



Education lecturers' perceptions of organising systematic online teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic conditions in 2020 at two selected universities in South Africa

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Abstract

In this article, we view epistemological access as organising systematic teaching and learning, and we focus on teaching and learning online during COVID-19 pandemic conditions in 2020. We used a Survey Monkey questionnaire with two universities in South Africa that moved their teaching and learning online to survey whether lecturers thought that the extent of epistemological access was affected when this happened. Our findings indicate that lecturers feel that the emergency teaching and learning did compromise their teaching, and, while most used existing face-to-face materials online, and some changed the content when they went online, they changed the assessment formats. We argue that these changes, although understandable given pandemic conditions, did not necessarily constitute the kind of carefully designed, paced, sequenced, and assessed online teaching and learning that also enhances epistemological access. We indicate that if one is to accept that the so-called new normal in education will largely be online, then the quality assurance of online teaching and learning will become unavoidable.

Keywords: epistemological access, online teaching and learning, emergency remote teaching

Introduction

In this article, we focus on teaching, learning, and assessment adaptations that were rapidly used to make the curriculum available online, and the extent to which these were organised systematically to allow for epistemological access. We seek to draw attention to content transmitted online and to scrutinise the experience of educators, in this case university education lecturers. This focus was motivated by three concerns: 1) emerging scholarly work and reports on the educational experiences during the pandemic tend to focus on access to data, connectivity, and devices (Jansen, 2020; Sayed & Singh, 2020); 2) they also focus more on the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of educational experiences during the pandemic (Black et al., 2020) and; 3) very little attention seems to have been given to the quality of online teaching and learning and to what has happened to the content of courses in the transition to online teaching and learning. Our purpose is to focus on the quality of online teaching and learning through the notion of organising systematic teaching and learning (Morrow, 2007b) that is necessary for epistemological access.

In the first part of this article, we outline the experiences that we have had that motivated us to conduct the small-scale research project on which this article is based. In doing so, we also discuss some of the scholarly work about, and reports on, educational experiences during the pandemic. We discuss these because such contributions have assisted in shaping our research. We then discuss the notion of epistemological access, foregrounding organising systematic teaching and learning. We go on to outline the methodology and discuss the findings. Finally, we analyse the data and conclude that quality and quality assurance of online teaching and learning is crucial.

We use Bernstein's (1971) conceptualisation of curriculum, pedagogy, and evaluation that he viewed as message systems in educational provision. We also use the notion of epistemological access, drawing on Morrow's (2007a) work that covers many dimensions, and is best explored by looking at the internal experiences of teachers and learners. In order to do this, Morrow indicated that it would require going through the course materials, observing interactions between teachers and learners, and looking at learners' participation in course tasks, activities, and assessments. However, given pandemic conditions, all this has not been possible, and we have, therefore, circumscribed our use of the notion of epistemological access to refer only to organising systematic teaching and learning online. We recognise that this does not deal entirely with epistemological access as indicated by Morrow (2007b) but this limitation has emerged largely because of the conditions under which we conducted the research upon which this article is based. We discuss this in more detail in the methodology section of this article, and we discuss more about how we used Bernstein and Morrow in this article in the section on our theoretical framework.

Using our own experiences, the existing literature, and reports on the effects of the pandemic on education, in this article we focus on epistemological access in relation to the content and assessment of courses offered online, and whether lecturers at two universities involved in these courses believe that there was a change in epistemological access once their courses

were put online. We are interested only in ascertaining whether lecturers thought that their courses and assessments affected epistemological access by being presented online, and in exploring the implications these have for the educational quality of online teaching and learning.

Theoretical framework

The COVID-19 pandemic still continues to have profound effects on several levels of life and society throughout the world. The education sector has been severely affected by the pandemic through the closure of schools, colleges, and universities. In almost all instances educational provisioning has moved online, and teaching and learning has been conducted on online platforms. Familiarity with, and competency in, learning and/or teaching online as well as access to online learning has been uneven at best and lacking in most instances in South Africa. Chisango and Marongwe (2021) found that the inadequacy of Information Communications Technology (ICT) and familiarity with ICT modes of teaching and learning in South African schools has created “digital, information and knowledge divides” (p. 149). The pandemic has loudly amplified such divides, not only in South Africa, but globally as Silva (2020) has reminded us.

In the higher education sector, nationally and globally, online learning in the wake of and during the pandemic is an emergency remote learning strategy (Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021). Hodges et al. (2020) described emergency remote learning as a temporary shift to alternative delivery modes that would return to face-to-face instructional delivery once the emergency had passed: it is meant only to be an emergency response to an emergency situation.

However, there has been little attention paid to the quality of what is taught or learnt online. The focus, rightly so given the pandemic conditions, has tended to be on ensuring that teaching and learning happens, no matter what. Hodges et al. (2020, p. 3), however, have cautioned that “the rapid approach necessary for ERT (Emergency Remote Teaching) may diminish the quality of the courses delivered.”

Drawing on our own and other colleagues’ experiences, we noted that although programmes are running online and tests are being written, the content of what has been put online has been streamlined to make it more manageable for online learning and engagement. Our experience also indicates that assessments have likewise been streamlined (Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development (CLTD), 2020a, 2020b). Where streamlining occurs after careful consideration and planning, courses may in fact be improved. However, streamlining as an emergency response may, at least potentially, reduce course content in ways that might compromise the overall organisation of systematic learning. These responses have occurred out of necessity, and they have been unavoidable but the issue of content and assessments being streamlined for online learning raises the question about whether the quality of the content and assessment is the same as they would have been under normal circumstances. Indeed, as Hodges et al. (2020) have indicated, the rush and urgency to move online could “diminish the quality of courses delivered” (p. 3).

We have had only one experience of a course/intervention that was subjected to quality assurance processes before the materials were put online. This was the *Teachers Choices in Action*, edited by Rusznyak (2020) that was put into place to ensure that final year Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) students and Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students would be able to complete a version of teaching experience, given that they were unable to go into schools to complete their teaching experience because of the pandemic restrictions. This was also to ensure that as final year students, they would be able to graduate with the requisite teaching experience. We do not know of another course that went through such quality assurance processes.

What should be noted about the materials in the *Teachers Choices in Action* (Rusznyak, 2020) is that although they went through quality assurance processes, they were materials that supplemented micro-teaching sessions that students had to come onto campus to complete and that were evaluated by members of staff who also had to come to campus. This means that these materials, despite going through quality assurance processes, were a support for contact sessions, and, thus, were not the same as online materials that work entirely online. It needs to be noted, however, that these materials were used by universities nationally and that not every university may have used the materials in the same way as we experienced and used them.

Our experiences, however, did make us question whether others were having similar ones. We wondered to what extent online teaching and learning had impacted epistemological access. Did the change in course content, the change in the format of delivery, and the change in assessment criteria and format have an impact on it? This made us decide to conduct a research project to ask colleagues in other education faculties if they felt that online teaching and learning impacted epistemological access.

Emerging scholarly work and reports

We also noted that in emerging scholarly work and in reports about educational experiences during the pandemic that we go on to discuss, there was a tendency to be quantitative and to focus on access to data, connectivity, and devices (Sayed & Singh, 2020; Jansen, 2020). Such contributions reinforced our questions and we noted that epistemological access, content, and quality of online teaching and learning had not been given attention. More research has been focussed on the experience of learning in isolation and the disruptive intrusion of home or community influences on learners who are trying to learn and work online at home (Isaacs, 2020; Taylor, 2020). Others have also pointed to the ways in which existing inequalities, including the lack of facilities, have been exacerbated and made more visible during the pandemic (Black et al., 2020). Others have pointed to the difficulties of managing time and developing a regular routine when learners have to work online at home (Taylor, 2020). Others, like Jansen (2020) and Daniels (2020) who contributed to a special issue of the *South African Review of Education* on this topic, have pointed to the difficulties many parents, across different social classes, have experienced in trying to provide home schooling for their children. Using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, these contributions have tended

to focus more on the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of online teaching and learning, and they have also tended to focus more on the experiences of learners and households than on the experiences of educators.

Indeed, there has been a lot of research and many scholarly publications on infusing technology in teaching and learning that have increased since the beginning of the 21st century. This literature has looked at using ICTs in education, e-learning, and e-teaching, at infusing technologies into teaching and learning, or simply at the technologies of teaching and learning in various educational contexts and at different levels (Carrim & Taruvinga, 2011; Jaffer et al., 2007; Osman & Hornsby, 2017). Our focus in this article, however, is different in that it looks at how technology has been used to move teaching and learning online during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the effects of this. Although the contributions on using technology in teaching and learning is of relevance to this article, these contributions do not speak to the use of teaching and learning during pandemic conditions nor to this as an emergency remote strategy, so discussion of such research and publications is thus limited to the type of scholarly work discussed above.

Reports on the effects of the pandemic on education in South Africa have tended to be quantitative. The information provided usually covers the rates of infection and death, how many have access to materials online and how many online submissions have been made, pass and failure rates in assessments done online, and how many have dropped out (Wits Senior Executive Team (SET), 2020a, 2020b). Van der Berg and Spaul (2020) reported on the impact of COVID-19 school closures and the effect on children in terms of days of school lost and the social, economic, and health costs associated with lockdown. The Minister of Higher Education, Blade Nzimande, released regular statements (Nzimande, 2020, May 23; 2020, June 09; 2020, July 21) on the progress made in implementing COVID-19 measures in higher education. He reported on such measures as the number of zero-rated sites available across institutions, how many devices were made available to students, and education budget revisions. Such information may be of vital importance, but it remains quantitative.

All such contributions have been useful, and the fact that all this work was done under lockdown pandemic conditions needs to be applauded. Given these current developments the theoretical framework and literature that this paper can draw upon directly is necessarily limited.

Whichever way one chooses to look at reports and studies of the effects of the pandemic on education, one cannot assume that the quality of what is offered, done, and submitted online is of the same quality as what was offered, done, and submitted during contact teaching and learning. We believe that this simply cannot be the case. In fact, the UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response Notes indicate that

within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a tendency to rush towards the use of ICTs to ensure continuity of learning. However, more consideration is needed around the qualitative approach if the objective is for students to be engaged, motivated, and supported to learn during this period. (UNESCO, 2020, p. 2)

We need to explore critically the difference/s between online and contact learning and teaching in terms of quality. Moreover, if one is to accept that the new normal in education in the future is one that will largely be online, then the quality assurance of online teaching and learning will not only become necessary and more critical, it will also be unavoidable.

For us, the important point is that online access does not necessarily mean epistemological access. Even if learners are able to access materials online, it does not follow that they will necessarily develop a deep understanding of the knowledge, concepts, and theories assumed in the information they are given online, nor is it guaranteed that they will acquire the concomitant skills.

Epistemological access

Morrow (2007b) identified two dimensions of access to education—that of access related to institutional policy and that related to teaching practice. The former, including enrolment and admission, is referred to as formal access while the latter refers to pedagogical approaches that enable all learners to learn and engage substantively with concepts, theories, and knowledge in order to develop deep understanding or, in other words have epistemological access (Morrow, 2007b).

This notion of epistemological access (Morrow, 1992) has generally been used in South African education research and publications to point to the difference between having formal access including access to material resources and facilities in educational institutions, as opposed to having access to knowledge. It is now aptly important to ask the same question in relation to online learning and teaching. Does access to online teaching and learning necessarily mean epistemological access?

The notion of epistemological access has been discussed in terms of considerations of 1) the type of knowledge to which students should have access; 2) ways in which students are supported in their engagement with that knowledge; and 3) the systematic organisation of that knowledge with regard to curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment decisions to ensure systematic teaching and learning. The theoretical framework we draw upon connects this notion of epistemological access (Morrow, 2007b) to Bernstein's (2000) notion of theoretical knowledge and the three message systems of education provision. Bernstein (1971) considered curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment to be the three interrelated common message systems through which formal education is realised. Curriculum in this case refers to selected knowledge that is considered valid, pedagogy refers to the ways in which that knowledge is transmitted, and assessment refers to the evaluation of the acquisition of that knowledge.

Valid knowledge in curriculum should be theoretical knowledge that, according to Bernstein (2000), is a form of vertical discourse through which principled knowledge is acquired systematically, and he distinguishes this from everyday knowledge that he viewed as a form of horizontal discourse during which knowledge is acquired through accumulation. Freidson (2001, p. 31) called "everyday knowledge" a type of practical knowledge that is "largely free

of formal concepts and theories.” He described theoretical knowledge as “formal knowledge” that is, “abstract, conceptual and not context dependent” (p. 29). Shalem and Slominsky (2010) referred to everyday knowledge as being comprised largely of spontaneous concepts that, “merely describe what is already present” (p. 758) and they contrasted this with theoretical knowledge that is comprised of scientific concepts. Wheelahan (2010) argued that social access without epistemic access, in relation to theoretical and disciplinary based knowledge, reproduces social inequality. It is the type of theoretical knowledge or disciplinary based knowledge that comprises curriculum that enables epistemological access for students.

In light of these distinctions, theoretical knowledge provides access to principles and theories that support epistemic access to disciplines and fields of study and the message system of pedagogy considers how this is transmitted. For epistemological access students need to be given ways of thinking about and working with knowledge within disciplines. Rambe and Mawere (2011) considered epistemological access as a means of inducting students into a specialist discourse and giving them access to shared disciplinary practice. Struyven et al. (2006) have argued that students need to be engaged in acts of knowledge construction rather than of knowledge acquisition and that knowing core conceptual knowledge and being able to apply this knowledge is what determines access to useful knowledge. This aligns with Morrow’s (2007a) argument that epistemological access is gained by what the student does rather than what is transmitted to them. This extends to assessment and the ways in which students are given opportunities to demonstrate their understanding and apply transmitted knowledge that determines if epistemological access has been realised as evidenced by the evaluation.

In a study that focused on American chemistry students and their engagement with online learning, Perets et al. (2020, p. 2439) found that after moving to emergency remote learning, “student engagement was likely negatively impacted by the emergency transition. [They] also found that lecturers engaged students less after the transition.” This is concerning since Morrow (2007a) suggested that it is access to teaching practice, learning strategies and discourses, and the provisioning of opportunities for students to construct knowledge and engage with conceptual knowledge that enables them to learn.

It is this provision, Morrow (2007a) has argued, that sees teaching as “the practice of organising systematic learning.” He has made the case that teaching demands the design of learning programmes intended to provide conditions for the “gradual development of competences that cannot be learnt in an instant” (p. 15). The role of the lecturer, then, in negotiating the epistemic domains of a particular subject and making knowledge accessible, would be to organize systematic learning for students in terms of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment choices. This is significant since it moves the conceptualisation of teaching beyond teaching methodologies and resources to the organisation of systematic learning that relies on the teacher as professional practitioner exercising professional agency in responding to the fundamental question posed by Morrow (2007a, p. 18), “How can I organize systematic learning in this context and these conditions, whatever the context and conditions

are?” It is this aspect that has posed significant challenges in the move to online emergency remote learning since logistical and practical considerations of access to content has undermined considerations of epistemological access. It is also for this reason that we sought lecturers' opinions as a focus for this study in order to ascertain how they managed to provide systematic learning opportunities for their students when they moved their courses online.

The outbreak of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns meant that universities had to scramble to put plans in place to offer emergency remote learning on learning platforms that many had not used extensively if at all (Inglesias-Pradas et al., 2021). Course plans and outlines needed to be significantly adjusted to suit the new mode of delivery and assessment alternatives were hastily constructed. Another aspect of online learning that did not feature significantly was the consideration of the students' ability to manage their learning in the online space. Online learning requires higher levels of student autonomy and agency given its reduced contact with lecturers. The ability to manage learning, both in practical terms with such things as navigating online systems, managing time, and mastering technology as well as in terms of epistemological engagement with understanding course concepts and ideas successfully in the virtual space requires some measure of cultural capital and cannot be assumed to be equal for all students. Silva (2020, p. 1) argued, “Distance learning brought by the pandemic has exacerbated the cultural capital abyss in higher education.” The academic cultural capital needed to navigate the institutional demands also varies among individuals with some possessing more institutional knowledge, including academic and digital literacy, thus allowing them easier navigation of the requirements to obtain the institutionalised state of cultural capital. Acknowledging the uneven cultural capital with which individual students come to higher education spaces assumes a response from those teaching these learners that addresses rather than widening the cultural capital divide.

[T]hese concerns are addressed with curriculum and pedagogical strategies—not simply by expanding online offerings uncritically. Now that remote learning is required for the sake of public health, it is crucial that higher education institutions and educators are attentive to the inequalities underlying and strengthened by the online format. (Silva, 2020, p. 1)

It is therefore imperative that we consider the nature of epistemological access afforded to students in terms of organising systematic teaching and learning online during COVID-19 emergency remote teaching and learning. It is crucial to look at the quality of what is being done online and to explore what shifts are happening, if any, to the content and organisation of courses when lecturers and learners transition to online teaching and learning.

We have indicated in the introduction that we recognise that we have not been able to obtain in-depth detailed data about the way teaching and learning was done in practice. Neither have we been able to ask more qualitative questions that would answer why the education lecturers in this study chose to do what they did. What we were able to do was gain, from the education lecturers who participated in this study, data about their perceptions of what they were able to do online and what students were able to do and submit online. We discuss these points in more detail in the methodology section that follows.

Methodology and ethics

We selected two universities in different provinces in South Africa offering undergraduate and postgraduate education degrees for this study. Both universities had, prior to COVID-19, offered their education courses in traditional contact mode, on campus, and neither had offered courses online. The rationale for this selection was that the two selected universities moved their programmes online during the initial COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, and their students have since been doing work online. Only academic staff in the Education Faculty/Department teaching both postgraduate and undergraduate students at these universities were asked to respond to the survey. Education Faculties/Departments were selected because we are located at the Wits School of Education and are, therefore, in the same field, and we have shared a similar experience in moving teaching and learning online.

These Education Faculty/Department university lecturers were reached using a Survey Monkey questionnaire. Of the 45 who completed the survey at the end of the 2020 academic year, 20 were from University A and 25 from University B. Although we attempted to reach more universities, we were granted permission to administer the questionnaire by these two. We acknowledge the limitations of the small-scale nature of our research including the limited number of responses we received but, despite these limitations, the data we were able to gather still provides useful insights into the perceptions of lecturers at these two universities of their experience of moving their courses online during pandemic conditions.

We used a survey approach to ask respondents how they experienced the quality of online learning and teaching. The emphasis in this research design is on collecting data on the opinions, perceptions, and views of the respondents as a way of identifying common views and experiences. The benefit of this approach for data collection is that it allows for standardisation of measurement since the same questions are asked of each respondent. We then analysed the data using statistical techniques in order to “discover relationships that are common . . . and hence to provide generalizable statements about the object of study” (Gable, 1994, p. 2). We do not seek to answer the question of why lecturers feel the way they do and are able only to report on their perceptions. A further qualitative investigation would be required to engage with the question of why these perceptions were held.

In addition, there was limited opportunity to use other research methods because of pandemic conditions. Despite using only an online questionnaire as our research instrument, we encountered serious problems with response rates and delays. As already mentioned, we reached two universities and it took between two and five months for them to process our research requests. Responses to the questionnaire were also delayed and affected by whether people had online access and were receiving work emails. The pandemic and lockdown conditions also impacted which research instruments we could use and what kind of data would be most feasible to collect under such conditions. The methodological limitations of the research upon which this article is based are therefore also a result of the conditions under which the research was conducted.

The survey questions focused only on how respondents felt about the quality of teaching and learning during online learning and teaching, and whether they felt that they compromised their own expectations regarding the kind of work they could expect from students and what they could offer to them under pandemic conditions. The questions did not focus specifically on pedagogical adjustments but, rather, on changes to form, content, and assessment of courses when they were moved online in an effort to ascertain general perceptions of changes affecting the systematic organisation of teaching and learning online and lecturers' opinions of the effect of these changes on the performance of students and on the quality of courses. The questions posed in the Survey Monkey, with the responses we received to each question in it, are discussed in the section on our findings.

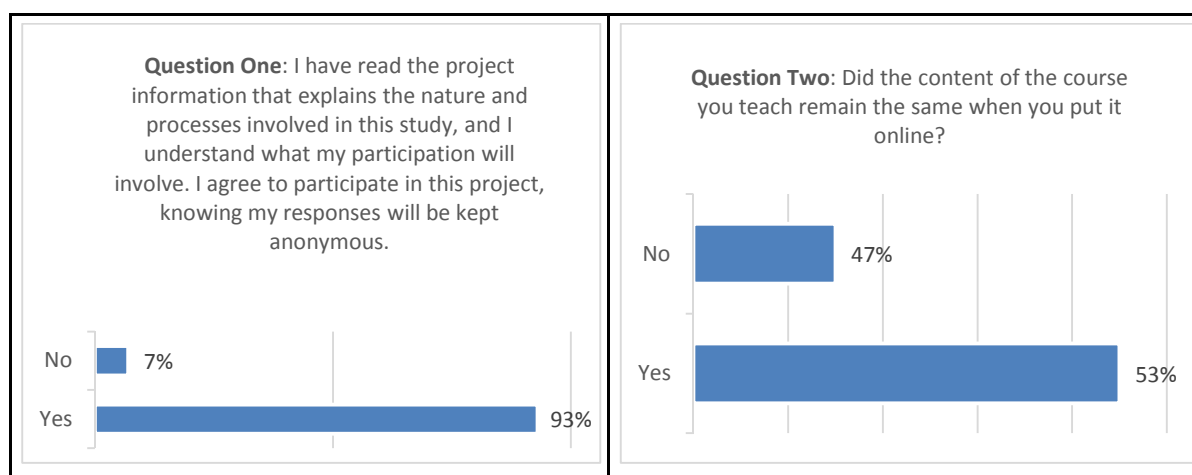
Permission to conduct research in the above-mentioned institutions was sought from the registrar/Dean of Faculty/Head of Department or School at each one. Research ethical clearance for the study on which this article is based was granted by the University of Witwatersrand's Research Ethics Committee (non-medical) prior to our approaching the selected institutions. The anonymity of participants and institutions discussed here is protected as is the confidentiality of all results. There was no harm done to participants and they were not exposed to any risks in completing the survey.

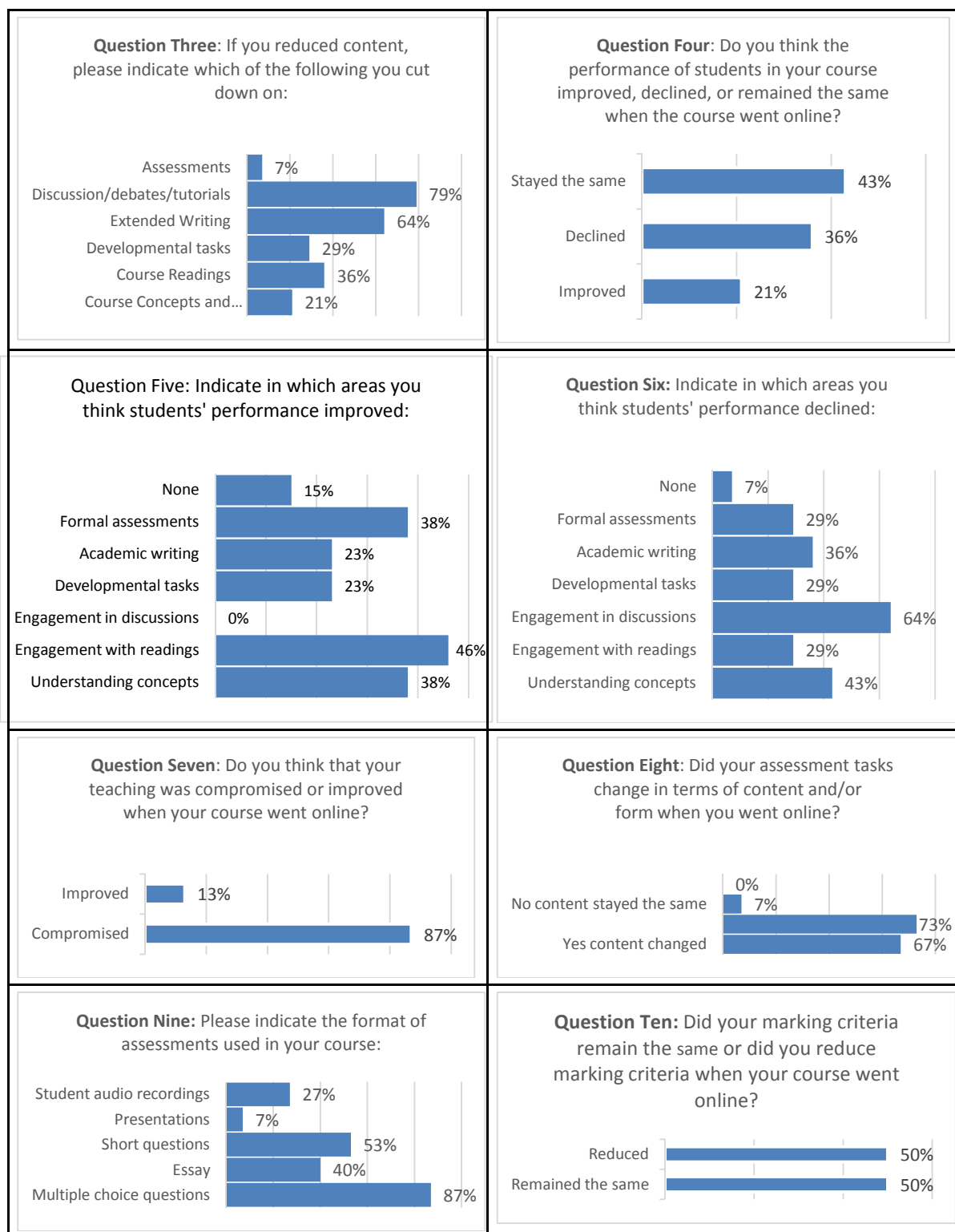
Findings

The ten questions in the survey explored epistemological access by asking lecturers if they felt that course content had been reduced. The questions, related to changes in form, types of activities and assessments, and perceived performance, aimed to explore lecturers' opinions of student performance and their engagement with knowledge. These questions allowed for some general insight into lecturers' perceptions of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment choices in organising systematic teaching and learning online and whether they felt that their teaching had been compromised. Table 1 indicates the responses that were received to each of the questions asked.

Table 1

Survey Monkey Responses





Of these lecturers, 53% indicated that the content of their courses remained the same when put online while 47% indicated that it changed. This is notable in that it appears that there were two distinct approaches to moving courses online: 1) changing content and 2) keeping courses as they were during face-to-face contact delivery. Despite the two distinct approaches it is significant that the majority of lecturers (87%) felt that their teaching was compromised with the move to online teaching and learning.

Where course content was reduced, 79% of lecturers identified discussions, debates, and tutorials as being key areas in which they felt content was reduced. Additionally, they identified extended writing opportunities (64%), course readings (36%), developmental tasks (29%), and course concepts and theories (21%) as having been reduced. It is notable that only 7% of lecturers felt that assessments had been reduced.

Some lecturers did, however, indicate that while assessments may not have been reduced, they were changed. For 73% of them the form of their assessments had changed and for 67% the content had changed. This is in contrast to the 7% of lecturers who said that the content of their assessments had stayed the same. No lecturer indicated that the form of their assessments had not changed. Relating this to the finding regarding course content changing overall it is interesting to note that while 53% of lecturers indicated that their courses had remained the same when put online this was not the case in terms of their assessments.

When asked about the format of assessment used online, 87% of lecturers indicated that multiple choice questions were used while 53% indicated that they used short questions and 40% indicated that they used essay type questions. This supports the indication from lecturers that they felt that extended writing opportunities had been reduced. Student audio recordings were identified as a format of assessment used online (27%) but only 7% indicated that presentations were used. Half of the lecturers felt that they reduced marking criteria while the remainder indicated that marking criteria remained the same.

In terms of student performance, results were mixed with 43% of lecturers indicating that they felt student performance had stayed the same, 36% feeling that student performance had declined and 21% feeling that student performance had improved. This is important because 64% indicated that students' performance either remained the same or improved. Where lecturers felt students' performance had improved, this improvement was noted with regard to improved engagement with readings (46%), understanding concepts (38%), and formal assessments (38%). Academic writing (23%) and developmental task improvement (23%) was also noted by lecturers.

Where lecturers felt that students' performance had declined, the most notable area of decline was indicated as engagement in discussions (64%) followed by understanding concepts (43%), and academic writing (36%). Student performance decline in the areas of formal assessments, developmental tasks, and engagement with readings was identified by 29% of lecturers. The data indicates that while most lecturers felt that student performance improved or remained the same, there were also feelings that student performance had declined.

In summary, it appears that two broad approaches to moving courses online were adopted—keeping content the same or changing it. Where content was changed reductions were noted in the areas of discussions, extended writing, course readings, developmental tasks, course concepts, and assessments. Despite the indication that in many cases course content remained the same there was overall consensus across both approaches that assessment had been changed both in terms of form and content. Multiple choice questions were indicated as being the most prevalent format of assessment used online followed by short questions and then

essays. There were mixed responses to the question of student performance. Where lecturers felt that this had declined, the areas identified were engagement in discussions, understanding of concepts, and academic writing. In contrast, where lecturers felt student performance had improved, the relevant areas identified were engagement with readings, understanding concepts, and formal assessments.

There were, however, no mixed responses when it came to lecturers' feelings about whether or not their teaching had been compromised in being moved online since an overwhelming majority indicated that they did indeed feel that this had happened. This indicates that the move to online teaching cannot be considered just a transposing of what was done traditionally in face-to-face contact; there are significant shifts in what lecturers feel they are able and unable to do online and, most significantly, this indicates that lecturers did not feel that their teaching online was the same as that done in person. This challenges the assumption that things continue to work as normal during emergency remote teaching and learning conditions.

Analysis and discussion

This article is based on empirical data obtained in a small-scale research project, using responses to a questionnaire that were gathered from education lecturers at two universities in South Africa. We acknowledge that the Survey Monkey that was used to administer a questionnaire to colleagues in the Education Faculties/Departments at these universities is limited and that the data is also limited. However, we maintain that this small-scale project with its limited data is useful because it offers insights into the perceptions of lecturers at these institutions about what happened to content and assessments when courses were put online as an emergency learning response under COVID-19 pandemic conditions in 2020. It also helped us to bring into focus epistemological access in online teaching and learning by considering lecturers' perceptions of what it meant to organise systematic teaching and learning online.

Epistemological access is related to teaching practice that enables all students to engage substantively with concepts, theories, and knowledge in order to develop deep understanding through the organisation of systematic learning. Epistemological access is concerned with both the form and content of knowledge structures central to a particular course. We have argued that access to principled, theoretical, formal knowledge as opposed to everyday, spontaneous knowledge (Bernstein, 2000; Freidson, 2001; Shalem et al., 2010) is key to enabling epistemological access. While this study did not explore the knowledge structures of particular courses, we have noted that some changes to both form and content of courses were made when courses were moved online.

It is noteworthy that 53% of lectures indicated that there had been no changes to the content of their course when it was moved online, but for the 47% of lectures who indicated that there had been changes in content these were related primarily to reduction in content. They affected opportunities for engagement through discussions, extended writing opportunities

and developmental tasks, and actual course concepts, theories, and readings that call into question the epistemological loss in terms of epistemic access to disciplinary knowledge (Rambe & Mawere, 2011). There is a clear indication that limiting the knowledge to which students had access in addition to the constrained access to ways of thinking about and working with that knowledge had an impact on epistemological access.

In contrast, lecturers noted improved engagement with readings (46%), understanding concepts (38%), formal assessments (38%), academic writing (23%), and developmental task improvement (23%) which is an encouraging finding that suggests that where disciplinary knowledge is not limited, epistemic access continues to be supported. What enabled such improvements to occur requires more detailed investigation of the course content and form in which the content was delivered and, more importantly, who these students were and what it was about them that allowed them to perform better learning online under pandemic conditions. Our limited project did not explore these aspects. However, they point to important issues related to students' own dispositions, contexts, and enablements that could be explored in future further research.

Although frequency of assessment did not appear to have been reduced, the formats clearly shifted when courses moved online. Our findings indicate that the most prevalent format of assessment used was that of multiple-choice questions that limit alternative forms of extended engagement with assessment formats that require skills such as structuring an academic essay with arguments.

The questionnaire used in this study covered curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Following Morrow (2007a), we viewed curriculum as course content, concepts, and theories covered in a particular course and the way in which content is structured to organise systematic learning. It is in the organisation of curriculum that the distinction is made between mere inclusion of random, isolated facts, concepts, and theories and the networked organisation of these concepts and theories that enables epistemological access to the underlying knowledge logic. We viewed pedagogy as instruction, pacing, sequencing, scaffolding, and explaining course content, concepts, and theories as well as the pedagogical decisions taken in terms of learning tasks, activities, and assessments. Drawing on Bernstein's (1971) description of assessment as evaluation, we viewed assessment in terms of the evaluation of students' understanding of content covered. Given that we used only a questionnaire in this study we were not able to investigate the specific methods of instruction used by lecturers for their courses and we did not look at the types of activities and assessments they included. However, the lecturers' responses to the questionnaire indicated that the types of learning activities and tasks offered were changed even if the content of the courses remained the same. The data indicates that developmental tasks like discussions and debates along with tutorials were reduced as pedagogical choices by lecturers as they moved courses online. This is significant given Wheelahan's (2010) assertion that student/lecturer interaction through activities such as theoretical discussions and developmental tasks is important in giving students access to shared disciplinary practice. In addition, reducing such activities also confirms the points made by Perets et al. (2020, p. 2439) who noted that

“student engagement was likely negatively impacted by the emergency transition. We also found that lecturers engaged students less after the transition.”

Although this study did not investigate the ways in which courses were presented, scaffolded, taught, and delivered, or why lecturers made the choices they did, the fact that they felt that their teaching was compromised and that reductions in content and assessment occurred, suggests that they felt that some pedagogical choices that had been available to them previously were no longer viable as part of emergency remote learning.

We have already noted that our findings indicated that the form of assessment changed during the move to online learning. It is important to consider in which ways epistemological access may have been compromised by the change in assessment format. Typically, assessment serves a dual function in relation to epistemological access in providing information about the process as well as the product of learning during a course. Hodges et al. (2020) cautioned that emergency remote learning tends to focus more on the product of learning even though the focus should also be on the process of learning. During emergency remote learning the dominant form of assessment used, as indicated by our findings, was that of multiple-choice questions that, in general offer answers that are correct or incorrect. This is most associated with summative forms of assessment that tend to be product focused, although we acknowledge that multiple-choice assessments can serve the formative (process focused) function of indicating areas in which students are coping and those in which they need additional support. In contrast, formative assessment provides students with substantive feedback indicating areas of strength and making concrete suggestions for improvement. Providing feedback on student writing, for example, provides an additional engagement opportunity between lecturer and student in which the process of learning, rather than the product, is the focus. From the data, it seems that formative assessments have been affected and summative assessments that use multiple choice questions have increased.

These findings do not suggest that online learning will always constrain epistemological access, particularly given the findings that student performance improved or remained the same. It merely suggests that the findings of this study indicate that epistemological access was constrained during emergency remote teaching and learning where content was reduced and where engagement opportunities were limited. Despite this, we are of the view that online learning can maintain epistemological access when lecturers focus attention on the ways in which courses are structured, presented, and delivered online or, in other words, the ways in which they organise systematic teaching and learning online.

Careful structuring of courses will be needed on the understanding that they will be taught and learnt online, and that they cannot be designed in the same ways as face-to-face courses are. The scaffolding of content and the readings used in the course are also crucial in this regard. In addition, key to maintaining epistemological access online is maintaining the standard and level of content included, considering ways of enhancing student engagement including forms of extended writing and formative assessment opportunities. If epistemological access is not to be compromised by an online mode of delivery, shifts in practice from traditional pedagogy used in face-to-face teaching need to occur to ensure that

even within the online space, curriculum, pedagogical, and assessment choices can be made to encourage substantive engagement to ensure epistemological access.

Conclusion

Our focus in this article is on online teaching and learning in relation to the notion of epistemological access. The small-scale study upon which this article is based explored epistemological access in relation to the content and assessment of courses offered online and considered whether lecturers at two universities believe that there was a change in epistemological access once their courses were put online. The purpose was to ascertain whether emergency remote teaching and learning has affected epistemological access from the perspective of lecturers, and to explore the implications of this for the educational quality of online teaching and learning. Given the limitations of the study and conditions under which it was done, we could not explore epistemological access in the detail that is needed. Such an exploration would have required an exploration of how teaching and learning actually happens and this we could not do. Therefore, we used the notion of epistemological access more in terms of the importance of systematic organising of teaching and learning, and we covered only how lecturers at two universities felt if such systematic organising was affected during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Based on the findings, we argue that online access to learning does not necessarily mean epistemological access. We found that whether lecturers chose to keep their courses as they originally were or made changes to them when they moved them online, they overwhelmingly indicated that they felt that their teaching had been compromised during emergency remote learning conditions. This indicates that while lecturers were able to move their courses online and ensure that students were given access to some form of content, they felt compromised in their teaching of that content. Lecturers indicated that where changes were made to courses put online, content and engagement opportunities were reduced and assessment opportunities that allowed for formative feedback were limited. This suggests that shifts in practice from traditional curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment practices need to occur to encourage the substantive engagement necessary for epistemological access in online teaching and learning. If education in the future is to move increasingly online, then considering teaching practice shifts for the online space becomes critical if epistemological access is to be foregrounded and the quality of courses maintained.

We acknowledge the limitations of this study that worked with a small data base and focused primarily on lecturers' views. Suggestions for future research would be to expand the data base and include students' views and lessons learnt during emergency remote learning conditions. Additionally, exploring views of how lecturers and students would prefer to proceed in the future would provide valuable insight into how to structure courses online in relation to course content and how that content is scaffolded, presented, and assessed. To ensure that educational offerings online maintain their quality we must open the area of epistemological access in online teaching and learning to consideration, discussion, and debate. We argue that bringing epistemological access into focus supports discussion and

debate on what would ensure the quality of teaching and learning online, and which teaching practices, structures, mechanisms, indicators, and systems need to be put into place to ensure epistemological access and thus maintain the quality of teaching and learning online.

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