

Inclusive pedagogies in digital post-Covid- 19 higher education

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only led to medical conundrums and uncharted scientific territories but has also engendered new educational challenges and opportunities that need to be considered in order to reconceptualise, recalibrate and reconfigure higher education in terms of its inclusive foundations and orientations. While current research has highlighted the role of digital teaching methodologies in creating the ‘new normal’ in higher education in the post-Covid-19 era, the ‘new normal’ must be concomitantly envisaged in terms of the role of higher education in fostering more inclusive e-learning spaces. This article discusses the ways in which the tenets of an inclusive pedagogical discourse can be conceptualized and enacted in virtual learning environments in terms of teaching methodologies, learner-centred content delivery and formative assessment implementation. The pedagogical triptych should be underpinned by an inclusive and equity-based ‘cyberculture’ that constitutes a sine qua non element in developing all students’ sense of belonging and learning in higher education. Key words: inclusive pedagogies, higher education, online teaching, post Covid-19

Introduction

The Covid- 19 pandemic has resulted in immense changes in all spheres of our lives, social relations, institutional arrangements and political priorities. Education has not been an exception as it had to undergo a pedagogical metamorphosis in order to provide remote forms of teaching and learning. Online teaching has reportedly become the ‘new normal for higher education’ (Nordmann et al., 2021) and is expected to shape our educational future in

the post- Covid- 19 era (Mulenga & Marbán, 2020; Sintema, 2020). This is because of its educational emergency response legacy in a time of health- related global crisis (Xie & Rice, 2021), and also

due to the way in which remote access and its affordances (such as privacy and comfort) seem to have been appreciated by some students (Hast, 2021).

Despite the ways in which ‘online teaching and learning’ has been portrayed as the ‘new normal’ in the post- Covid- 19 higher education landscape, it is questionable whether this is a realistic scenario, given that face-t o- face teaching seems to have re-emerged as the preferred pedagogical *modus operandi* in higher education. For example, Walker et al. (2021) provide evidence to suggest that most students and instructors expressed a preference for face- to- face learning. A similar preference is evidenced in the ways in which the majority of higher education institutions in the UK opted to revert to face- to- face teaching during the 2021/2022 academic year. This was also the case for universities that, even though they initially promulgated their commitment to an entirely online form of delivery, reversed their policies by reintroducing face- to- face teaching despite the ongoing health-r elated crisis linked to the pandemic (Walker et al., 2022).

Evolving skepticism regarding the feasibility and durability of the envisaged ‘digital normal’ in post-pandemic higher education also relates to the ways in which the digitisation of educational provision has concomitantly ushered in many challenges. These challenges not only arise from universities’ and faculty staff’s lack of preparedness and efficacy to create effective virtual learning communities, but also from digital inequities that are inexorably linked to other forms of social inequalities and power imbalances that have become more pronounced due to the pandemic (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Ndzinisa & Dlamini, 2022; Toquero, 2021). Xiao (2021) postulates that equity is pertinent to the ‘increasingly digitalized post-C OVID- 19 world’ due to the ways in which digitisation could create new forms of inequality and exclusion that

will further disadvantage vulnerable groups of students, despite its alleged potential to improve teaching and learning.

The ‘digital divide’ constitutes an important challenge in implementing online pedagogies as some groups of students might not be able to access digitally mediated information, resources and support in higher education. This is especially the case for students from historically marginalized communities, such as students with disabilities and those from low socio- economic, ethnic minority and migrant backgrounds, who are more likely to experience digital inequity and to be socially and digitally excluded (Faturoti, 2022; Mavrou et al., 2017). These students are less likely to adapt to and engage with online forms of educational provision, thereby raising concerns about the ways in which digital learning environments engender inequitable learning experiences (Hast, 2021). Hence, the new normal in higher education in the post-C ovid- 19 era should also be defined in terms of the ways in which higher education institutions can address deepening social inequities and their impact on students’ access to, participation in and success in higher education. The rupture in the global social edifice caused by Covid and the seismic changes that ensued in terms of digitizing the process of teaching and learning should be the harbinger of a new educational reality, whereby inclusive teaching is not just, in the words of Nordmann et al. (2021), ‘the pastime of pro- pedagogy faculty’.

Social injustices occur not only in in terms of students’ physical access to and meaningful engagement with the learning process, but also virtually via their online learning experience and the ways in which this involvement speaks to their own experiences (Lackovic, 2020). Freire (1998) was a firm proponent of dialogical teaching that presupposes teachers’ critical stance and understanding of students’ life histories and their ways of mediating and making sense of their world. These critical considerations and their equity-

based implications and ramifications reaffirm the fundamental importance of questioning the goals of education (Cahapay, 2020) and the roles of educators (Rodríguez- Triana et al., 2020), with a view to ‘reimagining, redesigning and recalibrating education to make it accessible, equitable and inclusive’ (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

This article focuses on exploring the ways in which inclusion and its equity and social justice concerns can be embedded in online pedagogical discourse and be the harbinger of a new normal in education, whereby higher education institutions can become critical spaces for addressing the post- pandemic exacerbation of social inequities. The latter enhance the risk of vulnerable groups of students failing and dropping out of higher education (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2013; Gibson, 2012). Even though inclusive pedagogies have gained momentum in higher education, the term encompasses a plethora of different practices (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). The disparity of inclusive practice in higher education arises from the contested and contentious nature of inclusive education, which has been plagued by ambiguity and characterized as a ‘semantic chameleon’ (Liasidou, 2012). In some cases, inclusive education is reduced to a special education artifact that regenerates and perpetuates discriminatory and stigmatized practices that are characterized as ‘inclusive’, such as the segregation of students with disabilities as a prerequisite for being granted extra time during exams (Madriaga et al., 2011). The quest for inclusion necessitates developing inclusive pedagogies that can meet the needs of student diversity. This is accomplished without stigmatizing and discriminating against students whose biological and biographical characteristics are thought to deviate from ontological and social identity ‘norms’ prescribed by the ‘humanist’ subject. The latter constitutes an ontological archetype that has engendered and

legitimized social hierarchies and dualisms of normative and non-normative ways of being (Goodley et al., 2014).

Given the student- centred and equity- based dimensions of inclusion, the notion of andragogy should arguably be used in tandem with, or even instead of, pedagogy in fostering more inclusive teaching and learning in higher education. Andragogy is pertinent in the context of inclusive education that places students' needs, interests, strengths and 'voices' at the heart of the teaching and learning process. According to Knowles et al. (2014), the andragogical model is, *inter alia*, underpinned by pedagogical assumptions, thereby rendering andragogy a more encompassing concept that aims to expand upon and apply pedagogical models in higher education. While pedagogy is defined by a more 'teacher-focused' approach to facilitate the process of students' learning, andragogy is conceptualized as a more 'student- centred' approach that is concerned with adult rather than young students' learning (Yoshimoto et al., 2007). This is an important, albeit contested and for some scholars unnecessary distinction, as they question the 'usefulness' and 'application' of andragogy in higher education (Blondy, 2007). Nevertheless, the importance of the distinction lies in the ways in which 'student- focused' as well as 'self- directed learning', which constitute core tenets of andragogy (Knowles, cited in Blondy, 2007), have gained increased attention in higher education (Demir & Ilhan, 2022; Riswanti Rini et al., 2022; Zhu, 2022).

This article provides some insights into the ways in which the equity- based and anti- discriminatory tenets of an inclusive pedagogical discourse can be conceptualized and enacted in virtual learning environments in terms of teaching methodologies, learner-centred methods of content delivery and formative assessment implementation. The three pillars of institutional change that the article focuses on are indicative elements of inclusive practice in

online higher education courses. They are not necessarily representative of a whole-university approach that includes other organizational parameters, such as student support, IT or libraries (for example, Brewster & Cox, 2022). The next section of the article provides some insights into the practical and critical dimensions of teaching methodologies and learner-centred methods of content delivery in the context of an inclusive pedagogical discourse. In this framework the notion of ‘content delivery’ is conceptualized against a recognition of the ‘institutional gap’ that exists between higher education and other phases of education in terms of the ways in which higher education curricula are structured and delivered through more ‘student-centred’ and ‘self-directed’ models of learning (Coyle & Gibbons-Jones, 2022). This is followed by an analysis of inclusive forms of formative assessment and their role in identifying students at risk and providing proactive forms of learning support in higher education. Formative feedback constitutes an endemic aspect of well-designed online pedagogical models, aimed at creating student-centred and inclusive virtual learning communities for all.

Teaching methodologies and learner-centred content delivery

Even though there are no pedagogical recipes or *modus operandi* prescribing the creation of effective and engaging online learning communities, there are certain ‘rules’ that are indispensable in establishing ‘good practice’ and contributing to the creation of equitable and inclusive virtual learning spaces for all. As Mayes and de Freitas (2005) appositely point out: ‘There are really no models of e-learning *per se* – only e-enhancements of models of learning’. These e-enhancements refer to the ways in which the power of technology can be harnessed along with contemporary pedagogical theories to facilitate the process of teaching and learning in virtual classrooms. The letter ‘e’ signifies the idiomorphic nature of online teaching and learning, along with the ways in which traditional

models of teaching and learning can be applied, expanded, modified, enriched, combined and hybridized, with a view to creating effective e-learning communities. Developing an informed awareness of the idiosyncrasies, challenges and possibilities of virtual learning environments is a *sine qua non* element in designing online courses, devising modes of presentation and facilitating dialogical modes of learning that can effectively and meaningfully engage students in the learning process.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in higher education provides a conceptual and practical platform for educational differentiation (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008; Dell et al., 2015; Rose, 2001), with a view to creating effective e-learning communities for learner diversity (see Dell et al., 2015; Tobin et al., 2015). Differentiation, which has many facets and configurations in terms of curricula, design and instructional intervention, as well as students' predispositions to learning and interests among others, has 'limited application' in higher education (Turner et al., 2017:490). What is generally implemented is 'differentiation by outcome' whereby different academic standards of work are expected from students depending on their ability. UDL is, however, inclusive in nature and thus necessitates implementing 'differentiation by more than just an outcome'; 'a critical teaching skill' that is at the epicenter of effective teaching (Kerry, 2008).

UDL is concerned with the introduction of curricula, teaching and assessment methods that improve teaching and learning. This facilitates educational accessibility regardless of ability, race/ethnicity and other markers of difference, without the need to introduce specialist interventions and accommodations (Burgstahler, 2012; Dell et al., 2015; Rose & Meyer, 2002; Burgstahler & Cory 2008; Thousand et al., 2007). Despite the ways in which UDL can enhance educational accessibility for all students without introducing specialist interventions and adaptations,

‘nothing can be truly universal’ (Mace, cited in McGuire et al., 2006); hence the importance of individualized differentiation, which should inform and underpin all levels of universally designed learning environments. As Rose and Meyer (2002, p. 4) point out:

‘To many people the term seems to imply that UDL is a quest for a single, one size- fits- all solution that will work for everyone. In fact, the very opposite is true. The essence of UDL is flexibility and the inclusion of alternatives to adapt to the myriad variations in learner needs, styles and preferences’.

Universally Designed e- pedagogies can be fostered with the synergistic use of synchronous and asynchronous modes of interaction, with a view to providing ‘proactive approaches to accommodations’ (Nieminen, 2022). This can be achieved by delivering multiple modalities of engagement with module content, and numerous ways of interacting, presenting content material and providing opportunities to demonstrate skills and knowledge. Content material delivery is not a monological and unidirectional process of knowledge transmission, but an interactive and student-centred facilitation of learning (Wright, 2011).

The various pedagogical functions that synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication entail, as well as their learning and formative assessment implications, rationalize the adoption of ‘hybrid designs’ of interactive learning environments. These combine the strengths of both synchronous and asynchronous uses of instructional tools to create interactive, ‘personalized’ and engaging virtual learning environments for all. Asynchronous modes of communication such as recordings are reportedly favored by students who are not able to attend synchronous virtual sessions due to financial and health- related problems and caring responsibilities (Nordmann et al., 2021). Simultaneously, the

utilization of ‘watch parties’ capitalizes on the relative strengths of synchronous modes of delivery, whereby asynchronous recordings are supplemented with synchronous sessions aimed at providing a timetabled virtual space for students and tutors to watch the recordings and engage in relevant discussions and academic deliberations. This hybrid arrangement can be especially beneficial for students who need structure in their learning, have poor self-regulation skills, have learning disabilities and/or come from disadvantaged backgrounds (see Nordmann et al., 2021).

Synchronous communication tools can also foster multi-sensory approaches to online teaching and learning, so as to better respond to students’ diverse learning styles and preferred modalities of learning (for example, video conferencing can include audio, visual and textual means of communication, as well as kinaesthetic modalities of learning such as integrated chat, whiteboard features or PowerPoint presentations). Synchronous modalities of communication can emulate the strengths of face-to-face interaction and communication such as ‘real time sharing of knowledge and learning and immediate access to the instructor to ask questions and receive answers’ (Skylar, 2009). As part of Universally Designed teaching methodologies, students should be afforded essential ‘psychological tools’, as suggested by Vygotsky, in order to enhance their learning (Daniels, 2009). These ‘psychological tools’ or ‘pedagogical affordances’ (Kershner, 2009) involve establishing a process of ‘negotiation and problematization of knowledge’ through dialogical encounters and opportunities to apply theory in practice. As Zawacki-Richter and Anderson aptly state:

‘the online world itself affords new tools for communication, knowledge and skill acquisition, and peer and group support that was not available to earlier generations of distance students’.

(Zawacki- Richter & Anderson, cited in Rotar, 2022, p. 2)

Synchronous learning activities ('same time, different place') can be instrumental in creating interactive and learner-centered virtual environments, while mitigating some of the criticisms leveled against virtual learning environments regarding the ways in which e-learning can be reduced to a transactional process of knowledge reproduction, rather than knowledge production through an engaging, autonomous, interactive and supportive learning environment. According to Kock's (2005) 'media naturalness' theory, facial expressions, body language and speech can enhance participants' 'physiological arousal', which is linked to higher levels of enjoyment, excitement and motivation, while in the absence of these elements, there are high levels of communication ambiguity and decreased physiological arousal.

The principles of UDL can also be applied to asynchronous content which can allegedly 'form the core of the pivot on the basis of accessibility and inclusion' (Nordmann et al., 2021:3). A UD curriculum can enable all distance learning students and staff to become acquainted with the theoretical, technical, legal and philosophical underpinnings of UD curricula, with the aim of fostering accessible and effective virtual environments for learner diversity. It is important that more complex and sophisticated designs and activities are incorporated after students' initial stages of familiarization with the e-learning platform, while information on the required tasks and readings are readily available to students without the need to go through a 'technological labyrinth', consisting of multiple threads, numerous hyperlinks, discussion boards, document-sharing areas and so on, in order to navigate their learning. Providing supplementary textual information is a prerequisite for effective online module designs (Tobin, 2014), in order to enable students to become acquainted with the content,

structure and learning outcomes of the module. Textual information can be provided to students through module guides/handbooks, reflective questions, assessment criteria/module rubrics, self-assessment and reflective exercises and PowerPoint presentations.

Notwithstanding the pivotal role of UDL in creating accessible learning environments for all, a mono- dimensional emphasis on accessibility ignores issues of difference and inequality in order to facilitate the empowerment of disenfranchised groups of students (Burbules & Berk, 1999). A concomitant emphasis should thus be placed on discriminatory conditions and disabling practices that oppress and marginalize some students. Fostering greater inclusive policies and practices in higher education involves acknowledging and challenging a web of ideological and structural dynamics that create power asymmetries and discriminatory regimes that undermine a fair distribution of and accessibility to educational resources for learner diversity. These considerations highlight the imperative of incorporating a critical approach to developing UD curricula and pedagogical approaches that take into consideration students' characteristics and the ways in which intersections of their biological, racial/ethnic, gender and/or class characteristics, along with other socio- political conditions and digital inequities, create barriers to learning and participation (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010; Strnadová et al., 2015). As Oran and Willis reported more than two decades ago:

‘As [online] classrooms become more culturally diverse ... it is not safe to ignore issues of race, ethnicity and power, or assume they are in the “off mode” because participants are not physically visible’.

(Oran & Willis, cited in Guthrie & McCracken, 2010, p. 5)

These curricula, for instance, should focus on the role of language (critical dimensions of language) and its material effects on the creation of accessible and non-discriminatory social and educational spaces for all (for example, Mole, 2012).

Therefore, it is vital that online tutors are cognisant of the critical dimensions of accessibility issues and UD pedagogies (Johnson, 2004) in virtual learning environments. Online tutors are the ones ‘who control access to the curriculum; whose assumptions, hopes or fears about young people help to create or dispose chances for them’ (Howes et al., 2009). Our philosophies in practice, according to Kanuka (2008), determine the ways in which ‘we perceive and deal with our preferred teaching methods – which includes how (or if) we choose and use e-learning technologies’.

Moving beyond the technological and pedagogical aspects of online learning, attention should also be given to the critical dimensions of online teaching and learning in the light of ‘humanistic’ rather than ‘mechanistic’ ‘approaches for online learning support’ (Rotar, 2022:3). The former point relates to the necessity of a pronounced emphasis on incorporating a critical approach to designing UD curricula and instructional strategies for online learning environments. This is in order to address, for instance, the ways in which intersections of disability, race, ethnicity, gender and/or class

issues might impact access to learning. For example, Nieminen (2022:7) discusses the ways in which an intersectional paradigm should be embedded in pedagogical practices, taking into account how written assessment can create ‘barriers for learning not only from the viewpoint of ableism but also racism’; hence, the requirement to ‘offer affordances for meeting the needs of first-generation students in written assessment with the required linguistic resources’. The role of online tutors is thus crucial in creating a ‘cyberculture’ that valorises learner diversity, while developing students’ ‘critical media pedagogy’. The objective of this is to problematise the ways in which ‘digital technologies and the virtual world contribute to social injustice by being hegemonic and “non-neutral” in terms of discourse, access, economics, affordances and use’ (Lackovic, 2020). This is especially the case for topics which deal with diversity and social justice as part of their content curriculum, whereby students are expected to develop reflective thinking and praxis to interrogate and challenge social inequities and discriminatory regimes (Grant & Lee, 2014).

Students’ inclusion in virtual classrooms should be premised on three kinds of ‘presence’ exemplified in the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, namely ‘Social’, ‘Teaching’ and ‘Cognitive Presence’ (Nagel & Kotzé, 2010). The CoI’s framework provides a comprehensive pedagogical context against which to design courses, devise modes of course delivery and academic activities to concurrently promote the triptych of presence. The three kinds of presence have reciprocal effects on the ways in which students and tutors experience virtual learning environments and obtain satisfaction and cognitive stimulation, while developing a strong sense of belonging in online learning communities. Central to this process is the role of ‘academic caring’ that is observed to be ‘an

important factor for online students' success' (Rotar 2022). 'Community building', according to Bliss et al. (2022, p. 11):

'connects the systemic with the interpersonal and personal dimensions of teaching and learning: the ways in which students connect to themselves, to other students, and to their professor'.

Online learning design models such as online forums offer varied opportunities for students to interact with their peers and tutors, and to foster 'virtual connectedness and encounters that lead to real life social connectedness' (Lackovic, 2020). The 'social connectedness' perspective is more lucidly captured through the notion of andragogy rather than pedagogy. Coyle and Gibbons- Jones (2022) point to the 'interpersonal gap' that marks the transition from further to higher education and the more meaningful ways in which students connect with their peers and academics 'in the modified and student- led environment', thereby shifting the focus from pedagogy to andragogy.

Socialization and communication among teachers and students have been problematic during the sudden migration into virtual education (Nordmann et al., 2021), hence the need to devise more effective and 'inclusive' online pedagogical designs. While drawing on the three kinds of 'presence', Guthrie and McCracken (2010) discuss the ways in which virtual learning environments can promote communications and interactions that facilitate 'online peer support and mentoring' (Rotar, 2022, p. 11) and are intellectually transformative for social justice and civic engagement. Bliss et al. (2022, p. 1), for instance, highlight the ways in which:

'[l]aw teachers need to consider how they can bring an anti-racist and trauma- informed lens and a focus on wellbeing to

their online pedagogy and create learning communities that are democratic, inclusive, and caring’.

This can be achieved when online tutors recognize, *inter alia*, that some forms of ‘curriculum can activate trauma’, a documented causal link that should constantly inform their teaching practice (Bliss et al., 2022). This is particularly true in current circumstances whereby ‘care- and empathy-centred approaches should be the default mode applied in Education, both in the COVID and post-COVID world’ (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

A first step to promote students’ ‘online inclusion’ is to nurture a genuine sense of belonging by creating empathetic and caring online learning communities, where the ‘voices’, experiences and concerns of all students are addressed and valued equally. Recognizing bias in professional practice, along with the necessity to redress curricular and instructional injustices that affect some groups of students, are at the core of inclusive pedagogies. These parameters can have a significant, albeit underestimated, impact on issues of accessibility and ‘presence’ in virtual learning environments. The latter should thus constitute critical spaces of questioning and destabilizing hierarchical social relations and dominant assumptions of normalcy such as Eurocentric knowledge or ‘digital whiteness’ (Lackovic, 2020), the objective being to encourage the creation of more inclusive online communities of practice (Mole, 2012) via critical dialogic teaching and a committed approach to teaching. Student retention theories (Saret, 2007) attribute great importance to tutor enthusiasm. Even though teacher enthusiasm lacks a consensual definition in education, it has been documented to energize and incentivize and, ultimately, improve the process of learning and to enhance academic success (Keller et al., 2016), as well as to galvanize the liberating and transformative

potential of teaching. According to Freire (1998), the process of teaching should be both rigorous and joyful and grounded in a genuine love for the act of teaching in order to mobilize the emancipatory potential of pedagogy to precipitate socially just change. Tutors' excitement encompasses enthusiasm about the discipline or subject that differs from but is inexorably associated with enthusiasm about the very act of teaching. Enthusiasm has both affective and behavioral dimensions as it can be either individually experienced by tutors or exhibited in their teaching. The latter dimension is transmissible to students who are positively influenced to engage in the learning process actively and meaningfully, and to subsequently reciprocate their own enthusiasm about this process (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Keller et al., 2016). Consequently, it is important that online tutors sound enthusiastic, as well as encouraging, reassuring and supportive, so as to assuage anxiety and build connections with students (Saret, 2007:3). This is an imperative task for all online tutors, who are committed to creating through their teaching a move towards a global academic responsibility for access and inclusion in both traditional and virtual learning environments.

Formative assessment implementation

The effectiveness of tutor–student and student–student interactions is not only mediated/influenced by the various modes of communication, but also by formative assessment procedures to facilitate and support the process of e-learning (Faulconer et al., 2021; Rotar, 2022). Formative assessment constitutes an endemic aspect of well-designed online pedagogical models aimed at creating student-centred and supportive virtual learning communities. The process of learning can be enhanced by assessment practices that go beyond quantifiable criteria of educational success (Serrano et al., 2018; Winstone & Boud, 2022)

and are characterized by ‘assessment for learning’ procedures (Black et al., 2006), as well as criterion-referenced forms of assessment (Mitchell, 2008) to improve students’ learning outcomes.

Drawing insights from current theories of learning and assessment such as assessment for learning, evolving understandings of pedagogy place a more pronounced emphasis on the process rather than products of learning and the ways in which this process can be optimized. This can be accomplished by creating an interactive learning process by closely monitoring students’ progress and providing frequent feedback on their learning and ability to apply theory to practice. Even though formative assessment is understood to include different practices (Schildkamp et al., 2020) and is sometimes ‘conflated’ with summative assessment (Winstone & Boud, 2022), it has nevertheless been recognized as a constituent element of what is considered to be effective evidence-based strategy to enhance learning (Mitchell, 2008; Schildkamp et al., 2020).

A UDL approach to formative assessment includes an array of versatile assessment methods and sources of feedback, thereby providing ongoing feedback that can be used by students and online tutors as a way of preventing failure and developing understanding of how students can be best supported to maximize their learning potential (CAST, 2020). Online learning platforms afford multimodal ways of providing formative feedback (written, oral), as well as feedback from multiple sources; namely teachers, computers, peers (from participation in shared activities, threaded discussions) and self-generated feedback/internal feedback (Nicol, 2010; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006) from self-assessment and reflective activities (such as Professional Practitioner Self-

Assessment). Depending on the type of dialogical encounters (for example, whether they are synchronous or asynchronous), the feedback provided can take many forms and serve different purposes. Asynchronous ways of interaction might prompt more reflective and theory-driven feedback (such as research-based recommendations for providing a more comprehensive analysis of a topic, identification of alternative ways of analysis, etc.). Synchronous ways of interaction could deliver ‘immediate feedback’, which, according to empirical evidence, can result in more effective learning, especially in terms of improving procedural skills and accelerating learning (see Shute, 2008).

Students can self-evaluate and monitor their engagement with learning activities, a feature that can be embedded in learning models through e-learning tracking tools, where learners are expected to reflect upon and evaluate their learning progress. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) discuss the ways in which students can self-evaluate and monitor their engagement with learning activities (self-generated feedback/internal feedback). Formative feedback can also help online tutors monitor students’ learning with a view to providing proactive support to those students who are at risk (Rotar, 2022).

The quality of formative or summative feedback depends on the ‘content of feedback’ (what kind of feedback is useful for the students) and the ‘style of giving feedback’ (‘how’ useful feedback is given), while quality feedback should be ‘prompt, timely, regular, supportive, constructive, meaningful, non-threatening and helpful’ (Getzlaf et al., 2009, p. 4–5). Nicol (2010) pays particular attention to the quality of written formative feedback and raises concerns about the importance of written feedback that is not ‘detached from its supportive context’, meaning that ‘the comments themselves ...

[should be] provided within the context of earlier assignments that [have been] the subject of earlier discussions and feedback'. With this approach, feedback becomes a '*forward looking*' process (Nicol, 2010), in the sense that it suggests how students might improve their subsequent assignments and submit quality final projects (Faulconer et al., 2021). Feedback can concentrate on content, participation (for instance, in online shared activities/discussion forums), expression and contribution (see Edelstein & Edwards, 2002). If the feedback structure relates specifically to a threaded discussion, then particular emphasis should also be given to the following aspects of a student's performance indicators: 'promptness and initiative', 'delivery of post' (for example, grammar, spelling), 'relevance of post', 'expression within the post' and 'contribution to the learning community' (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002). Thus, in shared activities (such as online forums/threaded discussion), the suggested assessment criteria should also incorporate students' level of leadership and collaborative potential in addition to the quality of their contributions on the basis of their content (for example, use of literature/theory) and academic rigor (for example, critical reflective analysis/academic discourse).

Formative feedback should also be firmly embedded in 'its supportive context' (Nicol, 2010); this means that the comments provided build upon previous comments, discussions and individual assignments, while having 'a forward looking' orientation by informing subsequent assignments through a dialogical process of redrafting (Nicol, 2010). Even the existence of these prerequisites cannot, however, warrant effective feedback unless students' views on how feedback can support their learning are taken into consideration (Winstone & Boud, 2022). It is important that the process of providing formative feedback does not become 'a

monologue’ or ‘a delivered message’, but ‘a dialogical process’ (Nicol, 2010) that prioritizes all students’ agency to have an active role in this activity (Nieminen, 2022; Winstone, 2022). This necessitates disrupting the firmly embedded power inequities between tutors and students in order to jointly contribute to and ensure the quality of teaching and learning in higher education (Winstone & Boud, 2022; Serrano et al., 2018). Difficulties in shifting this balance prevent the effective implementation of formative assessment via the establishment of ‘dialogic’ rather than ‘transmission’ models of feedback that parallel the dipole of student- focused and transmission- focused approaches to teaching and learning (Winstone 2022). Serrano et al. (2018:11) analyze the ways in which the increasing marketisation of higher education undermines dialogue- based and student- centred forms of feedback and assessment that constitute integral components of promoting authenticity in learning. The authors highlight the importance of critical pedagogy and Freire’s focus on ‘authenticity’ in learning in addressing what they refer to as the ‘ontological “crisis” in education’, while discussing implications for fostering authentic learning and assessment methodologies in higher education.

Providing student- focused and quality formative feedback not only motivates students and energizes the process of learning, but also enhances students’ metacognitive abilities in order to monitor and review their learning, while taking self- corrective action to facilitate their learning process through ‘directive feedback’ (Shute, 2008). The latter form of feedback can enable students to gradually develop ‘self- generated feedback’ strategies (Nicol, 2010) so as to reflect upon their learning outcomes, and to devise self- improvement strategies to maximize their learning potential. According to Denton et al. (2008:487), effective feedback is that which ‘indicates to learners where they have done well, where their

misunderstandings are, and what follow-up work might be required'. Feedback should therefore be focused on learning (for example, closely aligned with the purpose of the task) and empowering/enabling (for example, students could use it in order to improve their learning and inform their practice). As Costello and Crane (2013:220) suggest, 'feedback should be worded so that the learner does not interpret it as personal criticism, but as a critique of their work'. These characteristics can also be applied to summative forms of feedback, notwithstanding their performance-focused nature. Even though summative feedback is used in order to assign students a final grade, it can simultaneously be a type of formative feedback that can be used in order to inform subsequent tasks, when students are assessed against multiple assessment components. The use of the latter can foster more equitable pedagogical assessment practices, considering research evidence documenting that 'a single exam disproportionately impacts students of colour and those from working class backgrounds' (Bliss et al., 2022:33).

Conclusions

The migration into online teaching and learning as an emergency response to the Covid-19 crisis has reportedly been fraught with a plethora of problems and digital inequities such as internet connectivity problems and lack of digital accessibility, as well as lack of digital skills and literacy. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) characterize this pedagogical shift as an experiment, and even in cases where its implementation has failed, there are lessons to be learnt and opportunities to be seized in order to foster more 'potentiating' (Claxton, 2007) e-learning environments in an increasingly changing higher education landscape. Fostering inclusive online teaching in higher education requires both 'professional artistry' (Schön, 1983) and 'technological savviness'

to harness the power of technology to create inclusive and equitable virtual learning environments for all.

Digitally mediated forms of teaching can be instrumental in creating engaging, interactive and multimodal approaches to meet the needs of learner diversity, while providing critical virtual spaces to nurture a ‘cyberculture’ that addresses and valorises difference and diversity on the grounds of multiple markers of difference. While moving rapidly to a digital post- Covid- 19 normality in education, we need to consider how this normality can become more equitable and inclusive; a process that necessitates critical reflection, experimentation and commitment to the critical and equity-based dimensions of (online) teaching and pedagogy.

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