

Editorial

Reimagining higher education in the wake of COVID-19

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In October 2019, the second biennial SOTL in the South conference was hosted by the Central University of Technology in Bloemfontein, South Africa. The end of 2019 also saw the tenure of the inaugural managing editor of the *SOTL in the South* journal, Shashi Cullinan Cook, come to an end. This special issue of the journal includes a selection of papers first presented at the conference in 2019, and also features an insightful and inspiring reflection on the conference, written by Shashi. Readers interested in finding out about the conference itself should read Shashi's remarkable reflective piece.

On behalf of the editorial board of the journal, I would like to thank Shashi, not only for her excellent reflective piece but, more importantly, for her more than three years of dedicated service to this journal: Shashi was instrumental in keeping the journal afloat through what have been the tumultuous and oftentimes challenging fledgling years of this journal. By the same token, this issue is the first helmed by our new managing editor, Milton Milaras. So, as we wish one managing editor well in her future endeavours, we also welcome a new one – and look forward to his support as we grow the journal, both in terms of its reach and impact.

This issue features several research articles, each of which *reimagines* higher education in important, albeit distinct ways. In the first paper, Catherine Manathunga reimagines how Southern, transcultural and indigenous knowledge systems might be positioned in higher education. In her wide-ranging argument, Manathunga begins from the view that acknowledging one's own positioning is a necessary first step in decolonising our curricula, our research and, ultimately, our institutions. Her argument goes on to consider the ways in which decolonisation presupposes the reimagining of the ways in which time and space are positioned in higher education.

In the second article in the issue, Motlatsi Khosi reimagines research through the lens of Ubuntu, a Southern African philosophy. Khosi answers Manathunga's call to acknowledge one's standpoint, which leads Khosi to conclude that "the lenses through which I was 'capturing' [the social movement she was researching] is influenced by the university" and that "from the start my work was

compromised by my internalized ‘colonial unconsciousness’ that affirmed a power dynamic with those I engaged with”. Khosi not only reimagines research (including scholarship of teaching and learning), but also the very nature of the University through what she terms the University of Abahlali. These first two papers are striking in their overlaps and I encourage readers to consider them in combination.

Genevieve Quintero and Connie Makgabo position folk tales as important cultural artefacts that warrant greater inclusion in higher education – thus arguing against the notion of the traditional literary canon. In particular, Quintero and Makgabo use the example of how the roles of female characters in folk tales position women in particular ways within Society, highlighting the important critical work that is enabled by the use of folk tales in teaching and learning. They introduce an Ethiopian proverb that argues that “until the lions find their own historian, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter”. In their paper, Quintero and Makgabo begin to re-imagine the hunt, arguing that “both teachers and learners alike can derive inspiration from critical discussion of folktales and their relevance to culture and society”. Including this paper allows *SOTL in the South* to give voice to and engender discussion of subaltern narratives in teaching and learning.

Karabo Sitto reimagines the higher education classroom. Sitto provides a practical and detailed account of her efforts to implement the much-vaunted flipped classroom approach to teaching and learning. Using her own reflections as well as feedback from her students, Sitto shows the practical difficulties associated with the flipped classroom, but also its potential in reframing the traditional roles of teacher and learner. In so doing, Sitto also reimagines the focus of the curriculum and assessment, extending it beyond the development of content knowledge to include non-technical skills and competencies.

Reimagination is of increasing importance in higher education, particularly at this current moment in our history. At the time of writing this editorial, higher education – and society more broadly – is being reimagined on an almost daily basis due to the emergence of the 2019 novel coronavirus, COVID-19. It is ironic that this issue of *SOTL in the South* presents a selection of conference papers, as conferences across the globe have been either cancelled or postponed indefinitely as COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc on the economy, travel and, indeed, higher education.

Influential publications such as Times Higher Education publish articles on a daily basis on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education, as institutions around the world deal with the challenge of having to make an abrupt switch to online teaching and learning. To some, COVID-19 is a blessing wrapped in a curse, as it will ‘force’ institutions to leverage the affordances of online teaching and learning. However, it is clear – to this observer, at least – that COVID-19 has laid bare the inequalities of access to and participation in higher education. Students studying at foreign institutions have been left in limbo in many countries around the world; often they are unable to go home (either due to lack of funds, or travel restrictions) and are ostracised by their peers or kicked out of residences by their institutions. The economic fallout of the virus has led many institutions to plan for reduced enrolment, as many potential students delay entry into higher education (largely because of reduced economic means) and many current students place their studies in abeyance (also because of changed funding circumstances). The already-precarious position of casual, adjunct and temporary workers in higher education institutions becomes ever more precipitous. And, the transition to online teaching and learning, while relatively smooth in many institutions in the global North, will be anything but smooth

across the global South, where many students lack access to devices and the internet, both preconditions for online learning.

In some predictions, face-to-face teaching and learning will only be able to resume in March 2021, which will be catastrophic for many students, not just because of a lack of access to the required enabling technologies, but also because simple 'translation' of face-to-face teaching, learning and assessment strategies to an online environment may have dire consequences for students' ability to succeed in a context of isolation, or one of difficult home circumstances. In the rush to transition to online education, the significant body of SOTL theory which underpins successful e-learning is being neglected – particularly in the global South – where the aforementioned issues of infrastructure and access demand priority. Yet, equitable epistemological access is a key factor in student success. The challenge to be met, therefore, extends beyond the already-significant technological one: it requires reimagining teaching, learning and assessment that goes beyond the usual and that, at its core, fosters inclusivity, fairness, justice, openness and responsiveness. Future issues of *SOTL in the South* will need to tackle online teaching and learning in the South head-on. In this journal, we conceive of the global South as a cluster of features such as power differentials, technological and financial resourcing, and recognition of indigenous knowledges, rather than solely in geographic terms. SOTL – in *this* global South – remains as important as ever.



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