

A NEW HISTORY EDUCATION LECTURER'S UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19: A PERSONAL REFLECTION

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Abstract

On March 16th, 2020 I commenced my new job as a lecturer on History Education at Stellenbosch University (US), the very same day the University went into lockdown due to COVID-19. I have been a high school teacher for 11 years and so, moving to the University sectors brought with its own challenges. Added to these obstacles was now the addition of remote learning and the complete upheaval of University life. I have attempted to unpack my own experiences as a junior staff member during a nationwide pandemic lockdown and my experiences with remote teaching and learning. This is a personal reflection which outlines my experiences, as well as lessons I have taken away from the transition to online teaching. There are many obstacles that new lecturers face however, these challenges have been exacerbated due to the sudden transition to remote teaching and learning.

Keywords: Remote teaching; Remote learning; Online; New lecturer; COVID-19; Pandemic; History Education lecturer.

Introduction

On Sunday, 15 March 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that, due to the rapid spread of COVID-19, South Africa was now in a state of emergency which resulted in the closure of schools and universities alike. On the same day as the announcement, I arrived in the Western Cape to commence my new job as a Lecturer in History Education at the University of Stellenbosch. I must admit, the sudden change in trajectory provided some doubt in terms of the stability of my job and the expectations of it. Beginning a new job in a new province has its own challenges and inserting a global pandemic into the fray caused an overwhelming volume of job-related and personal anxiety.

Given the nature in the shift of expectations between the school environment and the university environment, there will always be challenges

for a new lecturer. I had my own expectations of challenges that I could expect as well as my own expectations of the job itself and the students. My preconceptions were challenged from the beginning, some I expected and some I did not. However, the biggest challenge that I experienced was, as a new History Education lecturer, the sudden lockdown and shift to remote learning due to a global pandemic.

Experiences of arriving at lockdown

On my very first day (16 March) at US, the University made the announcement that it would be shutting down per lockdown regulations and it has yet to open fully. When US went into lockdown, the staff and students began their term break a week earlier. This allowed for staff to transition their traditional face-to-face course programmes to the university online platform (SUNLearn). On the one hand, I was grateful for the reprieve to find my feet however, I was ultimately left stranded in an unknown environment. In a very short space of time, US managed to ensure that I had the technological support to allow for online teaching and that I had met with the necessary course coordinators, and for that, I am very grateful. However, because of the speedy nature of lockdown, I did not get to meet many colleagues, nor was I able to settle down in the university structure or my office. As a result, the professional transition from teacher to lecturer was stalled and it felt like I was in limbo – not quite a “real” lecturer and no longer a school history teacher.

Under these circumstances, as a new lecturer, I experienced many adjustment issues, issues that would have occurred anyway without a pandemic, but which were exacerbated by it. One major element with which I still struggle is the transition from being a teacher to a lecturer as it is a complete shift in mindset. Perhaps, it is lockdown related, perhaps the shift would have occurred at a quicker pace had I been in the actual physical university environment amongst fellow academics in campus for the last six months instead of at home; I am not sure. However, the adjustment in thinking and thought processes has been quite challenging. What I have noted, especially with regards to myself as a teacher, is that I struggle with boundaries and thus the university teaching and administrative obligations were my central focus often to the detriment of my own PhD in History Education studies. At university level, there is a great importance placed on research and publishing and thus there is now added pressure within this

new transition phase. Finding the balance between teacher and researcher has been quite challenging and I have not always been successful.

Furthermore, being the only History Education lecturer, it was quite difficult finding my feet as well as adjusting to the new rigor of academia. Thankfully, I had colleagues outside of the university who not only helped with course development but provided a supportive sounding board to my strategies or developments. I have been a High School teacher for 11 years having taught in both South Africa and Vietnam however, the move to the higher education arena has provided a new challenge. This is a challenge that I could not have survived without the handful of colleagues I had met prior to lockdown as well as my own long-term colleagues – support is immeasurable. The need for a sounding board so you do not feel alone cannot be stressed enough because what the pandemic has created is isolation. This was particularly evident in the first four months of remote learning – the feeling of being disconnected and isolated from the US community was strong. This was possibly also an error on my part as I could have asked for help more often as the support was there when it was called upon.

Lessons learned from remote learning

During the remote learning phase, that is online, off-campus emergency education, there are six lessons I can take away. First, my main struggle was with the *dissociated nature of online teaching and learning*. This particular take away was, by far, the most emotionally taxing. Whilst I had substantial support from my Head of Department (HOD) and other colleagues, arriving the day US closed did allow for some serious disconnection to take place between my colleagues, the students, and the university environment. Being a new lecturer brings to the fore challenges in its own rights like, establishing a structured course, getting to know other peers within the faculty, generating a support structure and understanding the way US works. These aspects of settling into the new position were not made easy by the COVID-19 pandemic. In hindsight, I imagine it was a difficult situation for everyone as everyone had to transition onto the online learning platform and so colleagues were only able to reach out much later. I can empathize with this as the workload was so overwhelming, it was difficult to focus on menial tasks, or tasks as simple as responding to an email. The first four months of remote learning was excessively grueling

for me and I believe other colleagues were waging their own battle against online woes. Adjusting to the new “normal” of virtual interaction has been a challenge and further entrenches my appreciation for in-person teaching and social interaction.

I also found that I was quite disconnected from my History Education students during remote learning. Coming from 11 years of in-person, face-to-face teaching, I do prefer the contact time associated with teaching. It is almost tactile in nature. The pandemic has stolen this from teaching and despite learning still taking place, there is something missing from the whole process. History is quite abstract in nature with multiple dimensions. The abstract nature of History combined with the need to challenge what the students know, has been made more difficult through remote teaching. Many people respond differently to online teaching and learning. I do see this as being a suitable way of learning for many students and I must commend US for doing their utmost to ensure that learning has still taken place. For me, I prefer the in-person engagement with the students. I do not like the sound of my own voice droning on and on into the dark void of nothingness, I prefer discussion-style lectures with students. Putting aside the workload and adapting to a new work environment, adapting to this new form of e-teaching has been uncomfortable. Completely changing how things are “normally” done added to a level of discomfort as my safety net of teaching had now been taken away. The concept of normality changed drastically during this transition which has been a difficult change to accept.

Another component of online teaching and learning was student and administrative communication through email. As this was the only way students could communicate with me, the number of daily emails rose exponentially. I was completely unprepared for the *sheer volume of emails* I would receive. From the administration side, in the beginning, there were many adjustments that US had to make as work schedules needed to be created or revised to ensure that students would not be overwhelmed by the volume of work. In the early days of lockdown there was an overabundance of emails and bureaucratic administrative work from the University. This was challenging because often I did not know what I needed to do in terms of the administration requirements for online teaching. Being thrown into online teaching whilst only having one day's experience at US proved to be a deficit when having to adapt to this change. The feeling of being in well over my head remained constant in the first few months. Communication

and understanding the communication was an aspect that I am sure would have been made easier had I either been at the University itself or had a better understanding of how US functioned.

The History Education students I taught were a challenge in an unexpected way. Any query a student had, regardless if this had been addressed in a lecture, they would email. This element might not have been so obvious had there been in-person classes as any queries they might have could be addressed in a more casual setting rather than the formality of email. One particular aspect of the email culture that I noticed is that many students lacked a certain “netiquette” when emailing and their questions turned into demands – often articulated in a rude manner. This was an interesting lesson to learn. Another aspect of the student culture that I noticed (through email) was this overwhelming sense of privilege and entitlement in many students. Perhaps, many were just “trying their luck” and pushing their boundaries with a new lecturer. It was an interesting lesson for me because I had different and possibly naïve expectation of university students – I am not sure why, as not all students were studious when I was studying. But this idealistic perception of mine adjusted very quickly to the reality of university students. Establishing boundaries and not accepting certain demands was something I had to learn very quickly.

As aforementioned, as a history teacher establishing boundaries was a weakness of mine and this was only exacerbated during the pandemic. *Creating boundaries* with the students is important in any kind of teaching situation, but more importantly, creating boundaries for myself was a lesson learned. Adjusting to teaching at university level and adapting the course to online (also mid-Semester) was difficult, and I am glad to say that I have managed to overcome this little hiccup. However, students can be unrelenting in their demands and it was important for me to establish boundaries for what were realistic demands or concerns versus concerns that were inappropriate at their level. Creating boundaries through course expectations is an important component of lecturing. This was something I had to learn for myself as I had naively thought that students would easily accept coursework. It was also a difficult balance between making course adjustments because of remote learning versus maintaining the standard of education. It was a balancing act made more trying by the demands of some students to lessen the course work. It was more difficult as I was unsure whether this was a legitimate e-learning concern or a concern from someone not willing to put in the required effort for a degree and as a

future teacher. This balancing act has improved, and now that I am in communication with more colleagues, it is easier to make this detection.

Forming boundaries for myself has proved to be an unsuccessful task. What I miss most about the in-person work environment is the perception of work times. It is easier for me to discern between work time and home time because of the change in physical structure. This perceived notion of a “workday” has all but disappeared. I have realized, I am someone who does not thrive from working at home. I need to have the physical structure of a work environment for me to balance work productivity and personal productivity. Because there is no physical structure, the mental perception of a work schedule has meshed itself into the entire day. Additionally, living alone under lockdown in a new city has added to this confused meshing of work hours as there is no clear delineation between a workday and home time. What happens as a result, is that I am constantly at my computer as I feel I have not produced enough work. Rational or irrational, this imagined perception has infiltrated my day and taken over any sort of boundaries I may have had. I have actively tried to establish a “work” day albeit unsuccessfully. Creating boundaries was made even more difficult by the marking of online assessments.

I drastically misjudged how long it would take to mark in *online assessments*. For me, it took almost twice as long to read, mark and comment on online assessments which was made even more difficult because of scrolling. I did have a number of History Education classes and so there were a fair amount of assessments (to be fair, it was still less than when I was a teacher) that constantly needed grading. Now that my feet are firmly on the ground, I do feel more confident that I would be able to tackle the marking more timeously than before. At the time, there were many balls that I was juggling such as: adjusting and adding to the course, general settling in stress, online workshops provided by US; these often took away the focus from marking. Once the first two assessments have slipped by, it is a snowball after that. And added to the number of tasks, was the length of time it took to grade properly. The pressure to meet marking deadlines (deadlines I had set for myself and US deadlines) meant that any sort of boundary creation disappeared, and I would be at my computer, again, all evening. This habit was nurtured because of online marking and now it is still difficult to detach from the computer.

Another component that needs to be factored in is the language component. US is a dual medium university, and as such, course work needs to be offered in both English and Afrikaans (as best as possible) and assessments may be submitted in Afrikaans, should the student wish. I am from KwaZulu-Natal, and despite the sweat and tears of my Afrikaans teachers, I have not managed to maintain the language. This is putting it lightly. My extreme ineptitude in Afrikaans has been a major shortfall as this adds an extra barrier to the online teaching. US offers translation services, much to my profound relief, however, translations take time and so, I have to always be ahead of the game in terms of my course work. Online assessments are a little more challenging to translate especially when there are deadlines, however, I am still eternally grateful for the translation services available at US.

A result of the lack of boundaries and online marking is the feeling of being *screened out*. Being in front of your computer screen from morning until evening creates screen exhaustion. This is not a healthy component of online teaching and learning and it is something I am struggling with the most. Because there is the lack of social interaction one would normally find at their job, I find myself, in front of the computer all day, taking a lengthy break only to walk my dog or go to the shop. Despite knowing the irrationality behind this feeling, it does not stop my mind from making the connection between work and computer thus productivity cannot happen with no computer. However, the consistency with which I am in front of my computer nullifies productivity as my eyes and mind need a break from the screen. Being away from it induces an anxiety that is difficult to describe – it is almost a guilt-induced anxiety. This creates a Catch-22 situation for me.

Acclimatizing to the academic rigor and high expectations of US as well as adapting this rigor to the online mode has provided many challenges. This has taken a toll on my *mental health* in many ways. The isolating nature of online learning, as aforementioned, has led to the blurring the lines of work and home. Now that work is at home, I am never removed from the work environment. I am always “at work” and it is too easy to fall into the trap of “checking in” at work. The lack of clear boundaries as well as my own personal desire not to fail or make a mistake has further blurred the lines between work and home. These are my own demons at work which have been enhanced by the pandemic and the lockdown regulations.

The lack of guidance in the beginning of my career at US, understandably so, led to unsureness and mistakes which enhances my own anxiety and fear of ineptitude. In hindsight, I cannot fault US, as it would have been impossible to tell me everything regarding the term and how the University functions all in one go. It would be unlikely I would even remember each detail. When an issue did arise however, and I contacted my support structure, they were quick to help and offer guidance where necessary and where they could.

Conclusion

I thought I was well-prepared. Perhaps if the COVID-19 pandemic had waited a few months to allow for me to adjust, I would have realized how idealistic that statement is. The online platform, whilst relatively simple, needed some practice. Learning how to address the different learning needs of the students and adapting to online teaching was also a challenge. In retrospect, I think I may have pandered a bit too much to the needs of the students in a way that created an environment of overexplaining and spoon-feeding. These are teething issues that would have happened however, not having the guidance of experienced staff nearby, these were issues I needed to realize on my own.

The process of writing this article has been cathartic and a much-needed push back into the realm of academia. Writing this article has allowed me to organize and articulate my experience for my own benefit. It was more beneficial to have written this article as a reflection on my experiences rather than when I was in the thick of it. Had I written this article much earlier, it would have been difficult to see the bigger picture and to see the struggle of others around me. In the beginning, I was very self-absorbed in my own struggles to find my feet, it would not have been an accurate reflection of my experience. Because the sudden move to remote teaching, my free time evaporated at the expense of my own PhD. This article has been a cathartic release and as such has enabled me to find my voice once again and reignited my writing ability. My own writing halted at the start of lockdown and re-entering into the academic mindset and subsequent writing style has been an obstacle. The COVID-19 experience has not been easy, and I do look forward to having a “normal” university experience at some point in my career, but on a lighter note, who else can say they were at US for one day before lockdown?

The transition from the school environment to university environment was always going to be met with some obstacles. Adjusting to not only the expectations of academia but adjusting my own preconceptions to the reality in which I found myself was needed. Some key obstacles were aggravated by the move to remote learning as well as my own inexperience. Given the transition to online learning, mistakes are inevitable, and I did experience teething issues. There are several lessons that I have taken away from this unique experience (on a lighter note – who else can claim that they have worked at US for one single day before lockdown started): it is acceptable to ask for help; establish clear working hours so one does not get sensory overloaded; and finally, accepting one's mistakes and subsequently learning from them is vital to both personal and professional growth as a History Education lecturer.