



Reimagining scholarship of teaching and learning in open and distance e-learning: Towards inclusive and decolonial digital pedagogies

Khanyisile Mbatha¹ 

¹ Department of Adult Community and Continuing Education, University of South Africa, Johannesburg, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This paper reconceptualises the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) within Comprehensive Open and Distance e-Learning (CODEL) at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Its purpose is to address the pedagogical limitations of Eurocentric models by developing an Afrocentric, practice-oriented, and decolonial digital pedagogy framework aimed at fostering equity, inclusivity, and transformative learning in digitally mediated higher education. Through a qualitative, theory-synthesizing methodology, the study integrates critical digital pedagogy, inclusive pedagogy, and transformative learning theory. Findings highlight the necessity of shifting toward an approach centred on African epistemologies and cultural contexts, culminating in a framework built on five principles: epistemic pluralism, learner-centred and practice-based engagement, critical reflexivity, culturally sustaining digital spaces, and sustainability through community co-creation. These principles challenge transmission-based pedagogies and resist the uncritical adoption of digital tools that reinforce colonial and neoliberal educational logics. Discussions illustrate the framework's applicability through CODEL innovations such as Open Educational Resources (OER), IoT-enabled learning, and personalized analytics. Recommendations call for reflective pedagogical practices, ongoing critical professional development for lecturers, culturally responsive digital content design, and institutional policies that support equitable and sustainable open distance learning. The study contributes to scholarship by advancing a context-sensitive, justice-oriented model of digital pedagogy that centres African epistemologies within global SoTL discourse, offering a decolonial alternative to dominant Western-centric frameworks and positioning CODEL as a site for inclusive innovation and educational transformation in the Global South.

Keywords: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), Digital pedagogy, Open and Distance e-Learning, Afrocentric pedagogy, Decolonial education, Inclusive pedagogy, CODEL

INTRODUCTION

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has emerged as a vital framework for interrogating and enhancing pedagogical practices across diverse educational contexts.¹ Traditionally rooted in face-

¹ Keith Trigwell, "Approaches to Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Research," *Higher Education Research & Development* 32, no. 1 (2013): 95–108; Peter Felten, "Principles of Good Practice in SoTL," *Teaching & Learning Inquiry The ISSOTL Journal* 1, no. 1 (March 2013): 121–25, <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.1.1.121>.

CORRESPONDENCE – Khanyisile Mbatha Email: mbathk1@unisa.ac.za

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to-face, Eurocentric models of higher education, SoTL is being increasingly reimagined in response to the demands and complexities of digitally mediated learning spaces. This reconfiguration is particularly urgent in South Africa within the context of Comprehensive Open and Distance e-Learning (CODEL), as practiced at institutions such as the University of South Africa (UNISA), the continent's largest open and distance learning provider. CODEL seeks to expand access to higher education while directly confronting the historical inequities, spatial, economic, and epistemic that persist in the post-apartheid era.²

However, the success of CODEL cannot be reduced to the mere deployment of learning management systems (LMSs), digital platforms, or artificial intelligence-driven tools. The rapid digitalisation of higher education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has revealed profound structural disparities in digital access, literacy, and pedagogical relevance.³ These challenges underscore a critical need for pedagogical models that are not only technologically responsive but also socially, culturally, and epistemologically grounded. Consequently, SoTL within CODEL contexts must move beyond conventional content delivery to embrace innovative digital pedagogies that are interactive, adaptive, and reflective of the lived experiences of students and lecturers in the Global South.⁴

This reimagining aligns with broader scholarly calls for justice-oriented, inclusive, and decolonial approaches to teaching and learning.⁵ Digital technologies are not neutral; they are socially embedded practices that can either reinforce or challenge existing inequities.⁶ In the South African context, they intersect with inherited colonial knowledge systems and socio-economic divides, raising urgent questions about whose knowledge is valued and how learning is mediated.⁷ Therefore, SoTL in digital learning spaces must foreground African epistemologies, digital equity, and transformative pedagogical practices that resist homogenising, Eurocentric frameworks.

Despite the increasing integration of digital technologies, SoTL within CODEL environments, particularly in the African context, remains constrained by Eurocentric pedagogical models and narrowly defined metrics of effectiveness. In institutions like UNISA, where teaching and learning are mediated almost entirely through digital platforms, a persistent disconnect exists between the lived realities of students and the pedagogical frameworks guiding instruction. While tools such as LMSs, virtual classrooms, and mobile applications are central to CODEL delivery, their adoption often reproduces transmission-based, teacher-centred approaches rather than fostering participatory, learner-centred, and contextually responsive pedagogies.⁸ This misalignment limits the transformative potential of digital pedagogy, marginalises the lived experiences of students and lecturers in the Global South, and perpetuates structural inequities in contexts already underserved by traditional higher education systems.⁹ Moreover, the reliance on imported, Western-centric models risks reinforcing epistemic injustice by neglecting African knowledge traditions, linguistic diversity, and socio-technical realities such as inconsistent connectivity and device access.¹⁰

² Council on Higher Education (CHE), *South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy* (Pretoria: CHE, 2016); Vuyisile Msila, "Teacher Unions, Schools and Success: Opportunities and Contradictions," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 21, no. 3 (2022): 263–80.

³ David Mhlanga and Tankiso Moloi, "COVID-19 and the Digital Transformation of Education: What Are We Learning on 4IR in South Africa?," *Education Sciences* 10, no. 7 (2020): 180.

⁴ M. Makoe, "Uncovering the Power of Distance Education in South Africa," *Distance Education*, 2018; Laura Czerniewicz, "Inequality as Higher Education Goes Online," *University World News*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200325160338852>.

⁵ Brenda Leibowitz and Vivienne Bozalek, "Institutionalising the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning," *Higher Education Research & Development* 35, no. 5 (2016): 1021–35; S. Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa* (Johannesburg: HSRC Press, 2016).

⁶ Neil Selwyn, "Digital Downsides: Exploring University Students' Negative Engagements with Digital Technology," *Teaching in Higher Education* 21, no. 8 (2016): 1006–21.

⁷ A. Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive," *Public Culture* 28, no. 1 (2016): 1–14.

⁸ Makoe, "Uncovering the Power of Distance Education in South Africa"; Czerniewicz, "Inequality as Higher Education Goes Online."

⁹ Leibowitz and Bozalek, "Institutionalising the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning"; Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*.

¹⁰ Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive"; Mhlanga and Moloi, "COVID-19 and the Digital Transformation of Education: What Are We Learning on 4IR in South Africa?"

Thus, a significant gap exists; there is an urgent need to reconceptualise SoTL in ways that are inclusive, context-sensitive, and grounded in African epistemologies and transformative digital pedagogies. Without such reorientation, the promise of digital technologies to enhance equity and learning in CODEL will remain unrealised, and SoTL will continue to reflect frameworks misaligned with the socio-cultural and infrastructural realities of open and distance students. This study addresses this critical gap by exploring how digital pedagogical innovation within CODEL can serve as a vehicle for reimagining SoTL one that is impactful, relevant, and rooted in principles of equity, inclusion, and critical digital engagement.

Anchored in critical digital pedagogy,¹¹ inclusive pedagogy¹² and transformative learning theory,¹³ this paper aims to reconceptualise the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning within CODEL at UNISA by developing an Afrocentric, practice-oriented, and decolonial digital pedagogy framework that promotes equity, inclusivity, and transformative learning in digitally mediated higher education. The study is guided by the following research question: How can the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning be redefined within Comprehensive Open and Distance e-Learning to advance inclusive, transformative, and Afrocentric digital pedagogies in the South African higher education context? Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative, theory-synthesising approach, drawing on a comprehensive review of recent literature and institutional case examples from UNISA to construct a theoretically grounded, contextually responsive pedagogical model.

To this end, the paper examines the intersection of SoTL and digital pedagogies, highlighting the potential for inclusive and decolonial innovation in CODEL. It details the integration of critical digital, inclusive, and transformative pedagogies into an Afrocentric, practice-oriented model. It further presents case studies and examples from UNISA, discusses the challenges and opportunities in digital education, and explores global dialogues on equity, access, and decolonial possibilities. The paper then outlines the implications for lecturers and students, and offers recommendations for future pedagogical practice and institutional policy in CODEL and analogous contexts across the Global South.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the integration of critical digital pedagogy, inclusive pedagogy, and transformative learning theory, forming a robust foundation for examining and advancing digital education within the CODEL model. Together, these theoretical lenses foreground equity, reflexivity, learner agency, and social justice in digitally mediated learning environments. Critical digital pedagogy provides a lens for interrogating how digital technologies and platforms may reproduce existing social inequalities if implemented uncritically, while also offering opportunities to disrupt entrenched hierarchies and reconfigure power relations in education.¹⁴ It calls attention to the questions of whose knowledge is privileged, who designs and controls digital tools, and how pedagogy can resist surveillance and exclusion while enabling emancipation and empowerment. Complementing this perspective, inclusive pedagogy emphasises representation, access, and participation for all students, particularly those historically marginalised due to disability, socioeconomic status, or geographic isolation.¹⁵ Closely aligned with UDL, it advocates flexible teaching strategies that allow for multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to ensure that diverse learner needs are supported. Transformative learning theory extends this foundation by emphasizing how students can critically reflect on assumptions, engage in dialogue, and experience shifts in worldview, identity, and practice.¹⁶ This approach highlights the significance of reflection and experience in cultivating lasting learning that extends beyond content mastery.

¹¹ Selwyn, "Digital Downsides: Exploring University Students' Negative Engagements with Digital Technology."

¹² Lani Florian and Kristine Black-Hawkins, "Exploring Inclusive Pedagogy," *British Educational Research Journal* 37, no. 5 (October 2, 2011): 813–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.501096>.

¹³ Jack Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice," *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 1997, no. 74 (June 10, 1997): 5–12, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.7401>.

¹⁴ Selwyn, "Digital Downsides: Exploring University Students' Negative Engagements with Digital Technology."

¹⁵ Florian and Black-Hawkins, "Exploring Inclusive Pedagogy."

¹⁶ Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice."

Building on these established frameworks, the study advances an Afrocentric, practice-oriented, decolonial digital pedagogy framework specifically tailored to the realities of CODEL in the Global South. This framework is designed to centre African epistemologies, cultural values, and pedagogical traditions while leveraging digital innovations in ways that resist technological determinism and neocolonial impositions. At its core, it promotes epistemic pluralism and decolonization by affirming indigenous knowledge systems and African ways of knowing as equally valid and integral to curriculum design and digital content creation.¹⁷ It also emphasises learner-centred, practice-oriented engagement, encouraging active participation through problem-based, experiential, and reflective pedagogies that bridge theory and practice, an approach particularly vital for professional fields such as teacher education and nursing.¹⁸ Critical reflexivity and social justice are embedded, urging both lecturers and students to question the sociopolitical dimensions of digital tools and practices, while also addressing issues of digital divides, accessibility, and structural inequities. Furthermore, the framework envisions culturally sustaining digital spaces that validate African languages, narratives, and communicative practices, thereby resisting cultural erasure and fostering inclusive participation. Finally, it stresses sustainability and community engagement, promoting context-sensitive technologies and pedagogies adaptable to resource-constrained environments and co-created with communities to ensure relevance and ownership.

Through this Afrocentric, practice-oriented, and decolonial digital pedagogy framework, the study proposes a holistic and contextually responsive approach for CODEL that positions UNISA as a leader in inclusive digital transformation. It not only advances access and learner engagement but also contributes to the broader project of educational justice and epistemic freedom in South Africa and the wider Global South.

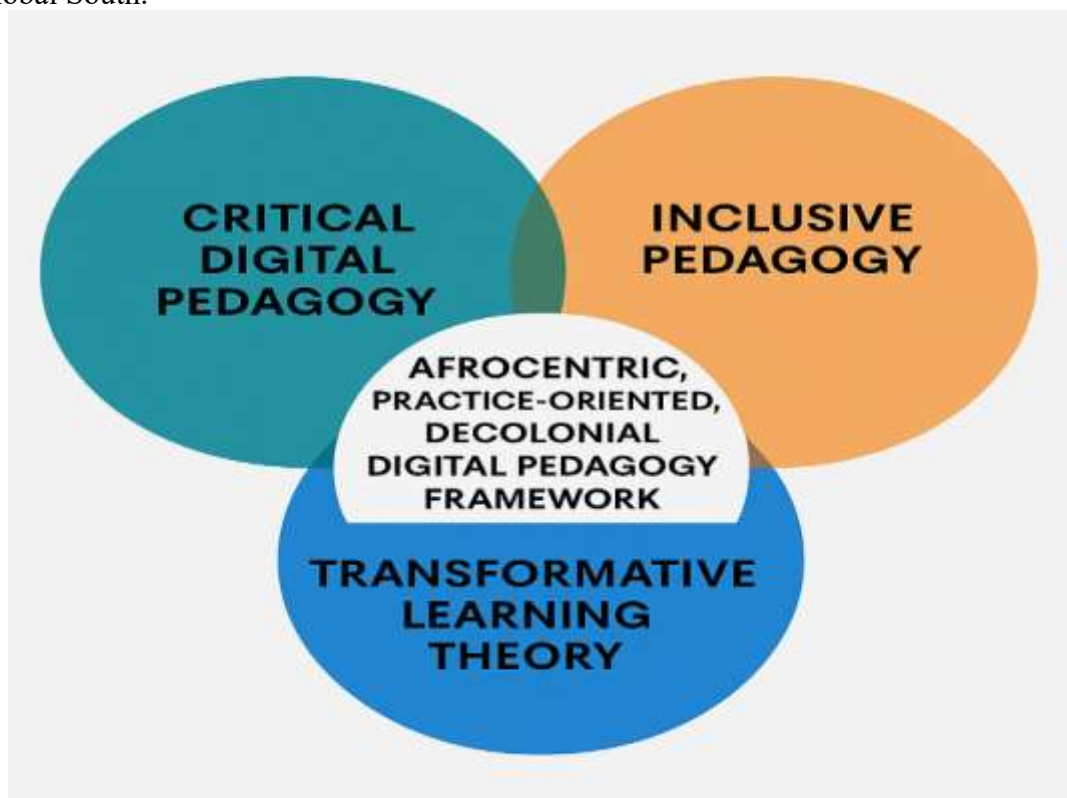


Figure 1: Intersection of theories

The diagram (figure 1) illustrates the intersection of three theoretical foundations Critical Digital Pedagogy, Inclusive Pedagogy, and Transformative Learning Theory to propose a holistic framework for digital teaching and learning that is Afrocentric, practice-oriented, and decolonial in

¹⁷ Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive."

¹⁸ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herter and Herter, 1970).

nature. Critical digital pedagogy challenges the neutrality of technology and interrogates how digital tools and platforms either reinforce or disrupt dominant power structures. Inclusive pedagogy focuses on accessibility and equity, ensuring that all students, particularly those from marginalised communities, are supported through adaptable teaching strategies and accessible learning environments. Transformative learning theory emphasises critical self-reflection and the re-examination of deeply held beliefs, fostering personal and collective transformation through engagement with diverse perspectives. At their intersections, these frameworks reinforce key principles: the necessity of designing accessible digital platforms that empower marginalised voices (inclusive + critical), the promotion of emotionally safe, reflective learning environments (inclusive + transformative), and the imperative to deconstruct hegemonic ideologies to support critical consciousness (critical + transformative). Where all three intersect lies the proposed Afrocentric and Decolonial Digital Pedagogy, a framework rooted in African epistemologies and lived experiences, which leverages open pedagogy, indigenous knowledge systems, and participatory digital tools to affirm cultural identity, support reflective practice, and expand access to equitable, context-sensitive education. This integrated approach is particularly well-suited for contexts like UNISA, where digital learning must be responsive to the social, historical, and cultural realities of a diverse student body in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

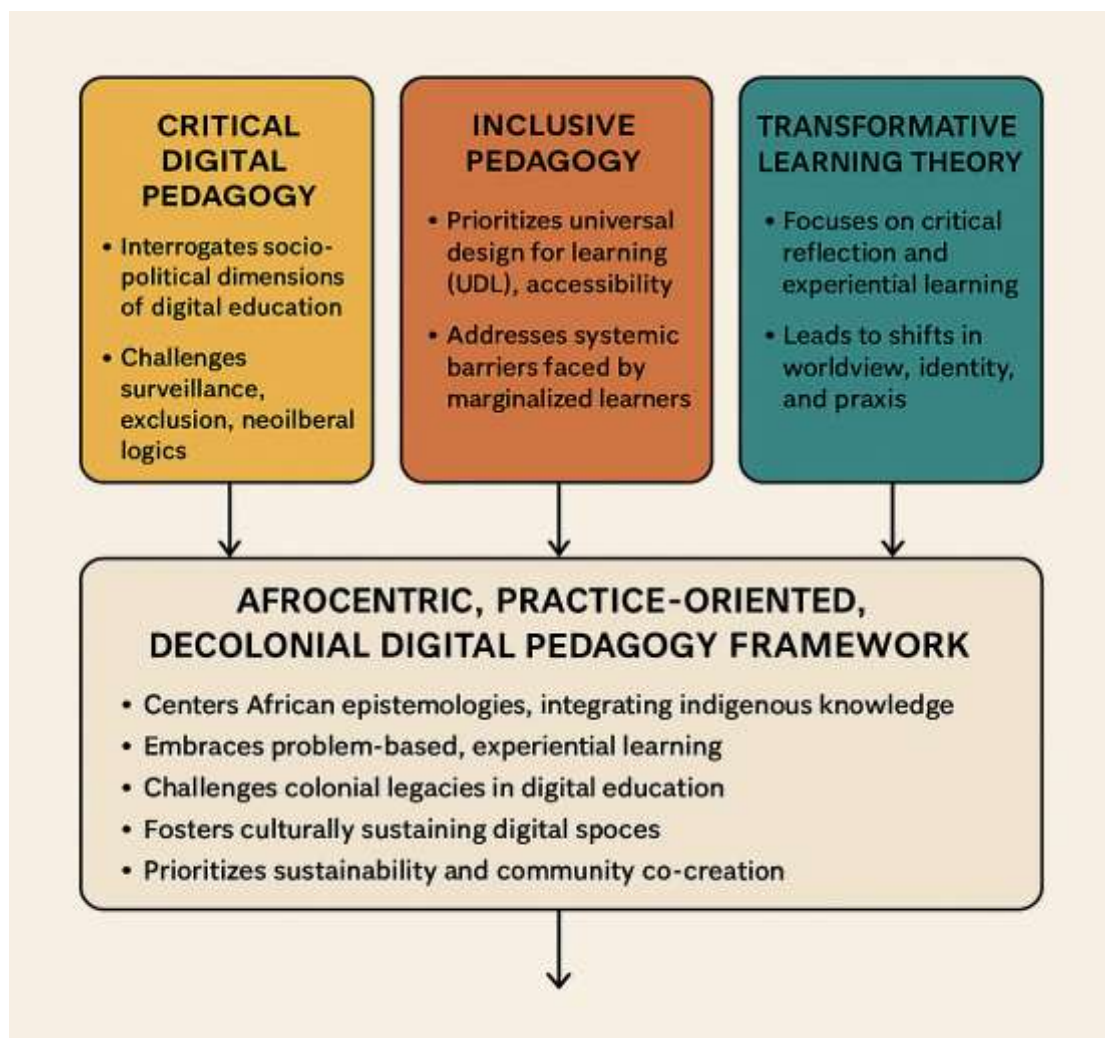


Figure 2: Afrocentric, Practice-Oriented, Decolonial Digital Pedagogy Framework for CODEL

The Afrocentric, Practice-Oriented, Decolonial Digital Pedagogy Framework (as illustrated in the diagram) integrates three foundational theories: critical digital pedagogy, inclusive pedagogy, and transformative learning theory to guide pedagogical innovation in UNISA. At its base, the framework

draws from critical digital pedagogy, which interrogates the sociopolitical structures of digital education, highlighting how technology may reproduce systemic inequities and calling for emancipatory, reflexive teaching practices. Complementing this, inclusive pedagogy ensures that teaching is accessible and equitable, especially for students disadvantaged by disability, poverty, or geographic isolation, aligning with UDL principles. Transformative learning theory further enriches the framework by emphasizing critical reflection and perspective transformation, empowering students to revise deeply held assumptions and engage meaningfully with educational content. These three theories collectively underpin the framework's core values of equity, agency, reflexivity, and justice.

At the heart of the model lies an Afrocentric orientation, which centres African epistemologies, languages, and cultural narratives, countering Eurocentric dominance and validating the lived experiences of South African students. Building upon this, the framework incorporates practice-oriented pedagogy, influenced by Freirean concepts of problem-based and experiential learning, which encourages students to engage in real-world, community-rooted applications of knowledge. Rising from these layers is the concept of decolonial digital praxis, which operationalises the integration of inclusive, culturally sustaining, and contextually meaningful digital teaching strategies. This praxis promotes technologies that amplify marginalised voices, challenge dominant narratives, and foster open, collaborative learning spaces. Encircling the entire model is a commitment to sustainability and community co-creation, emphasising the need for continuous professional development, institutional support, and adaptability to resource-constrained environments. Altogether, this framework provides a coherent, context-sensitive roadmap for transforming digital education at CODEL, advocating for a pedagogy that is inclusive, just, and grounded in African realities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intersection of SoTL and Digital Pedagogies

The intersection between the SoTL and digital pedagogies presents a critical opportunity to reimagine teaching and learning, particularly within CODEL contexts. This convergence holds the potential to transform traditionally content-driven education into a more participatory, inclusive, and practice-based model, where students and lecturers actively co-construct knowledge in dynamic digital environments.¹⁹ Within the CODEL framework at UNISA, this transformation is especially significant given the university's historical commitment to access and equity in a deeply unequal South African educational landscape.

Digital pedagogies, when grounded in the principles of SoTL, enable evidence-informed, reflective, and student-centred teaching practices that are essential for responsive online learning. Such approaches prioritise engagement, accessibility, and adaptability, key components in addressing the diverse needs of distance students.²⁰ The flexibility of digital pedagogies allows lecturers to move beyond static modes of content delivery toward interactive, multimodal, and iterative forms of teaching that centre the lived realities of students. These practices are particularly impactful in CODEL contexts, where asynchronous learning and geographic dispersion require pedagogical innovation and technological sensitivity.

The integration of Open Educational Resources (OER) and inclusive learning tools further supports a decolonial reimagining of distance education. OER not only enhances accessibility but also contributes to epistemic justice, enabling students to engage with locally relevant knowledge while challenging dominant Western narratives embedded in traditional curricula.²¹ As Msimango notes, digital pedagogy also plays a pivotal role in fostering inclusive education, enabling participation for

¹⁹ Semiu Olawale Makinde, "Advancing Pedagogical Excellence: Strategies for Enhancing SoTL in Digital Classrooms," in *Enhancing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Online Learning Environments* (IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2025), 1–20.

²⁰ Muhammad Usman Tariq, "Innovative Mentoring Programs: Strategies for Success in Post-COVID-19 Education," in *Mentoring Students and Instructors for Retention and Success* (IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2025), 123–58.

²¹ Siphamandla Mncube, "Open Educational Resources as the Panacea for the Decolonisation of E-Learning Content in South Africa," *Distance Education* 45, no. 3 (2024): 418–38.

students with disabilities and others who are marginalised by conventional models of teaching and assessment.²²

Moreover, the evolution of SoTL at UNISA illustrates a shift from theoretical abstraction to reflective practice. Historically, SoTL in distance education relied on prescriptive approaches. However, the rise of digital technologies has fostered a more adaptive, experiential, and praxis-oriented engagement with pedagogy. This is evident in how UNISA has embraced "slow pedagogy", a reflective and iterative teaching approach that encourages lecturers to adapt their practices based on ongoing feedback and real-time student experiences.²³ This model supports both educator growth and student empowerment by embedding a cycle of reflection, innovation, and responsiveness into digital education.

Ajani emphasises how digital SoTL practices have extended inclusivity to both urban and rural students, bridging the digital divide and aligning with UNISA's broader commitment to democratising access.²⁴ These developments reflect a broader institutional shift toward transformative SoTL, one that integrates digital innovation with social justice, contextual relevance, and educator-learner collaboration. So, the convergence of SoTL and digital pedagogies within CODEL environments like UNISA is not merely a technological advancement but a pedagogical reformation. It signifies a movement toward inclusive, critical, and situated teaching practices that are responsive to the realities of diverse, under-resourced students in the Global South. This intersection represents a fertile space for developing new theoretical lenses and models of practice that resonate with the journal's call for SoTL that is impactful, inclusive, and grounded in lived experience.

The Need for a New Theoretical Lens

The persistent challenges outlined above, including the disconnect between Eurocentric pedagogical models and the lived realities of students, alongside the structural barriers to digital inclusion, signal that incremental adjustments to existing SoTL frameworks are insufficient. The limitations of conventional, Western-derived models in CODEL contexts reveal a fundamental theoretical gap: a lack of a cohesive pedagogical lens that is simultaneously digital, critical, inclusive, and rooted in African epistemic and social realities. This gap is not merely technical or methodological; it is epistemic and ontological, reflecting what de Sousa Santos terms an "epistemicide" of indigenous and Southern ways of knowing within global education systems.²⁵

Therefore, the challenges and opportunities within CODEL necessitate a deliberate theoretical reorientation. This reorientation must move beyond merely applying digital tools within existing pedagogical paradigms and instead develop a new lens that begins from the epistemological and socio-cultural standpoint of the Global South, specifically Africa. Such a lens must integrate the critical awareness of power embedded in critical digital pedagogy,²⁶ the commitment to access and diversity central to inclusive pedagogy²⁷ and the transformative potential for perspective change found in transformative learning theory.²⁸ Crucially, this integrated foundation must be re-centered through an Afrocentric and decolonial imperative that actively challenges the hegemony of Western knowledge, validates African intellectual traditions, and designs digital learning spaces that are culturally sustaining and contextually responsive.²⁹

This call for a new theoretical lens is not an academic abstraction but a practical necessity. It provides the conceptual toolkit needed to critically interrogate why digital tools often fail to empower,

²² Welile Ntombifuthi Msimango, "Empowering Pre-Service Teachers to Enhance Inclusive Education Through Technology," in *Empowering Pre-Service Teachers to Enhance Inclusive Education Through Technology* (IGI Global, 2025), 59–86, <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-8759-7.ch003>.

²³ Briony Supple and James G R Cronin, "A Pedagogy of Slow: Integrating Experiences of Physical and Virtual Gallery Spaces to Foster Critical Engagement in SoTL," *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* 11 (2023).

²⁴ Oluwatoyin Ayodele Ajani, "Sustainable Transformation in South African Rural Universities: A Digital Perspective," *International Journal of Management, Knowledge and Learning* 13, no. 1 (2024): 113–27.

²⁵ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Routledge, 2015).

²⁶ Selwyn, "Digital Downsides: Exploring University Students' Negative Engagements with Digital Technology."

²⁷ Florian and Black-Hawkins, "Exploring Inclusive Pedagogy."

²⁸ Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice."

²⁹ Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive"; Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization* (Routledge, 2018).

to intentionally design learning experiences that affirm diverse student identities, and to systematically dismantle the colonial logics still embedded in curricula, assessment, and platform design. The following section proposes such a lens: an Afrocentric, Practice-Oriented, Decolonial Digital Pedagogy Framework, developed explicitly to address this theoretical gap and guide meaningful pedagogical transformation in CODEL environments.

Potential for Inclusive, Practice-Driven Innovation in CODEL

The potential for inclusive, practice-based innovation in UNISA's CODEL system is strongly rooted in the institution's evolving application of digital pedagogies. Central to this innovation is the adoption of frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which enable broader digital access and inclusivity for diverse student populations, including those with disabilities and those with limited access to connectivity and devices.³⁰ UDL promotes the design of flexible learning environments that accommodate individual learning differences, thus aligning with the inclusive goals of SoTL by removing systemic barriers to participation and success in distance education.

Another emerging innovation is the integration of Internet of Things (IoT) technologies into Open Educational Resources (OER), which introduces a new layer of interactivity and learner agency. IoT-enabled tools offer students greater control over how and when they engage with educational content, fostering more seamless, student-driven learning experiences.³¹ Such affordances speak directly to the transformative potential of SoTL when it is applied in digitally mediated, practice-oriented ways within Global South institutions.

UNISA continues to recalibrate its digital infrastructure and pedagogical practices in pursuit of personalised and inclusive learning pathways. This ongoing transformation reflects an institutional commitment to responsive, learner-centred education grounded in both technological innovation and the lived realities of its diverse student body. The shift away from one-size-fits-all content delivery models toward adaptive, feedback-driven pedagogies marks a significant departure from traditional distance education paradigms.

To sustain these inclusive practices, CODEL has introduced strategic measures such as incorporating adaptive learning technologies aligned with UDL principles and investing in continuous professional development (CPD) for lecturers.³² These initiatives support reflective teaching practices and equip lecturers to adapt their methodologies to diverse learner needs and evolving digital tools. In turn, lecturers benefit from increased pedagogical flexibility and improved instructional efficacy.³³ The impact of this practice-based innovation extends beyond individual learning outcomes to systemic transformation. As Farjon et al. argue, digital pedagogies that are grounded in inclusive design principles not only improve access to content but also foster deeper learner engagement, sustained motivation, and equitable skill acquisition.³⁴ This represents a practice-led model of SoTL, where inclusion, innovation, and pedagogical reflection are tightly interwoven.

Enhancing Teaching and Learning Practices through Digital Pedagogy in CODEL

Digital pedagogies at the University of South Africa's CODEL are increasingly central to enhancing student engagement, fostering interaction, and improving academic performance. Within the framework of the SoTL, these pedagogical innovations create opportunities for evidence-informed, student-centred practices that are both transformative and relevant to the realities of distance students in South Africa. When rooted in inclusive design and critical reflection, digital pedagogies contribute not only to improved outcomes but also to the development of a more context-sensitive and equitable learning ecosystem.

³⁰ Ashiya Abdool Satar, "Promoting Digital Access and Inclusivity in Open and Distance Learning in South Africa: A UDL Approach," in *Transforming Higher Education through Universal Design for Learning* (Routledge, 2019), 312–28.

³¹ Lancelord Mncube, "Internet of Things Affordance for Open Educational Resources in a Comprehensive Open Distance E-Learning," 2023.

³² Msimango, "Empower. Pre-Service Teach. to Enhanc. Incl. Educ. Through Technol."

³³ Makinde, "Advancing Pedagogical Excellence: Strategies for Enhancing SoTL in Digital Classrooms."

³⁴ Daan Farjon, Anneke Smits, and Joke Voogt, "Technology Integration of Pre-Service Teachers Explained by Attitudes and Beliefs, Competency, Access, and Experience," *Computers & Education* 130 (2019): 81–93.

Research-based digital strategies such as real-time collaboration tools, interactive platforms, and cloud-based systems serve to reduce the perceived and actual disconnection between students and lecturers. This aligns with the Transactional Distance Theory, which posits that psychological and communication gaps in distance education can be narrowed through enhanced interaction and dialogue.³⁵ Tools that facilitate immediate feedback, peer interaction, and continuous support help CODEL create relationally rich learning environments in a format that has historically suffered from isolation and learner disaffection.

Moreover, the integration of digital tools with Bloom's Taxonomy provides structured support for higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, application, and evaluation. These pedagogical techniques not only improve academic performance but also promote deeper cognitive engagement, enabling students to construct meaningful knowledge through interactive and reflective learning pathways.³⁶ These outcomes are particularly significant in CODEL's context, where students come from diverse educational, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds.

The successful application of these digital pedagogies requires sustained professional development and the establishment of professional learning communities (PLCs). By building collective expertise among lecturers, CODEL supports the continuous refinement of digital teaching practices and reinforces SoTL as a collaborative, practice-based approach to pedagogical innovation. Such reflective engagement among faculty helps lecturers remain responsive to the changing needs of students and the evolving digital learning environment.

Notably, the use of OER reflects CODEL's commitment to both pedagogical innovation and epistemic justice. OER materials allow lecturers to adapt content in culturally relevant and linguistically accessible ways, making it possible to decolonise digital curricula and promote learning that is embedded in the lived realities of South African students.³⁷ These resources expand access and empower students and lecturers alike to participate in shaping the content and direction of their learning.

However, some challenges remain in adopting advanced digital platforms. The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) highlights that while tools such as cooperative pedagogical plans and Virtual School Boards (VSBs) have potential, their usability and accessibility are often barriers to widespread adoption.³⁸ Interface complexity, digital literacy gaps, and unequal access to reliable connectivity continue to affect the full realization of inclusive digital learning.

Nonetheless, CODEL's continuous experimentation with and adaptation of digital tools positions it at the forefront of inclusive and transformative distance education. By fostering active learning, reducing transactional distance, and incorporating culturally responsive content, the institution enhances both the teaching and learning experience. The growing presence of learner-centred digital pedagogies opens new opportunities to transform ODL from a model of content transmission into a space of collaboration, empowerment, and innovation, core tenets of a reimagined SoTL in the Global South.

Challenges and Opportunities in Digital Education

As UNISA's CODEL deepens its engagement with digital pedagogies, it encounters a complex landscape marked by both significant challenges and transformative opportunities. One of the most persistent barriers is the low acceptance and inconsistent usability of digital platforms. Despite the digital platforms' potential to support collaborative learning and documentation, many lecturers find their interface unintuitive and burdensome, exacerbating workloads rather than enhancing pedagogical

³⁵ Hassan Abuhassna et al., "Development of a New Model on Utilizing Online Learning Platforms to Improve Students' Academic Achievements and Satisfaction," *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* 17, no. 1 (2020): 38.

³⁶ Abuhassna et al., "Development of a New Model on Utilizing Online Learning Platforms to Improve Students' Academic Achievements and Satisfaction."

³⁷ Mncube, "Open Educational Resources as the Panacea for the Decolonisation of E-Learning Content in South Africa."

³⁸ Kathrina Walther et al., "Challenges and Opportunities of Using a Cooperative Digital Educational Plan. Evaluation of the Implementation," *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning* 24, no. 1 (2022): 73–86.

efficiency.³⁹ Technical limitations, lack of adequate user support, and insufficient alignment with lecturers' pedagogical goals all contribute to its underutilization.

These usability and adoption challenges are symptomatic of a broader digital transition in distance education where technological advancement risks outpacing the institutional capacity for support, training, and reflective integration. Lecturers' reluctance is not rooted in technophobia but in genuine concerns about the mismatch between digital tool functionality and pedagogical intent. There is often a disjuncture between the envisioned benefits of digital innovation and the real-world constraints faced by those tasked with implementation.

Yet, these tensions also signal key opportunities for transformative, inclusive, and practice-led SoTL. The ongoing digitalization of CODEL offers fertile ground for advancing decolonial education through technologies that foster greater accessibility, flexibility, and cultural relevance.⁴⁰ Integrating digital platforms with UDL frameworks can enhance access for students with disabilities and for those from historically marginalised communities who continue to face structural and infrastructural barriers.⁴¹ This positions digitalization not simply as a technological shift, but as a pedagogical and ethical imperative, opening space for more just and equitable educational practices.

To fully harness the potential of digital pedagogy, educator professional development remains essential. Without sustained, context-aware training, lecturers may continue to experience digital platforms as disempowering. However, with proper support, these same tools can become catalysts for pedagogical growth, reflection, and innovation. Digital transformation must therefore be seen as a shared journey, where lecturers are not passive recipients but active agents shaping the future of SoTL in ODeL environments.⁴²

Addressing these challenges also requires a critical design orientation: improving user interfaces, offering responsive technical support, and involving lecturers in platform development can increase both usability and ownership. As CODEL navigates these transitions, its ability to blend technological innovation with inclusive pedagogy, local relevance, and educator agency will determine whether digital transformation serves merely as reform or evolves into genuine educational renewal.

Therefore, challenges encountered in CODEL's digital journey are not roadblocks but critical points of reflection for doing SoTL differently. They call for a reimagining of digital education not just as content delivery, but as a space for inclusive engagement, epistemic justice, and responsive praxis. With the right strategic frameworks and institutional commitment, CODEL can serve as a leading model for context-sensitive, innovation-driven, and inclusive open distance learning in the Global South.

Case Studies and Examples

The convergence of digital innovation and pedagogical transformation is evident in several key practices and experiments within UNISA. These examples illustrate how the integration of technology, underpinned by the SoTL, is reshaping the possibilities for inclusive, relevant, and context-sensitive distance education.

One significant case involves the innovative use of IoT technologies within OER. At CODEL, the deployment of IoT-enabled OER reflects a scalable, accessible, and adaptable digital infrastructure that aligns with the institution's commitment to openness and learner-centeredness.⁴³ These systems allow distance students to engage with OERs in more meaningful, interactive, and applied ways, thus breaking down traditional barriers associated with remote education. IoT affordances such as real-time feedback and personalised content delivery enhance the operational capacity of OERs, making them both technically robust and pedagogically agile.

Additionally, CPD for lecturers at CODEL has been grounded in SoTL principles that prioritise evidence-based practices for maximizing online student engagement.⁴⁴ Through CPD, lecturers engage

³⁹ Walther et al., "Challenges and Opportunities of Using a Cooperative Digital Educational Plan. Evaluation of the Implementation."

⁴⁰ Vuyisile Msila, "African Higher Education Institutions Catching up: The Potential of 4IR in Closing the Digital Deficits," *Technium Soc. Sci. J.* 43 (2023): 85.

⁴¹ Satar, "Promoting Digital Access and Inclusivity in Open and Distance Learning in South Africa: A UDL Approach."

⁴² Makinde, "Advancing Pedagogical Excellence: Strategies for Enhancing SoTL in Digital Classrooms."

⁴³ Mncube, "Internet of Things Affordance for Open Educational Resources in a Comprehensive Open Distance E-Learning."

⁴⁴ Tariq, "Innovative Mentoring Programs: Strategies for Success in Post-COVID-19 Education."

with research-led digital pedagogy models, fostering reflective and innovative teaching approaches that are more responsive to the evolving needs of diverse learner populations. This combination of theory-informed development and practical experimentation highlights the growing institutional commitment to a reflective, scholarly teaching culture within digital education.

A compelling example of applied open pedagogy is evident in CODEL's undergraduate nursing program, where a flexible, student-centred curriculum was introduced to accommodate the varied experiences and challenges of distance students. Using a critical realism paradigm, Nedeljković and Petrovic examined how this open pedagogical model promoted meaningful engagement, critical thinking, and practice-based application among nursing students.⁴⁵ The integration of theory and professional practice was enhanced through open, asynchronous platforms, ensuring students remained connected to the content and to each other despite geographic and technological constraints.⁴⁶ This case underscores the transformative potential of open pedagogy in fostering relevance, inclusivity, and learner empowerment.

In parallel, CODEL's experimental deployment of a personalised learning analytics framework represents another forward-looking innovation. This system leverages real-time, data-driven insights to tailor learning pathways, offering a granular understanding of individual student progress and behavioural patterns.⁴⁷ Learning analytics not only support early intervention strategies but also promote engagement and improve academic outcomes. This personalised approach aligns well with decolonial and culturally responsive teaching philosophies, especially as it supports rural and marginalised students by responding to their unique trajectories and challenges.⁴⁸ Such innovations also resonate with broader educational reforms across South African higher education, where adaptive and inclusive models are increasingly prioritised.

Together, these examples affirm that CODEL's investment in digital pedagogy is not simply about technological change, but about reimagining pedagogy itself. Whether through OER and IoT integrations, open curriculum models in professional programs, or personalised learning analytics, these initiatives reflect a context-aware, equity-focused, and SoTL-driven approach to digital learning. Moreover, their transferability and scalability suggest that such innovations can be adapted across other institutions in the Global South, extending CODEL's impact beyond its immediate context and positioning it as a leading example of inclusive digital transformation in distance education.

Global Dialogues on Digital Pedagogy: Reimagining Equity, Access, and Decolonial Possibilities

Global dialogues around digital pedagogy are increasingly central to reshaping education systems in ways that advance equity, inclusivity, and decolonial justice, particularly in CODEL contexts. As education becomes more digitised, a profound need arises to ensure that the design and implementation of digital pedagogies are both contextually grounded and globally resonant. The South African context, particularly through UNISA, offers valuable insights into how digital innovation, inclusive strategies, and decolonial thinking intersect in practice. This literature review situates CODEL's evolving pedagogical practices within a broader international discourse, emphasising the importance of equity, access, and cultural relevance in the digital learning landscape.

Equity in Digital Pedagogy

Equity in digital pedagogy is not merely a matter of access to devices or bandwidth; it involves intentional pedagogical strategies that recognise and mitigate systemic disparities. Lumanta and Garcia argue for the integration of open educational philosophy within distance education to create more

⁴⁵ Ivana Nedeljković and Dragana Rejman Petrović, "Student Satisfaction and Intention to Use E-Learning during the Covid-19 Pandemic," *The International Journal of Information and Learning Technology* 40, no. 3 (2023): 225–41.

⁴⁶ Supple and Cronin, "A Pedagogy of Slow: Integrating Experiences of Physical and Virtual Gallery Spaces to Foster Critical Engagement in SoTL."

⁴⁷ Oluwatoyin A. Ajani, "Enhancing Problem-Solving Skills among Pre-Service Teachers in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Pedagogical Sociology and Psychology*, May 2, 2024, 98–113, <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPSP.202424002>.

⁴⁸ Mncube, "Open Educational Resources as the Panacea for the Decolonisation of E-Learning Content in South Africa."

equitable learning systems.⁴⁹ Similarly, Feng et al. emphasise how AI-driven teaching assistants can facilitate equitable student support by improving teacher-student interaction and feedback loops.⁵⁰ However, as Tate and Warschauer caution, equity gaps persist globally due to infrastructural limitations and digital literacy disparities, especially in the Global South.⁵¹ These gaps became especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many students were excluded from online learning due to inadequate access to devices or connectivity. CODEL's emphasis on inclusive digital design and personalised analytics reflects a broader movement towards responsive, equity-centred learning technologies.

Access in Open and Distance e-Learning

Discussions of access in CODEL are deeply intertwined with issues of race, class, gender, and geography. Ikebuchi highlights that despite the promise of online learning's flexibility, barriers persist in under-resourced communities, where digital divides mirror existing social inequalities.⁵² Similarly, Koseoglu emphasises the importance of feminist and context-sensitive pedagogies in CODEL environments, cautioning against the over-standardisation of digital learning, which can marginalise diverse epistemologies and learner needs.⁵³ These insights underscore the importance of multimodal, localised, and context-aware pedagogical strategies. CODEL's implementation of OER and adaptive digital systems aligns with these global perspectives by fostering flexible, culturally relevant learning opportunities in low-resource environments.

Decolonial Possibilities and Pedagogical Justice

Digital pedagogy also opens space for decolonial possibilities, offering a powerful challenge to Eurocentric curricula and technological determinism. The concept of decolonial digital practices draws on a synthesis of critical traditions. It is informed by Mbembe's call to dismantle colonial knowledge structures, Selwyn's critique of technological neutrality, and de Sousa Santos's imperative for cognitive justice.⁵⁴ Furthermore, it responds to what Couldry and Mejias term 'data colonialism',⁵⁵ the appropriation of human life through digital platforms by advocating for educational technologies that are community-controlled, epistemically plural, and designed for justice rather than extraction.⁵⁶ In practical terms, this translates into pedagogical actions such as co-creating Open Educational Resources with communities⁵⁷ and designing digital curricula that centre indigenous knowledge systems.⁵⁸

Araújo Silva and de Souza describe how decolonial approaches in telecollaborative language learning can centre Southern perspectives and create intercultural dialogue.⁵⁹ Reyes et al. similarly explore how interactive digital narratives (IDNs) can destabilise colonial knowledge hierarchies by encouraging pluralistic storytelling.⁶⁰ Campano et al. advocate for multimodal, critical inquiry rooted

⁴⁹ Melinda F Lumanta and Primo G Garcia, "Quality Initiatives in an Open and Distance E-Learning Institution: Towards Excellence and Equity" (University of the Philippines Open University. <https://networks.upou.edu> ..., 2020).

⁵⁰ Ty Feng, Sa Liu, and Dipak Ghosal, "CourseAssist: Pedagogically Appropriate AI Tutor for Computer Science Education," in *Proceedings of the 2024 on ACM Virtual Global Computing Education Conference V. 2* (New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2024), 310–11, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3649409.3691094>.

⁵¹ Tamara Tate and Mark Warschauer, "Equity in Online Learning," *Educational Psychologist* 57, no. 3 (2022): 192–206.

⁵² Shelly Ikebuchi, "Accessing Education: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Online Learning," *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology* 49, no. 1 (July 17, 2023): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.21432/cjlt28349>.

⁵³ Suzan Koseoglu, "Access as Pedagogy: A Case for Embracing Feminist Pedagogy in Open and Distance Learning," *Asian Journal of Distance Education* 15, no. 1 (2020): 277–90.

⁵⁴ Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive"; Selwyn, "Digital Downsides: Exploring University Students' Negative Engagements with Digital Technology"; de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*.

⁵⁵ Nick, Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

⁵⁶ Walter D Mignolo and Catherine E Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Duke University Press, 2018).

⁵⁷ Cheryl Ann Hodgkinson-Williams and Henry Trotter, "A Social Justice Framework for Understanding Open Educational Resources and Practices in the Global South," *Journal of Learning for Development* 5, no. 3 (2018).

⁵⁸ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples," 2012.

⁵⁹ Maria Araújo Silva and Ricardo Alves de Souza, "Decolonial Telecollaboration in Language Education: Centering Southern Voices," *Language and Intercultural Communication* 23, no. 4 (2023): 345–62.

⁶⁰ Angela Reyes, Juan Márquez, and Laura Fernández, "Interactive Digital Narratives as Tools for Decolonial Pedagogy," *Digital Culture & Education* 15, no. 2 (2023): 45–67.

in postcolonial theories to disrupt global power asymmetries in education.⁶¹ Within CODEL, these decolonial imperatives materialise through efforts to integrate African epistemologies, community-based learning, and culturally sustaining pedagogies. This aligns with Mbembe's call for an African-centered transformation in higher education that values indigenous knowledge and resists intellectual dependency.⁶²

Towards a Globally Relevant, Afrocentric Framework

While the CODEL context is uniquely situated within South Africa's post-apartheid, multilingual, and deeply unequal landscape, its innovations offer transferable insights for global digital pedagogical reform. By embedding critical digital pedagogy, inclusive design, and transformative learning principles into an Afrocentric, decolonial framework, CODEL contributes to the global conversation on reimagining digital education for justice and inclusion.⁶³ As institutions worldwide grapple with the post-pandemic transformation of education, models like CODEL's offer alternative visions that counter the hegemony of market-driven, technocratic solutions and instead prioritise social justice, reflexivity, and contextual responsiveness. This underscores the need for globally relevant yet locally rooted pedagogies that reflect plural knowledges and complex lived realities.

Implications for Lecturers and Students

The integration of digital pedagogical innovations at UNISA has had transformative implications for both lecturers and students, fostering a more inclusive, adaptable, and contextually responsive learning environment. These innovations go beyond technological enhancement; they reshape teaching practices, learner engagement, and the institutional ethos of higher education in open distance learning.

For lecturers, CODEL's digital transformation has provided opportunities for CPD aligned with SoTL principles. Tools such as web-based platforms, learning management systems, and data-driven learning analytics allow lecturers to adapt teaching strategies to diverse learner needs and styles.⁶⁴ This enables lecturers to shift from traditional transmission modes to more interactive, flexible, and learner-centred pedagogies. Crucially, this also supports UDL principles, accommodating students with disabilities or limited access to resources, thereby promoting educational equity.⁶⁵

The integration of these technologies also demands that lecturers acquire new pedagogical and digital competencies. As lecturers engage with new tools and evolving theoretical models, they are required to become reflective practitioners, constantly evaluating and reshaping their practice. This shift underscores the need for sustainable institutional support in the form of structured, ongoing CPD programs. These programs ensure that lecturers not only keep pace with technological change but also develop the pedagogical dexterity needed to support diverse students effectively.⁶⁶

For students, digital pedagogies at CODEL have enabled more meaningful and autonomous engagement with content. Tools like Google Cloud services and mobile-responsive platforms provide students with greater control over their learning, while collaborative and problem-based learning models increase motivation and comprehension, especially in applied fields like computer science.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the deployment of personalised learning analytics enhances students' learning journeys by providing timely feedback, identifying learning gaps, and supporting academic progression.⁶⁸

Digital inclusion frameworks such as UDL and open pedagogy further support marginalised students, ensuring that those with limited connectivity or disabilities can fully participate. In this way,

⁶¹ Gerald Campano et al., "Agency as Collectivity: Community-Based Research for Educational Equity," *Theory Into Practice* 59, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 223–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1705107>.

⁶² Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive."

⁶³ Selwyn, "Digital Downsides: Exploring University Students' Negative Engagements with Digital Technology"; Florian and Black-Hawkins, "Exploring Inclusive Pedagogy"; Mezirow, "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice."

⁶⁴ Msimango, "Empower. Pre-Service Teach. to Enhanc. Incl. Educ. Through Technol."

⁶⁵ Satar, "Promoting Digital Access and Inclusivity in Open and Distance Learning in South Africa: A UDL Approach."

⁶⁶ Farjon, Smits, and Voogt, "Technology Integration of Pre-Service Teachers Explained by Attitudes and Beliefs, Competency, Access, and Experience."

⁶⁷ M X Xalmetova, "Use of Digital Educational Technologies in Teaching Informatics," *Galaxy International Interdisciplinary Research Journal* 10, no. 9 (n.d.): 124–28.

⁶⁸ Ajani, "Enhancing Problem-Solving Skills among Pre-Service Teachers in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review."

digital pedagogies serve as an equalising force, reducing barriers to access and offering flexible pathways to academic success. Students in CODEL environments demonstrate a high level of adaptability, benefiting from a learning model that values critical engagement, multimodal learning, and personal growth.

At a broader level, CODEL's digital innovation efforts reflect a commitment to educational transformation grounded in sustainability, equity, and scholarly teaching. This shift represents more than a technical upgrade; it signals a rethinking of pedagogy as a reflective and adaptive process. As institutions like CODEL lead in this transformation, they offer scalable models for other open and distance education providers across South Africa and the Global South.

Looking forward, the next frontier for CODEL lies in the integration of emerging technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and AI-driven learning analytics. These tools offer the potential to foster deeper interactivity, personalization, and inclusive engagement, aligning with a "pedagogy of slow",⁶⁹ a reflective approach to learning that values depth over speed, understanding over memorization, and critical thinking over surface engagement.

Digital pedagogies at CODEL are reshaping the roles of lecturers and students in profound ways. Lecturers become facilitators of learning and scholarly practitioners of pedagogy, while students are empowered as active agents in their educational journeys. This symbiotic transformation is at the heart of a renewed, inclusive Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, one grounded in African realities, responsive to technological shifts, and committed to equitable academic futures.

The Role of Lecturers in Driving Decolonial Transformation

The practical implementation of an Afrocentric, decolonial digital pedagogy framework fundamentally depends on the agency and reflexivity of higher education practitioners. A critical question arises: how can lecturers challenge dominant Western and Eurocentric frameworks when many have been trained within, and may still operate through, these very epistemologies? The answer lies in reconceptualizing lecturers not as passive implementers of institutional curricula, but as reflective practitioners and co-agents of change.

Central to this transformation is critical reflexivity, a deliberate, ongoing process wherein lecturers examine their own pedagogical assumptions, epistemic biases, and positionality within colonial knowledge systems. This is not merely an individual exercise but should be structurally supported through mandatory, CPD that moves beyond technical training to include decolonial pedagogy, African epistemologies, and inclusive design principles. Furthermore, the establishment of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can create collaborative spaces where lecturers critically engage with, adapt, and redesign teaching practices in contextually responsive ways.

However, a lecturer agency alone is insufficient without institutional enablement. A synergistic model is required, wherein university programmes and curricula create the enabling conditions through policy frameworks, resource allocation, and recognition systems that empower lecturers as drivers of pedagogical innovation. This includes integrating decolonial outcomes into promotion criteria, teaching excellence awards, and curriculum review processes. By positioning lecturers as co-designers of digital curricula and resources, institutions can ensure that transformation is both bottom-up and structurally embedded.

DISCUSSION

Epistemic Pluralism and Decolonization

At the core of reimagining SoTL in CODEL is the recognition of epistemic pluralism, which values multiple ways of knowing as legitimate and necessary in higher education. Conventional SoTL frameworks, often grounded in Eurocentric epistemologies, have historically marginalised indigenous knowledge systems and African intellectual traditions.⁷⁰ Decolonising SoTL in digital spaces requires

⁶⁹ Supple and Cronin, "A Pedagogy of Slow: Integrating Experiences of Physical and Virtual Gallery Spaces to Foster Critical Engagement in SoTL."

⁷⁰ Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive"; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*.

disrupting these hierarchies of knowledge and affirming African epistemologies in curriculum design, teaching practices, and digital content creation. By embedding local histories, languages, and cultural practices in CODEL environments, institutions such as UNISA can foster epistemic justice and learner identity affirmation. This approach resists the homogenising effects of globalized digital platforms, ensuring that technology does not become a tool of epistemic erasure but rather a medium for amplifying African voices and perspectives.⁷¹

Learner-Centred and Practice-Oriented Engagement

A decolonial approach to SoTL in CODEL must also prioritise learner-centred engagement that is situated in practice and lived experience. Traditional digital pedagogies often replicate transmission models, with technology serving as a conduit for information delivery rather than as a catalyst for active participation.⁷² In contrast, learner-centred frameworks emphasise dialogue, co-construction of knowledge, and experiential learning, enabling students to link theoretical concepts to practical contexts. This aligns with Freire's conception of praxis, where reflection and action are intertwined in the pursuit of transformation.⁷³ Within professional programs such as teacher education and nursing, practice-oriented digital pedagogies such as simulations, problem-based learning, and reflective e-portfolios can help bridge the gap between theory and professional practice. By embedding learner agency at the centre of digital pedagogy, SoTL in CODEL can create conditions for deeper engagement and transformative outcomes.

Critical Reflexivity and Social Justice

For SoTL to be transformative in CODEL environments, both lecturers and students must engage in critical reflexivity about the social, political, and economic dimensions of digital education. Technologies such as learning management systems and AI-driven platforms are shaped by underlying power relations, raising questions about surveillance, access, and whose interests are being served.⁷⁴ Critical reflexivity demands that lecturers interrogate their own positionalities and teaching practices while creating space for students to reflect on how their experiences are shaped by digital divides, cultural contexts, and systemic inequities. Embedding social justice into SoTL means recognising that digital pedagogy can either reinforce inequalities or actively challenge them. By adopting reflexive practices, CODEL institutions can design learning environments that address accessibility barriers, democratise participation, and empower students who are often marginalised in traditional educational systems.⁷⁵

Culturally Sustaining Digital Spaces

Culturally sustaining pedagogy extends beyond inclusion to actively affirm and sustain the cultural and linguistic practices of students.⁷⁶ In CODEL, this means designing digital spaces that embrace African languages, narratives, and communicative modes, thereby challenging the dominance of English and Western-centric pedagogical designs. By integrating local case studies, community knowledge, and multilingual resources into digital curricula, CODEL can ensure that learning is not only accessible but also meaningful and identity-affirming. Digital storytelling, peer collaboration in local languages, and the inclusion of indigenous knowledge repositories are examples of strategies that can sustain cultural

⁷¹ Leibowitz and Bozalek, "Institutionalising the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning"; Catherine Odora Hoppers, "Research on Indigenous Knowledge Systems: The Search for Cognitive Justice," *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 40, no. 4 (2021): 310–27.

⁷² Makoe, "Uncovering the Power of Distance Education in South Africa"; Czerniewicz, "Inequality as Higher Education Goes Online."

⁷³ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

⁷⁴ Selwyn, "Digital Downsides: Exploring University Students' Negative Engagements with Digital Technology"; Jeremy Knox, "What Does the 'Postdigital' Mean for Education? Three Critical Perspectives on the Digital, with Implications for Educational Research and Practice," *Postdigital Science and Education* 1, no. 2 (October 23, 2019): 357–70, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-019-00045-y>.

⁷⁵ Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World*, vol. 31 (Columbia university press, 2009); Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*.

⁷⁶ Django Paris and H Samy Alim, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World* (Teachers College Press, 2017).

identities while fostering digital literacies. Such practices resist cultural erasure, cultivate belonging, and enhance the relevance of open and distance learning for diverse African students.

Sustainability and Community Engagement

Finally, a decolonial SoTL framework for CODEL must be grounded in sustainability and community engagement. Many African students navigate resource-constrained environments marked by unstable connectivity, limited access to devices, and financial barriers.⁷⁷ Sustainable digital pedagogy requires the use of low-bandwidth, mobile-friendly platforms and open educational resources that are adaptable to local contexts. Beyond technological design, sustainability also involves building pedagogical approaches that are co-created with communities, ensuring that knowledge production is not an isolated academic exercise, but a collaborative process rooted in social realities.⁷⁸ Engaging communities in the design and implementation of CODEL content strengthens relevance, fosters ownership, and creates pathways for universities to serve as hubs of innovation and development. By foregrounding sustainability and engagement, SoTL in CODEL can transcend individual learning outcomes and contribute to broader goals of social transformation and educational justice.

Reconceptualising SoTL in CODEL

The SoTL has traditionally been framed within higher education contexts that privilege face-to-face, Eurocentric, and content-driven approaches to pedagogy. In digitally mediated ODL, particularly within CODEL models, such frameworks reveal significant limitations. First, current SoTL practices often adopt narrow metrics of teaching effectiveness, such as completion rates, test performance, or content coverage that overlook deeper questions of inclusivity, cultural relevance, and learner agency.⁷⁹ This instrumentalist orientation tends to reproduce transmission-based, teacher-centred pedagogies that are poorly aligned with the participatory, reflexive, and context-sensitive approaches needed in digital learning environments.⁸⁰

Moreover, the reliance on LMS, virtual classrooms, and artificial intelligence-assisted platforms has often been uncritical, focusing more on technology adoption than on pedagogy. Scholars warn that digital technologies are never neutral; they are socially embedded tools that may reinforce existing inequities if their design and use are not critically interrogated.⁸¹ In South Africa, this manifests in digital divides shaped by infrastructure, socioeconomic status, language, and geography factors that constrain equitable participation in CODEL.⁸² As a result, many students in the Global South remain marginalised despite formal “access” to digital platforms, highlighting the inadequacy of SoTL frameworks that do not grapple with structural and epistemic inequities.

The need to reimagine SoTL in CODEL is therefore urgent. A reoriented SoTL must be responsive to the sociocultural and epistemic contexts of students in South Africa and the wider Global South. It must acknowledge that knowledge production and dissemination in higher education have historically privileged Western canons while silencing or marginalising African epistemologies.⁸³ Reconceptualising SoTL through decolonial, inclusive, and Afrocentric lenses enables pedagogical

⁷⁷ David Mhlanga and Tankiso Moloi, “The Stakeholder Theory in the Fourth Industrial Revolution,” *International Journal of Economics and Finance Studies* 12, no. 2 (2020): 352–68.

⁷⁸ C. Odora Hoppers, “Research on Indigenous Knowledge Systems: The Search for Cognitive Justice,” *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 40, no. 4 (2021): 310–27.

⁷⁹ Felten, “Principles of Good Practice in SoTL”; Trigwell, “Approaches to Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Research.”

⁸⁰ Makoe, “Uncovering the Power of Distance Education in South Africa”; Czerniewicz, “Inequality as Higher Education Goes Online.”

⁸¹ Selwyn, “Digital Downsides: Exploring University Students’ Negative Engagements with Digital Technology”; Knox, “What Does the ‘Postdigital’ Mean for Education? Three Critical Perspectives on the Digital, with Implications for Educational Research and Practice.”

⁸² Mhlanga and Moloi, “The Stakeholder Theory in the Fourth Industrial Revolution”; Laura Czerniewicz and Cheryl Brown, “The Habitus of Digital ‘Strangers’ in Higher Education,” *British Journal of Educational Technology* 44, no. 1 (2013): 44–53.

⁸³ Mbembe, “Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive”; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization*.

practices that validate diverse knowledge systems, foreground learner identities, and cultivate critical digital engagement.⁸⁴

Such a reimagining also aligns with calls for SoTL to be transformative rather than technocentric. By situating digital pedagogy within frameworks of critical digital pedagogy, inclusive pedagogy, and transformative learning, SoTL in CODEL can move beyond measuring performance towards fostering meaningful learning that is participatory, socially just, and culturally sustaining. In this sense, rethinking SoTL is not simply a theoretical exercise but a practical necessity for ensuring that digital education contributes to equity, access, and epistemic justice in South African higher education and beyond.

Global Dialogue and Relevance

Although this study is rooted in the South African context, the Afrocentric, Practice-Oriented, Decolonial Digital Pedagogy Framework developed for CODEL contributes meaningfully to broader global discourses on digital equity, pedagogical justice, and decolonial education. Many postcolonial and resource-constrained nations across the Global South and even within marginalised communities in the Global North grapple with inherited educational structures and epistemologies that often reproduce Eurocentric hierarchies and digitally mediated exclusions.⁸⁵ The challenges faced by CODEL in addressing uneven access to infrastructure, culturally alienating content, and hierarchical pedagogies mirror those experienced in similar ODeL environments globally.

By centring African epistemologies, critical reflexivity, and community-based knowledge practices, the proposed framework offers a pluriverse model for resisting the homogenising tendencies of global digital education, which frequently promote Western technological determinism and neoliberal models of online learning.⁸⁶ It adds to international debates by foregrounding the need for context-sensitive, inclusive, and justice-oriented digital pedagogies that do not simply translate content across borders but reconfigure educational logics from the ground up.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the framework's emphasis on sustainability, localised co-creation, and participatory design resonates with global calls for decolonial and community-responsive strategies in open education, especially within under-resourced, linguistically diverse, and historically marginalised populations.⁸⁸ In this way, while the framework is specifically tailored to CODEL, it offers transferable principles and practices for educational systems seeking to reimagine digital pedagogy in ways that promote epistemic justice, cultural relevance, and learner agency across diverse global contexts.

Contribution and Implications

This paper contributes to the SoTL by advancing an Afrocentric, practice-oriented, and decolonial digital pedagogy framework tailored for digitally mediated CODEL environments. It addresses a critical gap in existing literature, which has largely been shaped by Eurocentric pedagogical models and narrowly defined metrics of effectiveness, by centering African epistemologies, learner agency, and socio-cultural contexts. The framework offers both theoretical and practical implications: theoretically, it extends SoTL scholarship into digitally mediated, resource-constrained, and culturally diverse contexts, highlighting the intersection of critical digital pedagogy, inclusive pedagogy, and transformative learning. Practically, it provides lecturers, instructional designers, and institutions with a guide to design and implement digital pedagogies that are inclusive, culturally sustaining, socially just, and responsive to the lived realities of students in the Global South. By foregrounding equity,

⁸⁴ Leibowitz and Bozalek, "Institutionalising the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning"; Badat, *The Challenges of Higher Education Funding in South Africa*.

⁸⁵ Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory* (Routledge, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003117346>; Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, "(Towards) Decoloniality and Diversity in Global Citizenship Education," *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 9, no. 3–4 (September 2011): 381–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2011.605323>.

⁸⁶ de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*; Selwyn, "Digital Downsides: Exploring University Students' Negative Engagements with Digital Technology."

⁸⁷ Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*.

⁸⁸ T. Adam, N. Butcher, and F. Tusubira, "Open Educational Resources in Africa: A Transformative Agenda," *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 22, no. 1 (2021): 1–18; Hodgkinson-Williams and Trotter, "A Social Justice Framework for Understanding Open Educational Resources and Practices in the Global South."

reflexivity, and community engagement, the framework positions CODEL as a site for meaningful pedagogical innovation and transformative learning, contributing to the broader project of educational justice and epistemic freedom.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the SoTL within CODEL must transcend Eurocentric pedagogical models and narrow metrics of effectiveness to meaningfully respond to the realities of higher education in South Africa and the wider Global South. While digital technologies have expanded access, their transformative potential remains constrained when pedagogical frameworks ignore students' cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity. This study therefore calls for a shift beyond technocentric approaches toward inclusive, context-sensitive pedagogies rooted in African epistemologies.

Anchored in critical digital pedagogy, inclusive pedagogy, and transformative learning theory, the paper advances an Afrocentric, practice-oriented, and decolonial digital pedagogy framework for CODEL. This framework prioritises epistemic pluralism, learner-centred engagement, critical reflexivity, culturally sustaining digital spaces, and community-based sustainability. Together, these principles offer a holistic foundation for reimagining SoTL disrupting transmission-based models, resisting neocolonial dominance, and promoting equity and justice in digital education.

By contributing to both local debates in South African higher education and global conversations on digitally mediated SoTL, this study urges lecturers, policymakers, and institutions to recognise digital technologies as socially embedded practices capable of either entrenching inequities or catalyzing meaningful change. Positioning SoTL within an Afrocentric, decolonial, and inclusive paradigm enables CODEL and similar institutions to lead a digital transformation that is not only innovative, but also just, culturally relevant, and transformative for all participants.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Dr. K. Mbatha is a researcher in educational technology whose work focuses on the integration of digital technologies to enhance teaching and learning in diverse educational contexts. Her research explores innovative and context-responsive pedagogical approaches, with particular attention to adult education in Community Learning Centres, open and distance learning, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and technology-mediated instruction in South Africa. Dr. Mbatha's scholarship is grounded in advancing inclusive and transformative educational practices, contributing to the field through critical, practice-informed perspectives on digital innovation in education.