REIMAGINING SUPPORT FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING IN POST-COVID-19 SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In South African higher education, learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was not a simple shift from a face-to-face to a remote context, but required engagement with varied and constrained contexts. Mediating shifts in learning and teaching during the pandemic blurred the boundaries between personal and professional roles and laid bare the visible and invisible traumas experienced by staff and students. The five authors of this paper, who are learning and teaching support staff at three South African universities, all experienced contextual, structural and operational realities that had implications for when and how their respective universities engaged with Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). During the crisis, the authors co-created a safe and authentic online community to share experiences, emotions and strategies for supporting learning and teaching in its evolving forms. The historical, structural and socio-cultural conditions at each of the three research-intensive institutions yielded a collective set of diverse stories of “self”. At the same time, overarching stories of a collective “us” and “now” emerged. Using discourse analysis, themes were abstracted from the researchers’ collective writings about the roles of support staff. Assumptions about how, when and where to support learning and teaching were challenged. Drawing from their shared experience the authors describe a process for reflecting on learning and teaching during and beyond times of crisis and offer several ways of reimagining support for learning and teaching post-COVID-19. The intention is to empower fellow academic developers and educators who have been supporting others during ERT.

Keywords
Academic Development; Collaborative Auto-ethnography; Emotional Labour; Emergency Remote Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions globally had to determine how to continue their academic programmes. Terms such as “emergency remote teaching” (ERT) (Hodges, Moore, Locke, Trust & Bond, 2020) or “emergency remote education” (Bozkurt et al., 2020) were used to describe the transition to the new type of teaching and learning occurring at the time, as distinct from high-quality online teaching and learning. Hodges et al. (2020) define ERT as a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery...
mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses… (para.7).

The transition to new forms of learning and teaching had major implications for those staff supporting these functions. Such staff members include the authors of this paper who are employed in the following areas: academic/educational developer, instructional designer and educational technology specialist.

In the process of “pivoting online”, academic developers, educational technologists, and others who served as “frontline workers” at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, experienced significant changes in their roles. Particularly in South Africa, learning and teaching during COVID-19 required that the pre-existing issues concerning access to higher education, diversity, equality and pedagogy be confronted in new ways.

It is in this context that the five authors of this paper, who are from three different research-intensive universities in South Africa, came together for research purposes. This collaboration enabled an organic emergence of a safe, authentic (honest and non-judgemental) online space to share experiences, emotions and strategies for supporting learning and teaching in evolving forms. Initially, the online space helped the researchers to manage their own uncertainties during the extended crisis and also to consider emerging forms of support. Over time the collaborative forum enabled the researchers to establish a strong foundation for reflection within and beyond the current crisis.

The article outlines the research context then considers relevant literature related to supporting learning and teaching during the pandemic. The theoretical framework section draws on Ganz’s organising pedagogy (2010) and Hochschild’s (1983) theory of emotional labour. Our collaborative auto-ethnography methodology is described as it emerged from our theoretical exploration. The findings are presented as the story of “self”, providing a foundation from which the story of “us” and the collective story of “now” could develop.

**CONTEXT**

In March 2020, the South African government instituted a national lockdown to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The restrictions necessitated a mandatory shift to emergency remote learning and teaching. All students had to vacate university campuses and residences when the “hard” lockdown was instituted. The phased return of students in the second semester of 2020 and first semester of 2021 varied across institutions, with decisions often made in response to infection rates in different provinces. The shift to remote education required different ways of thinking about learning and teaching, with academic staff and students needing to be appropriately supported.

The three public South African universities where the five authors, researchers and research participants are based are all traditionally contact universities with variations in their geographical, structural and operational realities. Each institution’s context had unique implications for when and how it proceeded with ERT. Although our individual job descriptions and roles differ (Academic/Educational Developer, Instructional Designer and Educational Technology Specialist), we found similarities between the kinds of work we
were required to do to support academics and students during a challenging time. Each of us has been within our current position for a different length of time, which could have a bearing on how we have experienced our work context during the shifts and changes that were required during the period of the study.

While the three universities have contextual differences in relation to location, staff and student demographics and diversity, the institutions are similar in the sense of being traditional contact research-intensive universities. The three universities differed in relation to when they went online, and how they managed the crisis, which including how ERT was supported, and how online assessment happened. Our research revealed that across the three institutions the level of preparedness, the capacity to deal with the changes and the infrastructure and technological resources available to enable remote learning and teaching differed considerably for both historical and current reasons. It was clear that South African universities are not homogenous when it comes to their use of educational technologies and the degree to which technology is embedded as part of the pedagogical aspects of learning and teaching.

Depending on institutional funding and budget allocations, there are various Learning Management Systems (LMS) and versions being used. The approaches to curriculum design, pedagogy and assessment, together with interpretations of blended learning, vary from university to university. Some institutions were already constrained before the pandemic, with student protests over fees and accommodation, thereby delaying the start of the academic year. The recognition of the various contextual differences and the need for differentiated responses informed the design of our study.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Much of the emerging ERT literature focused on the readiness of students and staff to transition to a different way of learning and teaching (Johnson, Veletsianos, Seaman, 2020; Cutri, Mená & Whiting, 2020). During this transition, it was expected that “everyone will be doing the best they can, trying to take just the essentials with them as they make a mad dash during the emergency” (Hodges et al., 2020, para. 12). Many authors raised concerns that the pandemic would exacerbate inequalities and the digital divides in higher education (Belluigi et al., 2020; Bozkurt et al., 2020; Corbera, Anguelovski, Honey-Rosés & Ruiz-Mallén, 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2020).

Academic developers or academic support staff are usually available to assist lecturers to design and facilitate learning in different modalities. Pre-pandemic, this has been limited to small numbers of academics at residential universities interested in blended or online learning (Hodges et al., 2020). The support available to academic staff varies considerably across institutions, depending on the resources available and the local context, however most institutions have a small, centralised learning and teaching support team (Redstone & Luo, 2021; Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Mihai, 2020). Sometimes additional support is available at faculty and departmental levels (Mihai, 2020). Often this support includes academic development and educational technology; typically including self-paced courses, workshops, seminars, collections of online resources and one-on-one support (Redstone & Luo, 2021).
The transition to ERT necessitated immediate online professional learning interventions for staff and students. In particular, those supporting the design of courses and development of learning materials saw an increased demand for online learning expertise (Bellaby & Sankey, 2020; Mihai, 2020). People working in academic support found themselves on the educational “frontlines” as institutions pivoted to ERT (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). This meant that the support staff who were providing technical help served as a lifeline for academics, which gave these support staff members greater agency and professional standing beyond simply technical support (Bellaby & Sankey, 2020). Support staff had to “find ways to meet the institutional need to provide instructional continuity while helping faculty develop skills to work and teach in an online environment” (Hodges et al., 2020, para. 9). The role of these support staff changed significantly, as they were required to upskill the academic staff and also to offer pastoral support to help staff manage the anxiety and frustration of dealing with uncertainties, technical difficulties and changing priorities (Bellaby & Sankey, 2020).

In considering how to support professional learning and development in relation to the transition to ERT, our literature review showed that there was a need to focus on organisational, community and teaching support (Redstone & Luo, 2021). Mihai (2020) describes the professional learning approaches during ERT as consisting of a “mix of reactive and proactive, general and discipline-specific, pedagogy and technology-focused” (para. 6).

Academic staff themselves identified specific needs during this time. A study in the United States and Canada found that staff requested online resource hubs with information and resources, as well as assistance with technologies, in order to be able to teach online (Johnson et al., 2020). Support during this time needed to include technological support for using the university systems (such as Blackboard and Zoom), and also pedagogical support (Redstone & Luo, 2021). Those providing support to academics had to meet the challenge of greater demand for technological support, over and above, pedagogical support. They also had to be aware of not overloading academic staff with too much information (Mihai, 2020). Importantly, institutions needed to provide a variety of support offerings to meet different needs, including online resources, synchronous and asynchronous workshops, and one-on-one assistance (Redstone & Luo, 2021). Mihai (2020) catalogues the forms of professional learning during ERT as self-paced online courses, bespoke synchronous sessions at faculty or departmental level, open drop-in sessions and repositories of resources.

Academics also needed to look beyond formalised institutional support during ERT. Our literature review indicated that additional collaborative support could be provided through collegial learning groups, communities of practice and peer support (Baran & Correia, 2014, as cited in Redstone & Luo, 2021). The research showed that community support can help overcome feelings of isolation and offer emotional and psychological support as well as promote reflection and an exchange of experiences (Redstone & Luo, 2021). Professional learning approaches can be augmented through communities of practice that showcase good practices in ERT, encourage peer reviews and a team-based approach (Mihai, 2020).
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the critical, exploratory and emerging nature of this study, we drew on Ganz’s organising civic pedagogy (2010) and Hochschild’s theory of emotional labour (2003) as the theoretical framework. Ganz’s theory, based on narratives, specifically on the “story of self, us and now”, informed the methodological approach for the study, while Hochschild’s theory enabled the analysis of the findings. The nature of each theory provided us with the opportunity to look across the data generated and to strategically abstract and analyse the findings.

The professional and academic practices within higher education are social acts and the COVID-19 experiences further highlighted that higher education has to deal with conflicting tensions within specific contexts. Ganz’s (2010) storytelling as pedagogy approach has been used to mobilise social groups for change. As a collective, we felt that our shared higher education learning and teaching values were challenged by the COVID-19 demands and the resulting shifts. This required us to act as authentically responsive practitioners engaging in purposeful action, rather than simply reacting to circumstances.

We hoped that the exploration of the “story of self, the story of us and the story of now” (Ganz, 2010) could help us mobilise hope over fear, empathy over alienation and self-worth over self-doubt. We became increasingly aware that the social, historical and cultural contexts of our practices would yield a diverse set of individual stories (“stories of self”) from a personal and professional perspective. Reflecting on ourselves as a collective enabled the articulation of both our shared experiences (“stories of us”) and our plans of action in going forward with possibilities for change within our respective professional contexts (“stories of now”).

The concept of emotional labour was first conceptualised by sociologist Hochschild (1983) and refers to an employee’s display of emotions according to accepted social and cultural norms, rather than to what they actually feel. Through our collective sharing we have realised that since the shift to ERT and the associated demands required of us, we have been labouring emotionally. Emotional labour is seen as the effort of workers to manage feelings in order to create publicly-acceptable professional practices (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labour could involve deep acting (i.e. modify felt emotions to match displayed emotions) and surface acting (i.e. fake, unfelt emotions or suppression of felt emotions) (Diefendorff et al., 2005). In this study emotional labour refers to the display of theoretically ideal emotions by the university’s service or “frontline workers” instead of expressing their true feelings. As a collective, we felt the pressure of this as we were aware of our own vulnerabilities and the very real COVID-19 fears amongst ourselves and our families. The display of institutionally expected emotions was often intended to help enhance the calmness and confidence of students, academics and management during the chaotic transitions to new modes of learning and teaching. The display of these “put on” feelings requires huge emotional effort and human fallibility (Archer, 2007), especially when trying to calm and care for those left in confusion, doubt and fear because of professional, personal, economic and health concerns.

As such, while being regarded as ERT “emergency frontline” university workers, and being ever ready to help, we realised that we were constantly shifting in and out of real and fake emotions, creating tension.
between our personal and practitioner selves. Our collective stories spoke to the concepts related to emotional labour, including “being there”, being “compassionate”, using “emotional intelligence” (McQueen 2004), “caring” (Brilowski & Wendler, 2005) and feeling “empathy” (Larson & Yao 2005).

According to Hunter and Smith (2007), emotional labour can be linked to emotional exhaustion and professional burnout (Mann & Cowburn, 2005; Näring, Briët & Brouwers, 2006) and should be given more consideration. More awareness and acknowledgement of emotional labour and the resulting consequences can lead to individual and organisational renewal (Reeves, 2008). As an informal community collective we met online on a regular basis, which enabled the expression of our built-up everyday stresses, so the meetings became our moments to “exhale”. We were able to “exhale” the pain, fear, laughter, tears and anger and we began to feel like a “community of coping” as suggested by Hochschild (Korczyński, 2002). Similar to the Fineman and Sturdy (1999) study, our online meetings became a space where we could drop our university masks. This enabled “emotional exhaling” in a safe space, free from scrutiny, but amongst those willing to hear and care for each other.

METHODOLOGY

Collaborative auto-ethnography is an emerging approach to practitioner research where academic developers and those in related fields engage in processes of shared reflection online (Pallitt, Gachago & Bali, in press; Bali, Crawford, Jessen, Signorelli & Zamora, 2015). Researchers may document their discussions and reflections using various forms of digital artefacts, such as online documents and recordings of online meetings. While digital team ethnography (Beneito-Montagut, et al., 2017) is an emerging methodology, the focus of this article is not on how we made use of online spaces to engage in a collaborative process (such as discussed in Pallitt, Gachago & Bali, in press), but rather on our reflections over time, and how we made sense of these using a particular theoretical lens.

We engaged in a series of free writing activities during 2020 (July, September and November) and 2021 (March), where we responded to the following question prompts:

• Q1: What has kept us awake at night over the last 2 months?
• Q2: What have been the practice pains in the last 2 months?
• Q3: What have been the practice gains in the last 2 months?
• Q4: What are the post-COVID-19 possibilities?

During May and June 2021 we revisited our individual reflections and engaged in a collaborative process to share and discuss meta-reflections. We met online to each read and then discuss our free writes, followed by further discussions, writing meta-reflections and then coming back into the meeting and sharing these to review the emerging themes. These meta-reflections were written on meeting days (or afterwards if authors were unable to join) and uploaded to a shared Google folder. Depending on the different “stories” (Ganz, 2010), we used different questions as prompts to engage in shared meta-reflection (see Table 1).
Table 1: Meta-Reflection focus areas and questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Story of self and story</td>
<td>Q1: How has your positionality influenced your professional space and feelings over the last year / Has your professional space influenced your positionality in any way?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of us</td>
<td>Q2: What have been the main thoughts about your position over the last year / What surprised you about your position over the last year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q3: What were the 3 main pains over the last year / What were the 3 gains professionally and personally over the last year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story of now</td>
<td>Q1: What are our biggest lessons learned from the past year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Q2: How do we see supporting teaching and learning occurring in the future (post COVID-19)?</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The data analysed for this article consists of numbers and stories, as well as our reflections included critical opinions of the government, the participants’ institutions, university management, and lecturers. As the authors were themselves the participants, no ethical clearance was sought from the institutions. The participant numbers used in the following discussion section do not correspond to the order of authorship in this paper. We see protecting ourselves in this way as a form of care; while sharing reflections with others in a public way is a scholarly activity, it can also be risky for individuals.

We used discourse analysis, as espoused by Fairclough’s (2005) social realist explanation, to consider the relations and tensions between social processes, structures and practices within each of our contexts and higher education more broadly. We drew on what emerged, and considered the conditions that enabled or constrained our agency during and post the initial COVID-19 shifts and transitions. Keeping social, organisational and practitioner change as possibilities for re-imagination, our meeting transcriptions, free writes, reflective and reflexive texts, as well as our observations became the discourse or discursive elements that led to our theme categorization and further abstractions.

Our research approach resonates with the decolonial approaches to research and “ubuntu” principles that have become accepted as a research paradigm informing research agendas and methodologies (Muwanga-Zake, 2009; Seehawer, 2018). Ubuntu philosophy positions the individual in terms of their relationships with others and shared humanity (Muwanga-Zake, 2009). When drawn on and acknowledged in research, this philosophy gives the research process a human face and emphasises humane collaboration where individual values, needs and norms are respected.
As researcher-practitioners in an African context, the recognition and valuing of our individual and collective stories enabled us to re-imagine new possibilities together.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**The Story of Self**

Due to this study spanning a year, we were able to stand back as individuals and reflect across our free write pieces. In terms of the “story of self”, a key finding was the intersection between our positionality and our university positioning. Positionality in our study has its foundation in critical realism (Bhaskar, 1993) and speaks to our life structures when we came into a pre-conditioned world. Our positionality then includes, but is not limited to, our race, gendered or non-gendered identity, culture, religion, geography of birth and socio-economic standing. Our coming together during the moments of structural, cultural and environmental crises associated with COVID-19 enabled the identification and acknowledgement of the enablements and constraints as the university’s frontline service workers during a time of fear and panic. Participant 3 (still very new to the institution when the pandemic started) noted: “Our roles changed overnight and with that comes pressure that moved me into different emotional states, ranging from excitement fuelled by adrenalin, to anger and fear of failure, to imposter feelings.”

For some individuals, these professional vulnerabilities immediately raised historical and embodied feelings of resistance to authoritarian and forced calls for change. We were, however, only able to arrive at this realisation about our resistance to change through the discursive and emotionally sharing nature of our collective during our meetings; our “exhale” moments. As a community of coping (Korczynski, 2002), we were then able to better identify, understand and calm our own and others’ acts of resistance and at times defiance as we began our journey of reimagining our learning and teaching spaces by enhancing the application of technology. Participant 5 (a black femaleacademic who had to abide by the regulations and laws of the apartheid system) reflected as follows:

A complete awareness of not being good enough came flooding in. I always felt a sense of resistance and questioned every call and this last year made me realise I still do this as the first reaction before going into further thought.

The shift to ERT highlighted the shifting identity threats of many of our positions as Academic Developers, Instructional Designers and Learning Designers, as acknowledged by Participant 2 who said, “I struggle with what to call myself…” The psychological battle of identity resurfaced with the increasing adoption of technologies for learning and teaching and began to increase the vulnerabilities in relation to job descriptions. Participant 2, who, like Participant 3, was new to the institution when the pandemic started, highlighted the identity struggles that the multiple demands of teaching during the pandemic brought up: “[T]ension is around my identity, ‘career’ and the role we play in supporting academics since I play a support role and yet I am an academic too.” This required finding ways of managing these multiple identities during a challenging time.

In some universities, tensions emerged between the identities and roles of Academic Developers (ADs) and Instructional Designers (IDs). IDs were now being...
deemed the rescue team responsible for helping all academics and students to transition to ERT. Participant 4 (an ID) noted: “I have noticed how more visible we are than traditional AD folks who seem at a loss to adapt and support in online spaces. Why are they invisible now and us who were... invisible are overnight VIPs.”

Through the thematic analysis of our free writes, we were able to give voice to feelings related to emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983). In the best interest of assisting our universities and colleagues and students in need of learning and teaching support, we realised that in our AD practices we were displaying certain positive emotions for others, while suppressing our authentic, negative feelings. As the stories of self were read, shared and discussed, a sense of coming together through pain, fears, anger and loss was acknowledged and was followed by a renewed sense of safety, care, support and hope for new and re-imagined possibilities. Participant 5 commented: “It was becoming part of a group like this that made me realise that we are all at the mercy of our vulnerabilities. It has enabled more reflection on the areas that continuously creep in and create discomfort.”

Given the often dominating culture, especially at research-intensive universities, which gives central place to knowledge (epistemology) rather than to being (ontology), the influence of personal positionality on our professional positioning emerged as a strong concern in our findings. This served to strengthen our belief that who we are, and having a strong sense of the emotional self, matters and is inextricably linked to what we do and how we practice. It was clear that our sense of our own personal relevance and lived history played a role in the way we approached the crisis and how we took on the roles we were expected to manage.

Every one of us mentioned being initially discomforted and disrupted by the COVID-19 crisis and the emergency shifts it necessitated, while trying to “save the academic year” – a chant that actually became burdensome to most. Individual stories raised the importance of “showing up” and being confident for those we needed to support. It was expressed that institutional management, at times, likened us to well-oiled cogs in the university engine, calling for us to engage as “superhero personas”. We were expected, in homogenous humanoid fashion, to discard our true feelings and get on with the job demands, irrespective of personal health, well-being and circumstances. Some of the stories of “self” brought to the fore the power imbalances that some have been forced to face and which have contributed to shaping the manner in which representation is made of the personal and professional self. For example, Participant 4 reflected:

You learn about yourself as a professional, but also it's kind of your role’s difference and you learn how important that role is. And then I thought, you know, we support people, not just technologies. And this entails a lot of human work... more than before.

The increased visibility of the technical support aspect, especially within the smaller institutions, highlighted the added responsibility, the diminished human capacity, the poor technical infrastructure and the underlying constraints of meeting the learning and teaching demands during these crisis moments. The visibility also brought to the fore some of our inherent personal “can do it all” traits, which have often harmed our wellbeing and the quality of our professional outputs. Despite the constraints, the moments of coming together to share and exhale have strengthened the
reflective self within the collective. It has also afforded us time to reconsider and reflect on the need to become more assertive about what we can take on; trust our ability to delegate; practice distributive leadership; and consider wholesome personal and professional preservation and sustainability. Participant 1 (a working mother, recently promoted to a leadership position) highlighted the following:

One of the big things I learned is that we need to take a step back. I think one of the major lessons would be to actually say... you know what, I can't do this... I cannot manage this, I need to draw on [other resources]... So for me it's been a growth point because I'm not good at asking for help.

The story of the self within the collective clearly revealed the importance of our being and becoming through continuous reflexivity, curious knowing and resilient doing. It also highlighted the value of acknowledging our positionality and its influencing privileges and limiting opportunities, while considering the enhancement of our agency as evolving practitioners, professionals and life-long learners. We see ourselves as people who are ready to engage with those requiring our support, as part of a collective of coping (Hochschild, 1983), and as confident to lean on one another as we navigate, re-imagine and innovate the learning and teaching spaces for future uncertainties.

The Story of Us

There were many areas of overlap between our individual stories of self, which signalled the broader shifts and implications of the rapid shift to ERT. As our relationships within the research group grew and we developed more of a collective identity it became harder to separate out each of the stories of self and us.

Our collective experiences highlighted that following the pandemic our roles not only changed, but also become far more visible at our institutions, as articulated by Participant 2: “COVID has certainly made a big impact on our roles… if I look at what I did this year, it’s quite different from my job description and highlighted the need for our roles.”

The sudden shift positioned us as “frontline workers” who went from “under the rock to rock stars” and at times it felt as if university management “hid behind us” (Participant 5) and “outsourced responsibility” (Participant 4). At othertimes management applied pressures which we perceived to be counterproductive to our role of supporting academics: “We don’t want to be seen as steamrolling ahead, but the pressure from management demands us to” (Participant 4). We had to balance university leadership’s technicist and “solutionist” perspectives of technology and online learning (partly framed by government discourses) with our own awareness and experience of supporting staff and students, which we felt needed sensitivity. Throughout this we also had to manage our own professional emotions to enable others to cope.

Emotional labour emerged as a key theme that shaped our stories. For the authors, emotional labour was practiced implicitly; and it was only through our interactions in a safe space that we could start to make sense of the emotional management we embodied in our professional practices (Hochschild, 1983). As support staff, we had to contain our own emotional state to ensure feelings of safety and confidence in the colleagues we supported. As Participant 4 indicated:
“[B]eing able to negotiate your role as a support person. You need to be able to read what’s happening on the ground, what’s needed, what’s the best format for support?”

The sharing of frustrations, irritations and stress points experienced during the shift to ERT created the conditions for reflection on our own positionality, while our professional practices became central to the story of “us”. Professional sharing, outside of our institutions, became a space to share our experiences and break down the self-made isolation that is often inherent in our profession. For example, Participant 3 noted a change in her approach to adapt to the challenges of incorporating new technologies, initially viewed as a necessity to ensure role security. “[B]ut as I began to work through the benefits, despite all the tech glitches, I have now taken to the affordances of technology in teaching and have strongly included this as part of my own positional make up”.

Having to support others during this time forced us to work in an open and flexible manner in order to respond to changing circumstances. This required a focus on our own continuous learning. Participant 3 highlighted the tensions inherent in learning during this time:

I have learned more during this period than any other time in my work in Ed Tech/AD especially on the functional and system level. I have learned more about my institutional context that I could hope for and this has challenged me at every level possible. [This has made it] a time of contradictions, as it is a very sad time... but for my career and my field this was a massive moment that brings our work to the front, but also shows where we can do better on many levels.

As an “us” we were able to hold each one’s emotions around the shifting sense of our professional identities within our universities. The sense of being a group enabled us to voice, hear and grapple with our internal deliberations about who we were being identified as within our institutions (Archer, 2007). It also gave us the courage to accept or challenge management on the basis of our job descriptions and the fields we were in. Participant 4 reflected:

I am feeling that the pandemic has helped me test my limits as an educational technology specialist. Before, I had a bit of imposter syndrome, now I know I am able to do this work and do it well even under stress. I have a renewed appreciation for the skills and dispositions I have, which I have seen does not come easy to many academics – a sense of self as a professional. It’s become clear we need to put our stake in the ground as specialists and be taken seriously.

Besides the reshaping of our professional selves, what became very apparent was the urgent need for reimagining learning and teaching spaces within our universities and higher education nationally. As a collective we professionally engaged in re-imagined ideas and alternative practices to successfully enable further epistemic and ontological access. This involved experimenting with and encouraging new ways of knowledge application that could be contextually responsive, and dealing with the constraining factors in our learning and teaching spaces. Participant 4 noted:

There is a divide between the “traditionals” who want to go back to a fully face-to-face campus and want
everything to be like it was... and then there are the other staff who have seen the light and are saying “no, we’ve learnt we can do things differently”.

Participant 4 also noted the improved sense of community in some spaces: “I feel like we have a community around online teaching that we did not have before. I am hoping we have more of a voice in matters going forward.” Despite all of the chaos, there was recognition that new ways had been found so that we could continue to support academics: “I am proud… of the work we have done over the past year to support academics as it has been so chaotic in some senses.” (Participant 2).

The Story of Now

The focus on the story of “now” was for us to recognise the stories of “self” and “us” that had emerged and use these to look ahead. This enabled us to focus on the key lessons that had emerged over the past year and how we could re-imagine support for learning and teaching in higher education in a post-COVID-19 world. The key lessons can be categorised into personal, professional and organisational changes.

Personal change lessons

The first personal lesson that emerged concerned managing the expectations that others projected onto us as “frontline workers”. In the transition to ERT, we were expected to provide support to academics and students, “there was this magnification of our work and all of a sudden we needed to provide all of these solutions to the institution” (Participant 1). While managing our own particular challenges, we had to also have the ability “to step out of our own comfort zones” (Participant 5) to be able to support others. As mentioned earlier this support went beyond providing technological support to providing social-emotional support to academics. This occurred through hand holding, listening and holding our own emotions in check. As support staff, we are happy to help where we can, as we value our roles of assisting others, but this sometimes comes at a personal cost. We had to be very careful to manage our own expectations and the expectations of others. Under pressure to assist others, we had to be careful not to do too much. We had to realise that “you cannot fix everything yourself” (Participant 1). As support staff, we find it difficult to ask for help ourselves. However, at times we needed the support of others and to be able to delegate work.

The second personal lesson that emerged was experiencing changes in our identities. Many of us occupy a “third space” (Whitchurch, 2015), where we have academic responsibilities, but at the same time also support other academic staff. We work in very small teams (usually two or three people) and so we experienced heavy workloads in supporting a large number of academics. We had to develop coping mechanisms for ourselves during this time to balance our academic and technical support responsibilities. Due to our focus on supporting others, in the face of urgent support needs, it became difficult to continue to focus on our academic responsibilities. This is noted by Participant 4, who said: “I’ve had to try really hard to not lose the academic side and try to remain active in research activities and make time for that.” This resulted in the questioning of our identities. We also had to be “…realistic about possibilities, given connectivity and other student and staff challenges” (Participant 4).

Professional change lessons
The first professional lesson was that we had to learn to support ourselves and the others within our professional teams before we could support academics and students. Support to colleagues in our own teams was required in addition to supporting our academic colleagues. We also had to learn many new things, sometimes very quickly, to be able to support staff. Often this meant varying our approaches, for example, “we’ve gone from lots of synchronous webinars initially to more asynchronous resources and online consultations” (Participant 4). We were able to do this through the teams we were in and by reaching out to our personal networks. By working together, we were able to overcome many of the challenges. The aspect of community was invaluable in helping us to get through this period.

The second professional lesson lay in our realisation that our institutions were now able to see greater value in our roles and in the contribution we make to our universities. Before the pandemic, we tended to work with small numbers of academics who reached out to us for support, but we were somewhat invisible in the overall university operations. Now we are more visible and “the value of our roles has been seen in the support we provided to help academics to be able to make this transition… this bodes well for future collaboration” (Participant 2).

Organisational change lessons

The first organisational lesson was learning how to take on greater agency in contributing collectively to systemic changes. Individually, we sometimes can become frustrated in not seeing greater changes in learning and teaching in our universities, yet “we can as collectives contribute in small ways to systemic change instead of always waiting and being disappointed that it is bigger than us” (Participant 5). We are now more able to contribute at higher strategic levels, for example, “management has come to rely on us for decision making, e.g. [implementing a] remote invigilation app in preparation for exams where we may have the third wave disrupting plans for sit down exams” (Participant 4).

Future directions

Given the lessons learned over this period, three future possibilities emerged from the reflections of how to support teaching and learning in post-COVID-19 higher education in South Africa. The first
The second possible direction is the changing positionality and expansion of the roles of learning and teaching support staff within higher education. There needs to be provision for greater capacity at various levels, to be able to provide the necessary responsive support for academics. This may include the recruitment and upskilling of additional staff to learning and teaching support teams. However, roles, such as academic developers and educational technology specialists, could be clarified or become more formalised, with the identification of defined career paths within higher education. Closer collaboration is required between the various stakeholders in learning and teaching and a team-based approach can more inclusively meet the needs of students. A more human-centred approach to support services is required to successfully address the needs of academics. Support needs to be seen in a holistic manner; that encompasses the pedagogical, technological and emotional.

The third possible direction is the changing nature of support through more distributed support services and different professional learning opportunities. Many learning and teaching staff as well as some academics have become used to working from home and this enhances the ability to provide distributed support, regardless of location. Additionally, the value of forming and strengthening communities of practice (both within and across universities) helps to strengthen support offerings and overcome some of the “silo thinking” often experienced in universities. Professional learning opportunities need to be provided in multiple forms and via multiple approaches to responsively meet the needs of different academics. Professional learning opportunities, for both staff and students, need to foster learner agency to deal with the disruptions that occur in life and develop the ability to engage in continuous and lifelong learning.

**CONCLUSION**

Forming a collective of support professionals from different institutions during a crisis enabled the sharing of emotions and the further development of practices. This led to discussions around the shifting nature of our work and roles because of COVID-19, and how we might better support lecturers and students during and after the pandemic. Using Ganz’s organising pedagogy (2010) and Hochschild’s (1983) theory of emotional labour enabled shared reflective practices to emerge. As a collective, over time we found that we were able to engage in authentic ways in a safe and supportive space, going from sharing our individual vulnerabilities (“story of self”) to shared agency (“story of us”). The strength of the collective supported our professional practices as we became better able to make sense of our emotional labour together. However, the collective aspect made it increasingly
difficult to separate the story of “self” (personal) and story of “us” (professional).

The collective space became not only a place to share frustrations and challenges, but also an experimental space to share alternate possibilities and new ways of knowing, doing and being as we supported learning and teaching. The power of our stories as a collective began to enhance institutional and collective agency (Archer, 2007) that infused our group with the agency to manage, sustain and create change as professionals within our individual spaces (“story of now”).

We hope to empower fellow academic developers and educators who have been supporting others during ERT through our description of a process for reflecting on learning and teaching which also highlights the support that may be necessary during times of crises. Despite our varying roles, contexts and lived realities over the past year, this study sees the notion of holistic academic development, as encouraged by Sutherland (2018), as an opportunity during and beyond the crisis, to radically transform the ways in which learning and teaching are understood, supported, enacted and evaluated. This article offers an approach that can be used by higher education practitioners to better understand their own experiences and, as part of a broader community, to be better able to assess the impact of different kinds of responses to learning and teaching. Adopting the proposed approach in a collaborative way can revitalise energy and re-imagine ways ahead across universities during and after any future pandemics.

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