

Online teaching and learning platforms in Higher Education from developing universities in South Africa (Africa): Socially just and decolonized pedagogies

Doniwen Pietersen

Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This article addresses whether dialogical, online teaching and learning platforms in higher education can be framed as socially just and decolonized pedagogies at all universities in South Africa (Africa). It is suggested that inclusive pedagogies like dialogue and care on online teaching and learning platforms such as Blackboard, if effectively used by lecturers, can contribute to students from diverse backgrounds feeling acknowledged and recognized as humans in general but Africans in particular. It is therefore the argument of this paper that socially just and decolonized pedagogies are particularly necessary in a post-colonial South African higher education system, where historically only certain individuals had input in the curriculum and the dialogical relationships of student and lecturer when it came to teaching and learning. In order for this to happen, lecturers ought to teach effectively in order to foster success in a decolonial classroom environment that is safe and friendly, with a curriculum where previously disadvantaged students can deliver dialogical input. In doing so, by implication, students grow wholly and communally as Africans, but are also provided the opportunity to

critically interact with lecturers in their online higher education learning process.

Keywords: inclusive pedagogies, developing universities (Africa and South Africa), higher education system, teaching and learning, decolonial space, social justice.

Many higher education institutions all over the world have been impacted by elements of the external environment, such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), the COVID-19 pandemic, and the volatile and uncertain learning and teaching environment. All these factors have played a significant role worldwide in the tipping over of massive unequal systems which include systems of education, but online education in particular, for many on the African continent. Developing universities in South Africa use online platforms such as Blackboard and try to include students from an African, decolonized and critical and dialogical pedagogical point of view.

The following quote underscores the importance of the direction of what a developing African higher education needs to be, that is free from exploitation and underpinned by social justice. Shermann posits that,

The African university is a product of the modern world, yet the environment which inherited it is largely traditional, pre-industrial, and agrarian. It is an environment caught in a change from external forces - centuries of economic exploitation, colonisation, intellectual and cultural dominance. The small modern sector resulting from these forces has expanded over time but compared with the traditional sector, it remains exceedingly small and does not integrate with it. A product of the Western world, the African university was born a stranger to its own environment, and its main links were with the institutions that were strangers to this environment and with the countries to which those universities belong. Thus the African university became heir to a dual setting - the traditional African environment in which it was to be rooted, and the modern Western sector from which it received its orientation. How was it to make an appropriate response? Its borrowed models were for an industrial society with an entirely

different milieu and could offer no real guidelines (Sherman, 1990:371).

The researcher considers this point of view to help provide insights as to how faculties at South African developing universities can respond equally or more positively to the ever-changing external and internal learning and teaching world, so that teaching and learning spaces can be more diverse and inclusive of students and the *habitus* they bring to these spaces – as Africans who are continually seeking to be decolonized. These insights may even bring to the fore how lecturers may be able to socially and psychologically engage with students so that students are able to thrive at their studies.

Socially just pedagogy discourse

Paulo Freire draws on a strong theological frame of reference when he considers teaching and learning settings and the undergirded reality of what the dynamics would be in a socially just space as lecturers and students are in the process of ‘becoming’. He aptly explains this as:

honestly confronting the realities we faced, on carefully listening, on remembering what it means to be fully human, on using one’s lived experiences to think critically about that reality and how it might be changed (Freire, 1972).

This critical conscience for Freire allows for those in power in the teaching and learning process to acknowledge and open one’s eyes to the cultural and other injustices and worldviews imposed on others (Pietersen, 2022). Interestingly, this also speaks to the departure point of decolonial classroom environments.

A teaching and learning setting, including online platforms such as Blackboard, needs to fulfill a kind of *modus operandi* that is both a diverse and inclusive approach, and which allows for both lecturer and student’s worldviews. In this working strategy, the ‘culture circle’ is used, in which teacher/facilitator and student create reflections and discussions about reality and collectively seek to unveil and identify the possibilities of learning. The ‘culture circle’ is a concept that speaks to the “critical consciousness of inequities and addresses their causes and insisting on transforming their social and their political circumstances” (Zulu, 2021:252).

For a higher education institution in South Africa to thrive in teaching and learning, it needs to prioritize ‘action-reflection’ processes. This would mean that teaching and learning processes need to be laid bare

on how students positively and actively participate in an online learning process, even on a virtual platform such as Blackboard (Pietersen, 2022:3), where the stories of students and who they are as persons from different backgrounds lend richness to the teaching and learning process (Longo, 2020:1–2). This kind of emphasis can be described in the words of Eisner and Eisner in the following way, and one cannot help but agree that “the enduring outcomes of education are found in...the joy of the ride, not merely arriving at the destination” (Eisner and Eisner, 1985). This kind of ‘joy ride’ is not only refreshing but it also allows all stakeholders in the teaching and learning process to strengthen and modify and re-evaluate their pedagogical practices (Davids and Waghid, 2018:221). It is thus the conviction of this paper that such a holistic socially just pedagogy encourages a reflective process where both lecturers and students from universities from South Africa are able to value the cultural and historical sources of individuals, which can challenge the ‘culture circles’, as previously mentioned.

To put this explicitly within a framework of theological and caring pedagogies that is undergirded by the aim of decolonized teaching and learning strategies, which is important for South African universities, Mbembe (2015:19) asserts:

By pluriversity, many understand a process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity. It is a process that does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but embraces it via a horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions.

It is therefore a plurality of epistemologies that is able to accentuate an ethos in the online higher education climate where every student in the lecturer and student relationship is embraced (teaching and learning).

For South African universities, in order to necessitate a socially just and decolonial action and redress in the teaching and learning process, true transformation needs to take place. This involves asking the following questions:

What would a humanising pedagogy look like when taking seriously the pedagogical task of rethinking the human without hiding the epistemic violence of colonial knowledge and practices of knowledge? What would a humanising pedagogy look like that acknowledges the contribution of Western knowledge but goes beyond and provides intellectual and pedagogical spaces of decolonial praxis—such as strategies of counter/storytelling,

healing, and reclaiming of people's identities and spaces? What would a humanising pedagogy look like that ethically addresses the complex and sometimes contradictory histories of different peoples in (post)colonial settings, while it enables us to change our relationship to colonial/colonized modes of signification and relationality? (Zavala, 2017).

Constitutive meanings of a socially just pedagogy

Most universities in South Africa's teaching and learning process is based on a system that aims to produce students who are able to identify, analyze and solve everyday problems. Students must be able to think critically and creatively, both inside and outside of their discipline of study – in a decolonized way. By implication, they are then able to contribute to their teaching and learning process, and how the curriculum is formed. The researcher is convinced that this is more than being able to successfully develop as students, but that they are able to do this particularly as Africans.

The effective management of teaching and learning in the higher education space, and online platforms such as Blackboard, ought to consider the adoption of a caring and inclusive pedagogy (Pietersen, 2022). Consequently, this will allow students to demonstrate an understanding of the world in a free and decolonized way. Thus, the proper use of online spaces as applied in the teaching and learning process must be viewed as critical tools in the development and growth of students in general and amongst developing universities in South Africa and their students in particular.

Moreover, the lack of a strong emphasis on the importance of making connections and critical engagement between students and lecturers in developing universities plays a vital role in mediating students' expectations and learning experiences. It is the experience of many students in university faculty's that there exists "a lack of communication from lecturers, as well as frustrations with a general lack of interactive communication between students, lecturers and peers" (Higher Education and Training, 2020:8-9). Many students find it difficult to engage with lecturers on online platforms. This ultimately creates a culture of exclusion and feeds into the colonized way of conducting education.

Some students actually verbalized this sense of exclusion from their teaching and learning process. Their responses can be summarized

from a South African university Institutional Report called “Emergency Remote Teaching”, when students were surveyed, noting things like:

Lack of communication from lecturers: We don’t get clear communication from the offset from lecturers, I still haven’t received any emails from lecturers for 3 modules second semester, so I have no clue what the plans going forward is. Some of the lecturers barely responded to concerns and would not reply to our messages. We would wait 2-3 days for a reply from them and some were very helpful (Higher Education and Training, 2020:9).

The underpinnings of the aforementioned statement are of students feeling excluded from the online (Blackboard) teaching and learning process. However, deeper reflections, for the researcher, can be ascribed to the tenets of colonization as a lecturer’s lack of response speaks to not seeing students as important and human impetus to the teaching and learning process. What is needed is ‘humanising pedagogy’ (Zembylas, 2018). The lecturer’s lack of effective use of and development and training perhaps in South African university Learning Systems, in this case Blackboard, can be said to be an attitude on behalf of the lecturer that is not based on a communal African way of learning and therefore does not communicate a sense of care in the teaching and learning process in its entirety. Consequently, it adds to a shortfall in terms of creating and enabling an online environment that adds to colonial education spaces that are in “the struggle for global social justice that is inseparable from the struggle for cognitive justice, namely, the recognition of epistemic diversity” (Fricker, 2007).

To aim for this kind of enabling environment, lecturers, students, and researchers alike need to continually “promote global social justice, through interrogating the construction of cognitive injustice in all educational contexts, policies and theories”, so that students in general but African students in particular are able to give voice to the voiceless and marginalized.

Socially just and decolonized pedagogical impetus in teaching and learning

The themes of dialogical and critical engagement, care and socially just pedagogies, can be summarized by the work of Freire (1972:61) who notes that:

dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person "depositing" ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be "consumed" by the participants in a discussion.

Freire's theory underscores the fact that teachers/facilitators cannot simply see themselves as someone who imposes their views on those who are less knowledgeable or who are empty vessels waiting to 'consume' material uncritically. This would be the result of deliberately ignoring the voices of the student in the online teaching and learning platform (Blackboard), even if it means drawing stakeholders such as students out of their comfort zone (Pietersen, 2022:4).

Put differently, Freire et al. (2005) state:

Without humility, one can hardly listen with respect to those one judges to be too far below one's own level of competence. It is indeed necessary, however, that this love be an "armed love", the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce. It is this form of love that is indispensable to the progressive educator and that people must all learn. Tolerance is another virtue. Without it no serious pedagogical work is possible; without it no authentic democratic experience is viable; without it all progressive educational practice denies itself. Tolerance is not, however, the irresponsible position of those who play the game of make-believe. The act of tolerating requires a climate in which limits may be established, in which there are principles to be respected. That is why tolerance is not coexistence with the intolerable.

In addition to the teacher/facilitator having much responsibility to drive inclusion of all stakeholders in the process of any online teaching platform, they also need to be progressive in how they use and perform teaching and learning tasks on teaching and learning platforms. In other words, students, as well as lecturers, add value to the teaching and learning process of online platforms and their input must be considered of primary importance because a process of care and decolonization indirectly unfolds.

Teaching and learning make up a process of education. However, it is also measurable. According to Peters (1966), for proper education to take place on any platform, including online platforms such as Blackboard, they must be central if teachers/facilitators are to be impactful with a vision to transform education spaces. Peters (1966: 25,31,45), suggests:

that “education” implies the transmission of what is worthwhile to those who become committed to it; (ii) that “education” must involve knowledge and understanding and some kind of cognitive perspective, which are not inert; (iii) that “education” at least rules out some procedures of transmission, on the grounds that they lack wittingness and voluntariness [on the part of the learner]

Noteworthy of Peters’s view is that it is critical for a teacher/lecturer to also foreground the dialogical and deliberative pedagogies, and that teaching and learning and education in general is transmitted by teachers/lecturers but also translate into the discourse of social justice in education.

Moreover, Biesta (2013:11) highlights what the underlining antithesis to the teaching and learning process is as follows:

The dialogical approach, both approaches ultimately rely on the possibility of truth and, more specifically, truth uncontaminated by power... this truth is learned from (and thus given by) the teacher; in the dialogical approach, this truth is discovered through a collective learning process. That the monological approach relies on the idea of truth uncontaminated by power has to do with the fact that emancipation is seen as a process of overcoming ideological distortions. Here, emancipation operates as a process of demystification. In the dialogical approach, emancipation is the process that restores true human existence – or, in Freirean language, true human ‘praxis’.

Therefore, the relationship between student facilitator or lecturer and how they relate and collaborate in the aforementioned process needs to be carefully considered, especially if the powers of lecturers and students are different and it relates also to a decolonial pedagogical perspective. The attempt to achieve this can be summarized by Greene (1986:430) when she asserts “[teaching and learning is] joined to [a] justice or equity process”. This process ought to prompt students as well as lecturers to question meanings and ideas, to imagine alternative possibilities and outcomes, to modify practical judgements, and to develop respect and critical engagement in their field of study. In this way, critical assignment and deliberation is unhindered communicative liberty that involves both rational opinion and willful allowance of information, which can almost always potentially lead to a transformation in people’s preferences and perceptions of their learning (Dhungana, 2021).

Before going any further, it is important to justify why and how the research problem arises out of this study. In other words, what are the factors which contribute to the research problem? The researcher believes that developing universities in South Africa, and education faculties at large in Africa forms part of an unevenly distributed education and training system that has too many barriers to growth - from a decolonized point of view. It is also the researcher's conviction that quality education ought to be evenly distributed and should be available to all South African students, regardless of background or location in Africa. This, in turn, speaks to online higher education's need to be re-evaluated against the decolonized project. Therefore, education entities such as developing universities need to set equitable teaching and learning standards for every student coming through their halls, but they also have the responsibility to create teaching and learning outcomes that are achievable in students' 'becoming' as means to empower students to be part of their learning process, making space for pedagogies of care and inclusion. In addition, when setting the content and standards for teaching and learning using online platforms such as Blackboard (Pietersen, 2022:5), it should be kept in mind that all students need to be developed in reaching their full potential as persons, not just for academic brilliance but also as Africans of the global south.

Factors that sustain excellent dialogical outcomes for developing universities' teaching and learning plan, including the views of students in the online teaching and learning process need to be valued, particularly when it comes to indigenous knowledge as it forms part of their educational formation. If this is done well, students will feel that they were included to create depth and meaning. Thus, developing universities would have wholly developed students that are both globally and locally engaged and are not restricted by geographical borders, because education needs to be interrogated from a decolonized pedagogical framework. This problem can only be addressed by lecturers reviving the "eventalization of the intentional emancipation of education [online teaching and learning systems such as Blackboard]" (Foucault, 1991:41). The way this could play out can be explained by Foucault and can be ascribed to acknowledging critique:

Critique doesn't have to be the premise of a deduction which concludes this then is what needs to be done. It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is. Its use should be in processes of conflict and confrontation, essays

in refusal. It doesn't have to lay down the law for the law. It isn't a stage of programming. It is a challenge directed to what is (Foucault, 1991:12).

This discourse does not allow the possibility for any individual or group of students to be excluded from critical/dialogical, socially just and decolonized educational perspectives that interest them and that determine their future. This means they need to critically engage in the teaching and learning process that is unfolding at an African university and not an institution that upholds Western epistemologies to the fast exclusion of Africanization of students on the African continent. After all, the rights of students to participate in deliberation and critical/dialogical, socially just, and decolonized engagement are legally institutionalized and should be measured against the effective use of teaching and learning tools, such as Blackboard. This means that each individual student has an equal opportunity to be heard during the deliberative and dialogical process of curriculum design and presentation of material on online platforms (Pietersen, 2022), which in turn means that the viewpoints of the minority are heard, and the domination of the majority is limited. However, in order for critical/dialogical, socially just, and decolonized engagement to be effective and truly beneficial, the constant monitoring of input by students from the perspective of the lecturer in using teaching and learning platforms, such as Blackboard, always needs to be evaluated.

Socially just and decolonized engagement in education

One crucial aspect that this paper offers into socially just and decolonized engagements in education, as well as affirming the process of deliberation and inclusion, is to juxtapose these pedagogical ideas and foreground the conversation between developing universities and Freire because both entities' "purpose of education is to serve and help develop a civilized and just society, through the development of well-read, thoughtful, scholarly individuals with a well-developed capacity for independent critical thought" (Gray and Collison, 2002). Purposed education considers consensus that grows out of critical/dialogical, socially just, and decolonized engagement in education in order for it to be effective in teaching and learning.

According to Habermas, this kind of consensus should not be a prerequisite for discussion, but rather it should reflect the democratic discourse of informed deliberation that is built on a socially just and decolonized responsiveness to the demands of an active citizenry, which is

what higher education in Africa ought to deliver on, including in the online teaching and learning space. Habermas (2006:413) also states:

[critical/dialogical, socially just, and decolonized engagement in education] necessitates the deliberative paradigm as it offers as its main empirical point of reference a democratic process [in teaching and learning], which is supposed to generate legitimacy through a procedure of opinion and will formation that grants (a) publicity and transparency for the deliberative process, (b) inclusion and equal opportunity for participation, and (c) a justified presumption for reasonable outcomes

Thus, a discursive account of democratic citizenship that is just and decolonized seeks ongoing deliberation as means to identify the ‘better’ argument between majorities and minorities after the parties have temporarily reached a compromise for the sake of progress as they learn and participate together (Pietersen, 2022:6). Habermas’s perception of democratic citizenship in online teaching and learning (education process) has important implications for a higher education institution on the African continent, but particularly with developing universities in South Africa who strive to be part of the Africanization discourse, that is impactful and that can add value to the world over.

Students today have been impacted by their external environment, such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution and COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to a volatile and uncertain learning and teaching environment, and it has shown to really demonstrate the kind of inequality that exists between Third World and First World countries. Developing universities in South Africa use of online platforms such as Blackboard and the inclusion of students from a dialogical pedagogical point of view may serve as a valuable conversation with Freire and others’ input on the critical/dialogical, socially just, and decolonized engagement (Pietersen, 2022:6). Because they serve to re-evaluate the discussion points for this means to lecturers in an African institution and faculty who engage with students on a regular basis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated “emergency critical dialogical changes in teaching and learning but has also created rare opportunities to think differently about the assumptions and processes that have become the norm” (Higher Education and Training, 2020:10), for the interaction between lecturer and students on online platforms such as Blackboard. The necessitated move to “remote learning for the majority of the sector” (Akuffo and Budu, 2019:1), including African higher

institutions in general but developing universities in South Africa in particular, it allows for a differentiated approach that precipitates engagement of dialogical, critical, deliberative and an ethics of care in the online teaching and learning process. This informs a socially just and decolonized framework. For developing universities to acknowledge that these themes go together, they ought to acknowledge the purpose of this research in seeing the importance of identifying “how students are accessing and using different forms of learning materials, and to explore how students’ experiences” of inclusion and exclusion during the aforementioned context (4IR and COVID-19) might be informed (Higher Education and Training, 2020), broadly speaking.

Lastly, lecturers need to think about including students more from a critical/dialogical, socially just, and decolonized perspective, around “policy and practice in more digitally advanced teaching and learning spaces” such as what Blackboard and other online platforms may offer because engagements from a decolonized and critical viewpoint are not negotiable (Pietersen, 2022:6), if we are in the business of creating higher standards of growth and more successful students and African graduates. Such a kind of transformation in the online higher education space is all-inclusive and can be summarized in the words of Young:

Emerge on different sites in any region: the academic, the cultural, the ecological, the educational, the industrial, the local centre-periphery structure of the city and the rural hinterland, the marketplace, the media, the medical in all its different manifestations, the mainstream political, the rainforest, and the social sphere (Young, 2001:58).

It may be argued that including and considering all these spheres of society may be the reasons why there is disharmonious disjuncture already in the education system. However, this may not be used by protractors to claim that a critical/dialogical, socially just, and decolonized framework cannot enjoy full consideration in the online teaching and learning space in higher education in Africa and South Africa, which is the gap this paper has aimed to address

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Author's Bio

Doniwen Pietersen is a Senior Lecturer that teaches and engages in research in Philosophy of Education at Sol Plaatje University in Kimberley, South Africa. My research interests focus on the intersection between ancient Near Eastern literature, Teaching and Learning pedagogies and philosophies in education. I have published several journal articles in these areas.

Email: doniwen.pietersen@spu.ac.za