



COVID-19 and the Quest for Reconfiguration of Disciplines: Unpacking New Directions

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical editorial piece sets the tone for a special issue that focuses on teasing new directions during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The piece is underpinned by bricolage thinking, and we seek to show that it is essential to reimagine various educational disciplines in order to meet new challenges and opportunities presented by COVID-19. In doing so, we are convinced that the relationship between a serene scholarly quest and applied space has to be re-examined. Thus, to reimagine a better world during and post COVID-19, cross-disciplinarity is no longer an option for humanity, instead, it is essential, to ensure the collective efforts needed to address the pressing issues of the day. We end this editorial section by arguing that new strategies that are adopted need to be shared across disciplines and faculties, to reinvent multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches to addressing human crises.

KEYWORDS

COVID 19; interdisciplinary, teaching and learning; online learning.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, humanity experienced a worldwide pandemic, COVID-19, which left countries devastated (Dhanani et al., 2020). It was reported that, by “end of July 2020 approximately 17,000,000 cases of COVID-19 had been reported worldwide with more than 660,000 deaths, placing the various life systems in many nations under severe pressure” (Osman & Keevy, 2021, p. xxv). The large number of deaths prompted the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare COVID-19 a pandemic, which ignited universal efforts and approaches to limit the spread of the virus. Among these were tight or hard lockdowns, which saw borders closed, flights grounded, people leaving their offices to work at home, and schools resorting to online learning. This situation became the “new normal” while the pandemic wreaked havoc. In essence, the pandemic ensured that life as we had known it, changed irrevocably. The crisis led many societies to acknowledge the importance of certain workers who had not always been afforded the proper appreciation prior the emergency caused by this pandemic (UNESCO, 2020).

Furthermore, the pandemic led to the realisation that disciplines cannot remain stagnant in the face of an ever-changing world. New ideas, new approaches and new ways of doing things needed to be investigated to contain the virus and to ensure that disruptions to life systems are minimised. These attempts to innovate had as its goal ensuring the coexistence of people and the virus – even though the pandemic has slowed, the total eradication of the virus is unlikely. Countries, such as the United Kingdom, Botswana and Namibia, have, at the time of writing, lifted hard lockdown rules, the necessity of wearing face masks, and PCR testing for international travellers, especially for people who have been vaccinated.

The pandemic reminded us of the need for new directions in various academic disciplines, to coexist with the new realities caused by the pandemic (Tarman, 2020). As UNESCO (2020) argues, the COVID-19 crisis reminded us how crucial public education is for societies, communities, and individuals. Therefore, the argument of this editorial is that, to improve human conditions in the face of a crisis, new directions are indispensable, desirable and doable in the context of a pandemic. The successful achievement of these changes hinge, in part, on integrated “curricula based on themes and problems that allows us to learn to live in peace with our common humanity” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 18).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BRICOLAGE

We locate this editorial in bricolage theory. Bricolage “is a concept that originated from anthropology, [and] designates a type of relationship with time and space and an approach to knowledge and reasoning” (Lévi-Strauss, 1967, p. 2). The essence of bricolage is to “make do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities” (Baker & Nelson, 2005, p. 333). In the quest to find new directions for disciplines, bricolage thinking, as proposed by Rapport and Overing (2014), seeks to “put together of multiple cultural forms to innovate and create something new or more fit for purpose”. With the effect of the COVID-19

pandemic on the world, it became inevitable that disciplines find “different ways of making sense, and pragmatic solutions that are not degraded by situations” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 326). These different ways, in the context of the pandemic, propel academic disciplines to “evoke strategies that are adopted to construct something out of the little that is available, whether resources or systems, to achieve new goals” (Aagard, 2009, p. 84). With bricolage as their line of thinking, we are convinced that disciplines will see the need to re-examine their approaches to life, in order to ensure they remain relevant in the pursuit to save humanity. We argue this way because bricolage is a theory that “inspires creative thinking because it encourages seeing new relationships between seemingly disparate objects” (Blankenship, 2020: p. 1). In short, we believe this theory is relevant for couch this editorial, because one of the goals of the theory is that it seeks to “promote progressive pedagogy by constructing new things out of what is available” (Louvel, 2013). Academic disciplines have existing structures through which they have been operating. However, through bricolage, academic disciplines could engage with other disciplines, and approach life problems, such as those caused by COVID-19, with a transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach. In essence, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe that disciplines cannot isolate themselves from other disciplines; instead, they should be working together and removing the boundaries that have isolated academic disciplines.

Why Reconfigure Disciplines?

Without a doubt, COVID-19 presented humanity with unprecedented challenges (Dhanani et al., 2020, p. 126) in all spheres of life, and rethinking our disciplines to ensure their relevance has become essential. If disciplines are to confront realities during and post COVID-19 successfully, there is a need for us to broaden our approaches, to encompass fluidity, capillarity and the changing contexts of contemporary societies (UNESCO, 2020, p. 10).

COVID-19 Exposed Unexpected Life Realities

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the “difficulty of dealing with unexpected situations in centralized bureaucracies and showed us that the real capacity for response and innovation” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 13). Bueddefeld et al. (2021) explain that the pandemic had unprecedented consequences for modern history. Most of the challenges manifested in social, economic and political spheres. One unexpected reality was the massive loss of human life in almost every country. Koh et al. (2021) report that, by December 2021, COVID-19 was the leading cause of death globally. On 17 March 2022, the cumulative global death toll stood at 6 077 252 (WHO, 2022). Almost every country on the globe reported COVID-19-related deaths between 2019 and 2022.

In the education arena, the pandemic caused the abrupt closure of schools and higher education institutions (Gupta & Goplani, 2020; Mirahmadizadeh et al., 2020). Teaching and learning times were lost. Most endowed schools resorted to online learning and blended teaching. Through COVID-19, we discovered what it means to be stuck at home, with computer

screens, laptops and phones being our only way of communicating, we learnt about home-schooling and working from home offices, and we worked out and stayed in touch with loved ones via Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp, Facebook and other software (Maphosa, 2021). These unexpected, new life realities presented challenges as well as opportunities; one such opportunity relates to the need for government agencies to work in unison.

Covid Required an Interdisciplinary Approach to Humanity

In our attempts to address the challenges presented by COVID-19, it became clear that everyone needed to come on board to determine the best way to mitigate the pandemic, to limit losses related to life, trade and jobs. An interdisciplinary approach was viewed as the most practical. Interdisciplinarity is defined as different disciplines considering a shared object from different perspectives (Mol & Hardon, 2020). The Gemelli Against COVID-19 Post-Acute Care Study Group (2020) advocates for a health-directed, interdisciplinary approach to boosting post-recovery rates. Fields such as health, education, the retail industry, the transport sector and others adhered to various COVID regulations that had been gazetted by different governments to halt the spread of the virus. Health, as a spotlight discipline, did not disregard what other fields could bring to the table to address the various challenges. Boundaries that had separated disciplines were removed and negotiated, to pave the way for finding solutions to save humanity.

Disciplines Often Create Unnegotiated Boundaries

While the idea of a need for interdisciplinary approaches to life's challenges were gaining momentum in some sectors, others guarded their disciplinary boundaries and remained blind to ways their disciplines could integrate other thought processes for the sake of finding solutions for the challenges facing humanity. While we support this argument, we also acknowledge that interdisciplinary spaces are hard to construct, and hard to maintain (Wissoker, 2018). However, the advent of COVID-19 necessitated changes to the landscape and evoked the need for people to bring to the table every available piece of knowledge to solve or mitigate the pandemic. An example of people working together in the South African context is the national disaster command team assembled by President Cyril Ramaphosa, which comprised people from various disciplines, and which was tasked with addressing issues relating to the pandemic. The intent was sustaining communication with the populace and minimising disruption and other side effects. Thus, in this context, reconfiguration of disciplines was required, to allow various academic disciplines to negotiate boundaries, rather than taking isolated stances in the context of the pandemic.

Disciplines Can Learn from Each Other in the Context of Crisis

In the context of the crisis, and post pandemic, we have seen that disciplines can learn from each another. As educationists, we learnt the meaning of a variety of medical terms, which, prior to the pandemic, were unknown or irrelevant to us. For example, the general populace learnt the meaning of terms such as surgical mask, immunity, asymptomatic, droplet transmission, endemic, and social distance. Academic disciplines need to think about the ways

they can “develop actors, structures and dynamics which can operate at a global level to make humanity better” (Smith, 2007, p. 35). Negotiation under the context of COVID-19 should be characterised by compromise, which demonstrates that disciplinary consensus is needed to fight a global pandemic (Grunert & Ludwig, 2022).

Value of Unpacking New Directions: Towards Multidisciplinary Approaches

There is always value in seeking new directions in the quest to make the universe and humanity a better place or norm for all. Doing so requires that academic disciplines learn from and open their spaces to new knowledge, rather than protecting their academic territory. The constantly changing circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic showed us that academic disciplines cannot remain stagnant. Consequently, new thinking and approaches are indispensable for making the world a better place for humanity and other crises such as climate change.

We agree with the observation by UNESCO (2020, p. 10) that the pandemic magnified many of the long-standing challenges facing humanity. The uneven opportunities that divide people within and across nations, in fact, seem to be worsening. Therefore, it is essential to encourage post-pandemic reconstruction, research excellence (as demonstrated by ongoing collaborative research to understand and defeat the virus), pedagogical innovation, and effective responsiveness to various disruptive trends (Wangenge-Ouma & Kupe, 2020). We argue that this is possible from a bricolage thinking approach, since the theory “supports the need for something new from the reworking of those items” (Blankenship, 2020).

This special issue drew many articles from the field of education. We submit that education, as an academic field, should begin to interact with various other academic fields to enact a better world during and after the pandemic. We agree that the “educational response to the COVID-19 crisis has revealed the [need for] capacity of educators to draw on their professional knowledge and collaboratively mobilize with a resourcefulness and creativity” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 13). Achieving this goal cannot be the sole responsibility of educational theories and online teaching, but requires a willingness to open up to various possibilities that can improve education in the context of a crisis. Thus, education should tap into interdisciplinary theories and ideologies that have shaped other fields. Reciprocal learning is inevitable if we are to invest in improving education, so that it can stand in the times of crisis. Thus, we agree with White et al. (2021, p. 240), that “interdisciplinary research can be highly rewarding. It allows research teams to cross disciplinary boundaries, to connect and collaborate on complex issues; and to share and combine expertise that might not be achievable within individual disciplines”. Thus, our message to authors was that they should discuss the new directions their fields have acquired, and show how interdisciplinary approaches have and will, in the future, positively impact their fields after the emergence of COVID-19. While COVID-19 was, indeed, a human catastrophe, it reminded us the urgency of “improving on the world that was before presents us all with a real challenge and responsibility. We must build narratives for what the new reality

could look like” (UNESCO, 2020, p. 24), and this new reality can only arise when we seek new directions, through interdisciplinary approaches to improving the situation for humanity, and trajectories associated with it.

CONCLUSION

This editorial piece introduced the special issue, which has the theme of new directions in and post the COVID-19 era. We argued that, while academic disciplines are independent, the COVID-19 pandemic reminded us that remaining isolated as academic disciplines would not help us to address the challenges associated with the pandemic. It was noted that learning from one another is required if we are to reconstruct a better world, better than the one that was damaged by COVID-19. Interdisciplinary research is key in the quest for new directions, and for reinventing a better world for all. Thus, to achieve this, the special issue covers, but is not limited to the following aspects:

- Transforming higher education and finding new directions in the post COVID-19 era
- Engaged science: Is it an odd expectation?
- Teaching STEM education practical work in remote classrooms
- Online learning in rural ecologies, and new directions
- Economic and management sciences and COVID-19: New directions
- A new understanding of human sciences, the social contract and its meaning
- The university as a virtual space and new directions in education
- Student activism in the context of COVID-19, and new directions

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