because it also referred to reflective practices although

¹ Ioannis Assiouras et al., “Value Propositions during Service Mega-Disruptions: Exploring Value Co-Creation and Value Co-Destruction in Service Recovery,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 97 (November 2022): 103501, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2022.103501>.

² Albert Chibuwe, Allen Munoriyarwa, Gilbert Motsaathebe, Sarah Chiumbu, and William Lesitaokana. “Newsroom Disruptions and Opportunities in Times of Crisis: Analysing Southern African Media During the COVID-19 Crisis.” *African Journalism Studies* 43, no. 2 (2023): 53–70. doi:10.1080/23743670.2022.2071961.

³ Ann L. Cunliffe, “On Becoming a Critically Reflexive Practitioner,” *Journal of Management Education* 28, no. 4 (August 1, 2004): 407–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562904264440>.

it went on to venture into an elaborate discussion on the distinction between reflective practices and reflection. Unlike Cunliffe who sought to distinguish the notions of reflection and reflexivity in his work, this study does not veer into that complexity.⁴ It adopts reflection in the sense of “reflecting-in-action as professionals construct an understanding by drawing on cumulative personal and organisational knowledge and engaging in a reflective conversation with the situation.”⁵

In another study, Chibuwe and Munoriyarwa did a comparison between teaching methods in Zimbabwe and South Africa during the Covid lockdowns using in-depth interviews.⁶ The study concluded that South African universities adjusted far much better than their Zimbabwean counterparts as universities provided more support and “gadgets to smoothen the transition to online learning.” What is clear however is that it should be elementary to say that one of the goals of the unintentional consequences of a crisis is the incidental learning and intentional coping strategies that live long after the end of the crisis. COVID-19 lockdowns forced people especially students and educators to come up with strategies to continue teaching and learning. This study taps into the experience of the educator who is the author and the feedback of his students on their learning experience during COVID-19. Education is a facet of modern society. It is one of the key indices of the Human Index. The effects of the pandemic were considerable, and it was hard hitting especially for the marginalised members of society who are often excluded from technological uptake that favours those who have money. This was especially true in the two-world society of South Africa. As Mbeki puts it, one of these nations is white, and relatively prosperous, regardless of gender or geographic dispersal.⁷ It has ready access to a developed economic, physical, educational, communication and other infrastructure. The second and larger nation of South Africa is black and poor, with the worst affected being women in the rural areas, the black rural population in general and the disabled.”

The effects of the pandemic on the latter nation were clear. In the courses that the researcher taught, there were some students who relied on campus for the internet, they also came from areas where the network was poor. The asymmetrical distribution of services and resources that characterise South Africa was very clear. Issues of equity and access became very pronounced when some students due to the deprived areas where they came from suffered and did not have the same level of access to internet connection for example and some had cheaper laptops that were not useful for online classes. Many of these were freezing in the middle of the lessons or simply could not load to enable the learners to log in. The effects were considerable, and the institution through mechanisms to accommodate these communities. In that sense, it was clear that education was essentially the preserve of those who could. Some could not cope and had to drop out in that onslaught hence the theme of resilience becomes very critical in this study given that many of the students had to find the fervour and inner strength in themselves to carry on.

The sheer boomerang effect of the situation promoted solutions. Hence it is critical to reflect on the situation, the actions that were taken and the lessons and the good things that came from it. As such reflection is an important concept in this study. Many studies that focus on reflection focus on the classroom situation and as expected not from a crisis perspective. Unlike Cunliffe who sought to distinguish the notions of reflection and reflexivity in his work, this study does not veer into that complexity.⁸ It adopts reflection in the sense of “reflecting-in-action as professionals construct an understanding by drawing on cumulative personal and organisational knowledge and engaging in a reflective conversation with the situation.”⁹

⁴ Cunliffe, “On Becoming a Critically Reflexive Practitioner.”

⁵ Cunliffe, “On Becoming a Critically Reflexive Practitioner.”

⁶ Albert Chibuwe and Allen Munoriyarwa, “Emerging Methods and Challenges Associated With Teaching and Learning Media Studies During the COVID-19 Pandemic Induced Lockdowns in Zimbabwe and South Africa,” *Sage Open* 13, no. 2 (2023): 21582440231167110.

⁷ T. Mbeki, “Speech Delivered at the Opening of the Debate in the National Assembly, on ‘Reconciliation and Nation Building’ National Assembly, Cape Town, 29 MAY 1998,,” *Umrabulo.*, 1998, 3.

⁸ Cunliffe, “On Becoming a Critically Reflexive Practitioner.”

⁹ Cunliffe, “On Becoming a Critically Reflexive Practitioner.”

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study embraced two concepts namely Resilience and a Reflective practice. The latter concept is significant because the ideas in this study are largely based on the author's experience as an educator. Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on an action to engage in a process of continuous learning. A key rationale for reflective practice is that experience alone does not necessarily lead to learning; "deliberate reflection on experience is essential." In reflective practice "people learn from their own professional experiences, rather than from formal learning or knowledge transfer."¹⁰ According to this source, "A person who reflects throughout his or her practice is not just looking back on past actions and events, but is taking a conscious look at emotions, experiences, actions, and responses, and using that information to add to his or her existing knowledge base and reach a higher level of understanding."¹¹ This study opted for reflective practice rather than reflexive practice since the former is an ongoing and iterative process.

Reflective practice refers to the deliberate process of looking back at one's action as part of continuous learning. As Hatton and Smith state to improve practice, "our thoughts should be extended and systematic by looking back upon our actions sometime after they have taken place."¹² On the other hand, engaging in critical reflection means that teachers have to both understand their experiences in the social context and also to understand how they can use that knowledge to develop their practice in the future. In a sense, the current study focused on what Larrivee in some places calls "pedagogical reflection" which interfaces learning goals, learning theories and practice.¹³ This is because the researcher was interested in coming up with lessons that could be drawn from practice.

The study propagates the theoretical model developed by Driscoll widely known as Driscoll's What Model characterised by a set of three key questions, namely a) What? b) So what? c) Now what? By asking these three simple questions one can begin to analyse and learn from his/her experiences. According to this model, the researcher must first describe what the situation or experience was. This means explaining what happened. This provides a clear idea of what is being dealt with. Then there should be a reflection on the experience by asking 'So what? In other words, what was learnt because of the experience? The final stage asks the researcher to think about the action that would be taken after this reflection. For instance, will one change behaviour, try something new, or carry on as usual?

On the other hand, Resilience which is another key concept with which this work is approached embodies sturdiness amid chaos. Thus, adopting the notion of Resilience as a coping strategy, the study exemplified how students and educators embraced the challenges and adopted viable strategies to minimise the alarming effect of the pandemic on the learning process. The notion of Resilience is significant because it emphasises humanity's ability to bounce back in any crisis despite its magnitude. Giving in was not an option. As Basotho says *ha hona ntho empe e senang molemo*, which means something positive could come out of a bad situation. Despite the significance of crises in pushing humanities to come up with coping mechanisms, their practical implications are yet to be fully explored by scholars and educators. Thus, by using reflective practices after a crisis, this study provides a remarkable opportunity to reflect critically on one's action after it happened to see how such actions contributed to salvaging what was left of the university calendar. Reflective practice and the notion of resilience provide appropriate lenses that form part of the interpretative framework of this study.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative approach using a combination of reflexivity methods and students' feedback. Using an interpretative framework, the researcher constructed based on Driscoll's What Model of reflection. The data was studied to explore the experience of students and that of the

¹⁰ Priya Mathew, Prasanth Mathew, and P J Peechattu, "Reflective Practices: A Means to Teacher Development," *Asia Pacific Journal of Contemporary Education and Communication Technology* 3, no. 1 (2017): 126–31, 127.

¹¹ Mathew, Mathew, and Peechattu, "Reflective Practices: A Means to Teacher Development."

¹² Neville Hatton and David Smith, "Reflection in Teacher Education: Towards Definition and Implementation," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 11, no. 1 (1995): 33–49.

¹³ Barbara Larrivee, "Development of a Tool to Assess Teachers' Level of Reflective Practice," *Reflective Practice* 9, no. 3 (August 2008): 341–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623940802207451>.

researcher who was a professor of two of the journalism, film and television courses at a South African university. The chief aim was to explore the positive consequences of COVID-19 on education. The study was exploratory because it explored some of the good things that came out of a bad situation and further developed possible new avenues that will continue to benefit teaching and learning in the future. The study relied on the author's experience and used feedback from students reflecting on their diverse experiences in engaging with classes, online material, online assessments and feedback received. The study used data from voluntary students' feedback. The participants were students enrolled in courses in Film, Television and Journalism at a university in South Africa. In all instances, the author informed students that their feedback would be used in an academic study and gained their consent.

Data Analysis Procedure

Students feedback was analysed using Driscoll's What Model of Reflection (Reflective Analysis) aided by thematic analysis. The combination of these two approaches allowed the researcher to identify the challenges and what came out of the challenges in the form of remedial actions and value-added services that continue to be part of future teaching scenarios. This analysis was inductive because the researcher relied on the various themes that emerged from the analysis itself rather than approaching the data deductively with predetermined themes. Aside from the unsolicited emails, the researcher used formal institutional students' feedback to extrapolate emerging themes. The inclusion criterion was therefore straightforward as this aspect of the study relied on the data generated during the year 2020 when COVID-19 was at its apex.

Thematic analysis enabled the author to draw meanings from the data by way of thematising common issues salient in the data. The information from the data was deliberately anonymised which means the identities of participants are not revealed. The research itself was not sensitive as the dignity and privacy of the participants were not affected in any way. There was also no physical contact since data was obtained through online means when the students provided feedback which allowed the researcher to draw insights into the issues raised in this study.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented below according to Driscoll's What Model.

WHAT? (What happened? What were the issues?)

The first step towards the process of reflection is to gather information about what happens in the class followed by analysis of the data. When Covid lockdowns started, academics tried to save the academic year. For its part, the University where the author was teaching quickly moved into online teaching. This was a relatively smooth process because at the time the researcher had already started incorporating hybrid classes. This was a deliberate process as the researcher was applying for promotion to full professorship and figured that this move would stand him in good stead since the university prioritised the 4th industrial revolution. But there were general problems that were experienced by the students especially those that had to leave the campus. The key challenges included difficulty connecting to the internet as a result of poor network reception. There was also an issue of device problems as most students had poor quality devices that were not geared to effective connectivity and only a few students had quality devices that made connection easy. The poor ones were often lagging and freezing during the lessons substantially obstructing teaching and learning. A further challenge was that students were used to classroom modality where educators drove the teaching and learning process and as a result such students struggled with the new modality necessitated by the situation which means that learning was more self-directed than being dependent on the lecturer as the facilitator.

SO WHAT? (What was the big deal/implication)

These problems affected teaching and learning significantly. This meant that students with poor equipment and those who were generally experiencing internet reception problems were often unable

to download material to study and do their assignments. This contributed to most students missing submission deadlines or not submitting at all. The situation also took an emotional toll on students as some lost family members during the pandemic and some of the students were themselves infected by the pandemic. This meant that students were also able to engage effectively in the learning process. Furthermore, it was very difficult to teach certain practical aspects of the course. As Motsaathebe indicated teaching journalism often involves imparting core skills such as writing and operating equipment in order to match the skills required by the envisaged employer.¹⁴ This aspect proved difficult during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The COVID-19 situation also exposed South Africa's unequal distribution of resources and services as most of the services and resources are concentrated in urban areas and as such students based in rural areas experienced serious problems.

SO WHAT? (What did we do?)

Faced with the abovementioned set of challenges, the researcher in his capacity as the professor devised ways to transcend the problem. These included the following: using available online teaching platforms such as Course Hero and recording material. He initially recorded class lessons in the form of videos but soon realised that such videos were using too much data which the students did not have. Also, some students could not open them. Preparing material for online teaching was also taking too much time, which meant that there was not enough time to give constructive feedback. The above measures worked very well except for practical modules which were almost impossible to teach online.

How do we know it worked? Reflection is an ongoing and iterative process. Participants themselves indicated in their feedback that the interventions assisted in improving teaching and learning. The students indicated that they were able to do well in their studies as seen from some of the verbatim excerpts from their appreciation emails sent to the researcher who was their professor at the time as indicated. Common themes from the feedback were the following:

Effective online delivery

Students expressed that the course was delivered effectively online. This means that the intervention and mechanisms put in place by the lecturer were effective.

“Just wanted to send you an email expressing my gratitude for everything I have learned from you throughout the past few months. You have provided me with a great grasp of TV journalism.”

Another student sent a message of appreciation saying difficult concepts were properly demystified.

“Being taught by you was very fun and engaging, a lot of concepts you made them easier for us in class, I preferred going to class and listening to you teach than studying by myself, I wish even in the second quarter you got a chance to teach us. I really enjoyed your lectures.”

Informative content

Delivering informative content that is tailored for online dissemination was critical for successful teaching and learning under the circumstances.

“The module was very informative, and Prof was very helpful. He is a great lecturer, prioritizes his students and you can see he is passionate about his job.”

Another student put it this way:

“You have been nothing but a good, understanding lecturer, especially at such hard times. The course was manageable with your help and I thank you for that.”

¹⁴ Gilbert Motsaathebe, “Journalism Education and Practice in South Africa and the Discourse of the African Renaissance,” *Communicatio* 37, no. 3 (2011): 381–97.

Engaging and fascinating mode of delivery

Other students echoed the idea of thorough preparation and knowledge of the course material. Such preparations go a long way to ensure that the students learn better online and understand the tasks required of them.

“The course was extremely fascinating and well facilitated. The lecturer was very knowledgeable about the subject and taught it very well. He made sure that all students mastered the content. Due to his impeccable teaching standards, I was able to get a distinction.”

Other students put it this way:

“The classes were always interesting and the communication regarding assignments and what was expected of us was always accurately and diligently communicated to the class. I feel that I have learned a lot from this course that I will be able to apply in my future workplace as a journalist.”

“I just wanted to say thank you for helping us with the Radio Journalism research essay today. We really appreciate your willingness to assist us and that you have our best interest at heart. And thank you for a great fourth term!”

Students also enjoy active participation and want clear instructions and open communication so that they know what is expected from them. The idea should not be to trick students into failing but to help them understand the material to succeed.

“The journalism theory course was presented extremely well. He made sure to explain the course material to us in a manner that was easily understood. He encouraged in-class participation and discussions to better our understanding and provided examples to better explain concepts. The professor communicated the class times and the material that was going to be taught before classes so that students were able to prepare. He also made sure to emphasise the most important content and ensured that we understood it. For this reason, we were well-prepared to complete our assignments. Prof was also available to assist us during and outside of his consultation times and responded quickly. I have learned a lot from this course.”

Although much of the feedback was expressing appreciation for the lecturer and the way the courses were delivered under difficult circumstances, these feedback comments were significant in identifying what worked and what did not work. Engaging students throughout the teaching and learning process was important as students became co-creators in the teaching and learning process.

NOW WHAT? (What we learned from that experience)

From the experience described above, it was clear that many people were forced to embrace the technology with platforms such as Zoom and MS Teams becoming very popular for teaching. WhatsApp was also used more for quick communication. Students quickly adjusted to submitting assignments online where they also received their feedback.

This study looked at what happened during COVID-19, how students responded and the legacies/opportunities for the future. The study identified several themes from the data which included the sheer overwhelming of the pandemic crises in all aspects of individual lives; poor internet reception; and device problems as most of the gadgets used by most students were not of the best qualities for online learning. It is important to critically engage with the findings to show how the situation has changed the practice and further draw the lessons for the future. From the findings, it is clear that the situation brought about the following:

Accelerated use of technology

There was an accelerated uptake of technology in teaching-learning as learners online teaching platforms such as Blackboard and other platforms such as MS Teams, Zoom and some even used

WhatsApp. In his case, the researcher also incorporated another platform called Course Hero which became a useful online resource.

Importance of fit-for-purpose tools

It immediately became clear that certain tools and equipment were not suited for the online sessions. For example, certain laptops and phones that were not appropriate kept on freezing during the session and significantly disrupted the teaching and learning process.

The importance of effective IT service in an institution

The situation also brought to the fore the importance of having a robust IT that is proactive and can rise to the occasion urgently when needs arise to support online learning.

The need to consistently build Resilience

From a humanistic point of view, the situation enhanced profound resilience in humanities. The situation oscillated around building resilience. The study observed that this process was taking a particular pattern. It was observed that this resilience building was happening along a particular process which is illustrated below.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Towards a crises-resilience building model/continuum

In view of the findings which clearly exemplify the resilience of the students in the face of the crisis and how they adjusted through each stage of the crises, a crises-resilience model is proposed. The study showed how students adapted to the crises from the initial stage characterised by panic mode and uncertainties through other stages where they continually adjusted and refined their coping strategies. Hence a need for a model illustrating these stages and how each stage of the crises triggers the next stage. Based on the study, a five-stage crisis resilience model is proposed along the following continuum: crises – coping strategies – challenges of coping strategies - refinement – positive outcomes.



Figure 1: crises-resilience model
Source: Author

The above figure shows that when crisis strikes, it presents challenges, which in turn necessitates solutions in the form of coping strategies, the initial coping strategies will inherently have their challenges that would have to be ameliorated which leads to refined coping strategies. Effective strategies result in positive outcomes as illustrated by positive student comments. Indeed, all these developments affirm the researcher's summation that crises often create value and liberating avenues for humanity.

CONCLUSION

Despite the significance of crises in pushing humanities to come up with coping mechanisms, their practical implications are yet to be fully explored by scholars. This study has attempted to fill that gap. It has also brought to the fore the issue of resilience and the effect of the unequal distribution of services and resources which tend to negatively affect communities in the deprived areas more than those in resourced areas. The results of this research offer significant insight into what transpired during COVID-19 lockdowns at tertiary institutions in terms of teaching and learning. Another finding of this study is that the situation enhanced profound resilience in humanities and the study concluded that such resilience was taken according to a particular pattern. As a result of this finding, the study proposed a nuanced five-stage crisis resilience model.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

Concerning limitations, the study focused on feedback from a group of students from a single institution and therefore the sample was very minimal. Nonetheless, the results are still generalisable as the same sets of challenges are noticeable at other institutions not covered by the study. Future research could focus on a much larger sample involving multiple institutions.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In terms of pedagogical implications, the findings of this study could be used by educators to prepare for future scenarios so that they are not caught unprepared by possible future crises. Useful questions to consider include: How do we want students to learn in the future? What type of assessment will be relevant? What skills do we need as educators apart from technical abilities to use applicable online platforms? What about issues of multilingual and multicultural accommodation? The findings demonstrate the importance of practically responding to challenges when there are very few or no options at all.

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