

# Teaching Care During Covid-19: Reflective Assessment for Becoming-Historians

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## Abstract

This article argues that the Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 left learners and teachers alike awash in feelings of helplessness, loss, and anguish. While online learning literacy and pedagogy have improved over the course of 2020 and 2021, and interesting and important innovations have been implemented and explored, the foundational inequalities have not lessened or disappeared. This article argues for the use of care as a necessary pedagogy in the virtual classroom using a case study of one class. The labour of care needs to be considered as part of the labour of pedagogy during Covid-19. I argue for care being built into both pedagogy and assessment as part of a radical pedagogy for this time. I explore reflective assessment embedded in a pedagogy of care as a way to, if not combat, recognise and respond to the inequalities embodied in ERT and the society it exists in, towards radical change. Active reflection draws out the impact that ERT has had on the “being” and “becoming” of pre-service History teachers.

**Keywords:** Covid-19; Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT); pedagogy of care; radical pedagogy; pre-service History teachers; reflective assessment

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I'm a gathering of everybody and nobody, of everything  
and nothing. Is there anyone else you'd like to invite?  
Everyone's invited.  
(Roy 2017, 20)

We are hung up  
In giving  
What we wish to be given  
Ourselves  
(Lorde 2000, 87)

We held hands and watched others turn to ice  
(Ewing 2017, 30)

## Introduction

*The class is gathered: dispersed. There is no shared air. No shared laughter (I don't count emojis). All students except one are present on the WhatsApp group. I pause, breathe, lying in bed, fingers ready to fly over the keyboard, voice hollow in my throat. Breathe in. Breathe out. Type.*

I struggled so much in my first Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) class with the History Method III group (HM) because the six weeks face to face had been so engaged and involved. It had created a close-knit group. There was an energy between the learners, with multiple small conversations flowing in and out of the main conversation.

*"How are you?" I ask.*

This is the simple question we start every class with, in a physical classroom: How is everyone? I would sit on the desk and look at everyone's faces and read the tiredness, excitement, joy or pain on their faces. And we would build from there.

*How do I build from a cellphone?*

Disorientated. Confused. Terrified. Some answer. Some do not.

*In need of care.*

*How do I care from a cellphone?*

On average about 10 to 15 students participate in WhatsApp classes, out of a class of 39. This is a stark reminder of the digital poverty in which ERT unfolds in South Africa. The classes are invigorating and exhausting. I cannot see anyone's face or hear anyone's voice to read where they are. They are ether. Not tethered. And enclosed in their own realities. Even though we had done regular check-ins, both informally and in formative

assessment, I only realised how little I knew about those realities when I read their exams.

*Although I had previously requested that emojis not be used in formal communication with me, today they are a lifeline. They speak faces I cannot see.*

Every moment of everything we learnt in that class was put into those exams. The anguish, despair. The histories. This is a history class. Their histories.

*I sleep through their last lesson. My buzzing cellphone does not wake me. I am exhausted.*

If a radical or critical pedagogy must be conscientising, humanising, how to do this online? How do we rehumanise through the non-human? This is my proposal for a pedagogy of care: this care is relational and requires vulnerability and trust. This care is pervasive through the course and both immediate and long term. This care involves the world and ourselves and the intersubjectivities we build.

## Methodology

This article draws on a qualitative and critical framework influenced by a radical feminist approach to pedagogy and a critical education research framework. The study uses case-study and purposive sampling, as well as conceptual analysis, reflective pedagogy, and participant observation. The research was approved by ethics protocol number H18/10/10.<sup>1</sup> The case study is a History Methodology classroom for Further Education and Training (FET, Grade 10–12) History pre-service teachers. There were 39 learners in the course. I draw on both group engagements and individual examinations through reflexivity and purposive sampling. I analyse the data drawn from both group engagements and examinations in a narrative format.

The introduction to the article is unusual in an academic text and purposefully so. It is intended to jar the reader into experiencing the data from which this article is drawn in a different way. Parts of this article are written in fragments to represent the fragmented, dispersed, and alienated nature of online learning. I use reflective teaching, drawing on my experience in classes (Ashwin et al. 2015). I also draw on the ideas provided in Flux Pedagogy (Ravitch 2020) to support the measures I took in the class as a framework for understanding education in the time of Covid-19.

In the case study, I discuss the content and pedagogy of the course and detail the examination equivalent, drawing on a social justice framework informed by both Bourdieu and Fraser (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Fraser 2009) that locates this moment of pandemic education inside a society. In discussing this examination equivalent as an attempt at radical online pedagogy, I discuss how it was located in the

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<sup>1</sup> Obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand's Ethics Committee.

pedagogy of the course, where it worked and where and how it failed, supported by the multiple pedagogical frameworks I draw together. I then turn to the examination responses. Ten students gave me permission to specifically quote from their papers, either anonymously or with their names. I have followed their directive in citing the papers; for those who requested their names be included, I have kept their names in the text. This is important in terms of this article because, while anonymity throughout might be simpler, it is important to credit the creative work where the students desire it. I analyse these examination papers thematically, discussing how a radical pedagogy and a care pedagogy can be read into them (Livholts and Tamboukou 2015). These examination papers are not examined in detail but rather through broad thematic analysis, with three examples being used to display the main themes being discussed. These papers show that a pedagogy of care can be read into them, but importantly, what emanates from them is a vulnerability and awareness of historical inequalities and those caused by Covid-19 still present in South Africa. These results raise questions about ERT and a pedagogy of care.

### Theoretical Framework: Being and Becoming

In this article I use several different theoretical frameworks, both educational and around decolonisation and social justice. I draw primarily from the works of bell hooks and Paulo Freire for a critical or radical framework for education and social justice. I work through this also drawing on ideas of social justice, inequality and education from Nancy Fraser and Pierre Bourdieu for the framework of analysis for the examinations particularly. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital play an important role in the continued spread of inequality, especially in the pedagogic action of systemic education. Fraser introduces the two spheres requiring different, and overlapping, social justice action: redistribution and recognition. These spheres speak to the South African context in terms of class, "race", and gender, and are expanded by Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Crenshaw 2018; Fraser 2009; Freire 1985, 1996; hooks 1994). The radical pedagogical process calls for a humanising and dialogic pedagogy that reads the context as well as the text, that reads the world before reading the word, and understands them together. This sets up a dynamic to extend John Bigg's (2014) constructive alignment into the affective world of the learner as they are contextualised in the world:

Cast forward by its open-ended in-between-ness, affect is integral to a body's perpetual becoming (always becoming otherwise, however subtly, than what it already is) pulled beyond its seeming surface-boundedness by way of its relation to, indeed its composition through, the forces of encounter. (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 2)

The above description is not legibly a classroom—but could be one. The open-endedness and the in-between-ness, the space of becoming, of transformation (of knowledge, of knowers). Once the space of transformation is taken away, what are we left with? Beings on their way to knowing, without a visible home for the preparation of their knowledge. In some ways the virtual space purports to make that space more

readily and easily available: the classroom is wherever the student is, can be summoned at the push of a button. This can even be liberating and create spaces for critical thinking (Boyd 2016; Hamamra, Alawi, and Daragmeh 2021). However, all that this really does is reinforce the maps of colonialism and apartheid, the maps of privilege and inequality, onto the virtual space, as the “looking out, looking in” (see below) examinations show. The classroom provides a space of community, of concentration, of focus on learning. It also provides a “becoming” space. There is an immanence to it: a togethered immanence, in my cases—becoming teachers, becoming historians, or, as the class likes to refer to themselves, “historians-in-action”. The “becoming” holds past and future together in the classroom. Gray van Heerden (cited in Braidotti et al. 2018) argues that all socially just pedagogies should hold both past and future in their maps:

Socially just pedagogies in South Africa should not only seek to retrospectively address the social injustices stemming from Apartheid and the legacy of colonialism—a movement towards history—but that it should, also, be reaching forward—into the future—calling forth “a people to come”. (Braidotti et al. 2018, 25)

This brings the perspective of time in our Covid-19 “portal” (Roy 2020) into a broader time frame for the “students to come”—and we know and do not know who those students will be. What we know is that technology is not neutral, and until we clear our maps of past inequalities, the maps to the future will only deepen these inequalities (Grimes and Feenberg 2013). Technology is often linked with the future—the 4th Industrial Revolution; however, technology falls into human-made patterns of inequality. Inequity. And simply teaching along those grooves merely serves to deepen them.

Freire’s idea of dialogic teaching in this format feels impossible (although Boyd [2016] disagrees, arguing that Freire would have found possibilities for dialogue in, for instance, the forum function). The outcome is always already prescribed: a recorded lecture, an assessment; and the becoming that happens in the classroom is a failing, because learning is disembodied for all, and completely inaccessible for some.

However, this class has an integrated network of radical care already built in. In the six weeks we had of two classes a week in person, this community was given strong foundations. In the last class before the Covid-19 regulations were imposed, they shared hand sanitiser and quiet fear. Part of the community of learning was solidified in that small act before our world was shaking. There was radical care there, in the somewhat contradictory act of sharing hand sanitiser. It was an affirmation: my life matters; your life matters. So much of teaching history is about radical care. We care about the past to care about the present. We care about the histories of inequalities to redress them

now. We care about one another's histories to know who is living in our classrooms and in our world.<sup>2</sup>

As much as I talk about facilitating learning, that the learning happens in the students, there are limitations to this. And the ERT puts a physical and digital barrier between the learning, which invokes Melissa Watkins's question,

What is lost in limiting the teacher's role, refashioning them as facilitators or "learning managers" and conceiving learning as primarily an autonomous activity rather than a process of intersubjective engagement with teacher and student? (Watkins 2010, 273)

The process of intersubjective engagement in class is both organic and structured. It is structured around an object of learning, and organic in the sense that it is allowed to develop in the class, in community. Because community is such an important part of my teaching, with this class especially, I was at sea on how to engage during the Covid-19 pandemic. I went back to Freire and hooks for praxis, and was driven by trying to find a radical pedagogy of care to hold the students (and myself) as well as learning during this period. Ravitch has since written on an approach referred to as Flux Pedagogy, which draws together different pedagogies of care and self-care, which I did not have access to at the time (Ravitch 2020).

## Radical Pedagogy Online: What Are the Possibilities and Lines of Flight?

What could radical pedagogy, a pedagogy rippling out to dreams of "a world on its way", look like if it had to remain online? Would it reach the students in a way that humanises them in the classroom? Or would the new world only provide for those with access, with economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 2011)? This is a moment, as Arundhati Roy (2020) says, of a portal. We can glimpse through and we can build. But we can also glimpse through and push back. This moment perhaps is where we have to take most seriously the often ignored middle section of the famous Roy quotation: "another world is not only possible, she is on her way. Although many of us may not be there to greet her, on a quiet day, I can hear her breathing" (Roy 2003).

There are many ways we can lose people, and there are many ways in which Covid-19 has deepened inequality in teaching and learning. Inequality is deepened, for students and staff, through a lack of access to university infrastructure, childcare needs, and household obligations. This is, of course, differentiated student by student, by what kinds of capital students have access to, and the habitus of the university (Bourdieu 2011). It is also deepened through lack of access to education; through neoliberal possibilities in corporate-colonial universities in which job security and comfort are threatened through total administration, heightened by ERT (Kelly 2020; McCann et al.

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<sup>2</sup> More on radical self and community care practices in the classroom during Covid-19 can be read in "Flux Pedagogy: Transforming Teaching and Learning During Coronavirus" (Ravitch 2019).

2020; Moore et al. 2021); through the exhaustion that online learning creates in staff and students; through the loss of the spatio-temporal and affective dimensions of the classroom; and through the loss of the “eros” of the classroom (hooks 1994). Watkins (2010, 271) writes:

[A] notion of recognition is fundamental to the pedagogic process. This is not simply in terms of a student desiring the recognition of his or her teacher but also the teacher desiring the recognition of his or her students. This pedagogic relation involves a process of mutual recognition realized as affective transactions that at one and the same time can cultivate the desire to learn and the desire to teach. It is interesting, therefore, that the current pedagogic practice seems to want to minimize contact between teacher and student and encourage independent learning over whole class interaction.

The above was written before Covid-19, but with the intervention of technologies in mind. I am not writing against the use of technologies for learning; I am writing against the replacement of embodied engagement with individual isolated learning and class learning only done by those who can (through access to data, space and devices) with those teachers who will (who have time, energy, and space). What happened with Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) was a forced separation of class and teacher, of colleagues and co-learners.

### Flying/Falling into the Portal

*“Hope is hard, but I have it”,<sup>3</sup> I whisper to myself. I cancel half of the students’ assessments—keeping the core of the course. I remember in our last class before shutdown I passed around a chipped figure of a stone bird from Zimbabwe, to talk about holding history in your hands. Students passed around (shared, touched, breathed on) a small bottle of hand sanitiser.*

The students in the course care about more than their marks. They care about the future of the learners they will have in their classrooms. They care about themselves as teachers and as historians-in-action. They care about social justice in the world, and how teaching history can aid social justice. What has happened with them?

We grasp one another through technology, through WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, through virtual spaces, created and constructed socially even as they become social and socially recognised spaces (Lefebvre 1991, 82). This learning space is both institutionally and socially created, with each mode placing limitations on the other: institutional limitations on creativity and care, and social limitations on who belongs and how. Memories of physical care in the classroom are replaced by a tactile haze of blue screens. I rely on my students and we rely on each other—to pass the course, to hold spaces of radical care (Ravitch 2020), to be vulnerable and to allow our becoming.

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<sup>3</sup> This quote is drawn from the poem “Principles” by Danez Smith (2016). I start and end each course with this poem. I also have the quote tattooed on my arm.

*We have a small, safe, masked, year-end picnic. We speak about social justice; naturally, the conversation flows there. Social justice and religion, and different paths to one gate, religion for social justice. I am reminded of Freire. I am humbled by the weight and bearing of these students who will go into different places, into different schools and programmes, with social justice-as-history as a firm foundation. Who are becoming-historians, who are becoming-teachers, still, even though the pandemic robbed them of so much.*

Students use the take-home examination to navigate their lives and their world. The title “Looking out, looking in” provides two compass points with which to navigate. The depth of their analysis breaks open the boxes we often put students into. These boxes define what we look for in terms of assessment. This is 50%. This is 70%. This is 100%. Does this matter? Beyond how we measure what is excellent and sufficient and a failure, does this matter? Important work has been done on these issues through the concept of ungrading (Blum 2020). Ungrading unpacks the problems with grading student assignments, and the system that creates the need for it. This speaks to the vagaries of mark variation and the discrepancy between grades and learning, among other things. In this instance, the mark simply was not able to speak to the levels of honesty and vulnerability shown in the assignments. The mark serves as a raft big enough to cling to, but leaves the body of the student still in the water.

## Building a Pedagogy of Care in the Time of Covid-19

or an empty woman  
trying to touch  
what matters.  
Lorde (2000, 400)

The class in question is a History Methodology class in a Bachelor of Education programme. It has 39 students. All students in the class have been taught by me in previous years—they know me, and my methods, my poetry in the classroom. This class is a methods class—exploring how to teach history. These students have all chosen history either as a major or a sub-major. They are committed historians and teachers. Although all my classes are underpinned with a social justice frame that, according to Biggs’s constructive alignment, is present in the curriculum, the pedagogy, and the assessment, in this class in particular there is also a commitment to teaching for and through social justice issues (Biggs 2014). They proposed writing a “Decolonial History Teachers’ Charter” (Bulbulia et al. 2020) as one of their assignments. We have robust discussions on what social justice looks and feels like in a history classroom. They care. So how do I inject care in pedagogy where the only way I can see them is through a phone?

*I have downloaded WhatsApp onto my laptop. There are only 10 or 15 students who regularly interact on WhatsApp. Is this more or less than in class? I try to remember. No. Probably more interaction. There were more faces, more bodies, less interaction.*



*Maybe WhatsApp gives one or two students who were shy to interact the space to? No. It's the same students who are interacting. Just less. Less faces. Less bodies. Less interaction.*

A pedagogy of care needs a voice, to express care, a body, to express care, needs bodies in class, to express care. But during this time, how do we express care? Through extension, through the question, “How are you?”, through the honest answers of how we are, through finding ways to examine how teachers are actually expanding and growing their teaching awareness and prowess through this pandemic. Flux Pedagogy advocates for a policy of radical self-care, and radical compassion, through a trauma informed pedagogy (Ravitch 2020). The specific applications of this approach unfold in my class, trauma permeating everything.

Students seem to be more mark driven than usual in this early ERT period. This is likely due to the heightened anxiety internal and external to the institution. While marks are often hollow representations of students’ learning, the marks appear to be the solid points that they can hold on to. Their pass or fail. The symbol that they exist in this world of classes on WhatsApp, or Zoom, or Microsoft Teams. Marks come to mean more. I attempt to practise constructive alignment (Biggs 2014) in my classes; however, getting the students to focus on anything apart from assignments for marks now proves challenging. This involves a pared-down curriculum, without the extra entanglements of learning that happen in the interstitial spaces of classroom interaction.

The engagements draw comment, but those that draw the most comments are centred around what is necessary for examinations, for assignments, to pass. To get through. All of this seems an exercise in survival, and trying to produce quality is a level above surviving—finding sufficient test qualifiers, finding enough of what external examiners will find acceptable, this is still rigorously adhered to. However, the earth has shifted beneath our feet, and beneath those of our students. We need to take stock of what and how they are learning and try to test that.

The examination question was not designed by me. It was designed by a colleague, attempting to use it in an English course. Although originally set as an English examination, the social justice impetus in English and in history often overlap, and it was easily adapted for history. The key principle of the examination is reflection—reflection on yourself and reflection on your world. This involves reflecting in and on a community—but also connects many communities, all the communities in which the students live, making tentative webs between me and them; those that would have been previously formed in a classroom are explicitly spelled out in an examination.

How do we teach radical care via ERT during the Covid-19 pandemic? Radical care entails radical self-care and radical compassion (Ravitch 2020). However, we are working within an extremely stressed and anxiety-full context. Making questions about care for marks part of the official curriculum is part of how we build this care into

vertical discourse, the specialised knowledge named by Bernstein (2000) to differentiate between everyday knowledge and esoteric or powerful knowledge. How do we create examination questions that connect enough with where the students are (at home, in themselves, in their communities) and with where the knowledge needs to be (everyday knowledge decontextualised and recontextualised) to make higher order knowledge or “mode 2 knowledge” to use another formulation (Luckett 2001, 50)?

The course was designed, and redesigned, according to the principles of Constructive Alignment (CA) (Biggs 2014). The core principles and objectives of the course were present in every aspect: the pedagogy, the content, and the assessments. In this, a key principle and objective had been self-reflection on an individual and community (or global) scale, with a linking between pasts and presents. We applied this in the pedagogy with frequent “How are you?” engagements, and then broadened these into critical engagements with pasts and presents. This kind of pedagogy promoted constant reflection—and this was supported with brief “free writing” exercises inside and outside of class. The assessments were designed to balance the constraints and toll of the pandemic, and the need for academic rigour to ensure that the students not only pass the degree, but go on to thrive as history teachers. The assessment was not only linked to the pandemic, but to my teaching philosophy; I aim to make all assessments “assessment as learning”, rather than “assessment for learning” or “assessment of learning” (Ashwin et al. 2015, 10). The examination I used was designed with those characteristics in mind.

The examination question is as follows:

**“Looking out, looking in”—A reflective writing Project for Student Teachers in a time of Pandemic<sup>[1]</sup>**

Life has changed a lot in a very short space of time. The Coronavirus pandemic has affected the majority of the world’s people and it has brought a swift end to “normal” life as we knew it. Going to school, meeting with friends, running a small business, attending religious gatherings, playing sport or studying: for many of us, these everyday activities have changed drastically over the last months. We now have a state of uncertainty, as we wait for things to go forward towards a “new normal”. Even when the pandemic subsides, it is unlikely that things will simply go back to the way they were. This impacts us as humans, as students, and as future teachers.

Reflection, becoming aware of what is going on inside you and outside you and trying to make meaning of it, is a useful tool to deal with change. This is an important skill for a History teacher, who is constantly analysing and linking the past and present. For this take home exam you will write about your experiences during this time. To do this you will have to both “look out”—describe what is going on in the world around you—and “look in”—describe what is going on inside you, in your feelings, thoughts and emotions. You can do this about your thoughts and experiences generally, and with a focus on what it means to be a History teacher in this rapidly changing world.

“Looking out” means that you will have to closely observe what is happening in your neighbourhood or community, in your country and in the world. Being both a History student, someone who is part of a formal learning program, and future History teacher, someone who is preparing to facilitate formal learning for others, you could pay special attention to what is happening with regard to education, schooling and learning during this time. You could think specifically about what this means for History education. You could think carefully about what the current moment shows us about the challenges we face in education in this country and what opportunities for change it might be catalysing.

“Looking in” means that you will become more aware of everything that is going on inside you, inside your mind, inside your body and inside your heart. You will have to investigate your feelings and your ideas and document how they appear, grow and change.

Of course, everything is connected, so when we look out, it might trigger us to feel things inside or when we look inside it might change the way we think about what is going on outside. It’s not important to make a clear distinction between these or to get too technical about it. More important is that you try to integrate reflection and reflective writing into your everyday life. I encourage you to find a little bit of time every day to sit and write about everything that has been happening. You could do this for 15mins, perhaps early in the morning before you start your day or at night before you go to sleep.

This examination question was a borrowed attempt at radical pedagogy (and perhaps it is noteworthy that it was rejected for use by the university in which its original author works), an attempt at connecting context and knowledge, integrating vertical and horizontal knowledge (Bernstein 2000). The radical pedagogy meant that the class had been undergirded with a social justice framework that had informed our lessons, conversations, and assessments. The answers I was looking for from students would connect care and observation with historical thinking, allowing students to settle their academic and critical selves in their own communities and draw critical knowledge from their own experiences, linking into the courses they have taught.

This ties into Bernstein’s pedagogical device as well as Freire’s dialogic methodology: the process of decontextualising and recontextualising while working abstract knowledge into everyday knowledge involves moving everyday knowledge into specialised knowledge (Bernstein 2000). In the following section, I will look at excerpts from the examination and analyse them through thematic analysis in terms of radical pedagogy and teaching care during Covid-19.

## Discussion: Students’ Voices, Students’ Wings

In this section I will discuss excerpts of three students’ responses submitted for the above-described summative assessment. I will pull out different themes that intersect and overlap between the different responses, and those that suggest aspects of a radical pedagogy. I will argue that those aspects of radical pedagogy were planted in previous

in-person classes and were able to come to fruition during the Covid-19 pandemic because of the foundational aspects set in place.

One student, Aasif Bulbulia (who has asked to be named), wrote a rap about his experience, which was later published in a poetry journal. He reflected on both his own experience and how this was reflected in the later multiple experiences of primarily oppressed groups during the lockdown: this was an expression of radical care from himself, into others, not using his teacher persona, but in his own being.

### **Student 1: Aasif Bulbulia**

Here is a story of my displacement,  
Here is a story of my struggle,  
Here lies my truth, my tears on paper  
Hear me, hear me.

The least you can do is lend me an ear.  
I was born in what seemed like a harmattan, roads untarred and shacks unstable  
my first smell of the air was dusty, my eyes opened just to be brownd  
the purity of them taken away by things I could not yet understand.

My life is a product of my ancestors' failures  
Their miseducation, their timidity, their poverty  
Not yet Uhuru, not yet uhuru.  
Does not the God of my people call me worthy?

“fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine”  
Is this what I am called for?  
Why do I respond to colonial calls?  
My struggle is decoloniality for as a man thinketh, so is he.  
Father, free me from this bondage.  
Knowing my condition is the reason I must change.

Now is my turn to speak.  
While the world sleeps, hear me.  
God looks at me and says “mine”  
God also looks at me and says “home”  
But where is my home?  
Did you not say you have brought us out of Egypt and into the land of Milk and Honey?  
Where is the land? Where is it?  
did you not say that you would not put diseases on us which you have put on the  
Egyptians?  
We are dying of a foreign disease. Where is the healing?

All my life I had to fight  
I had to fight the conditions and the conditioning  
I had to fight for positions and emancipation.

I am fighting the fight my ancestors started, I am fighting racism  
I am fighting the patriarchy, I am fighting femicide, I am fighting homophobia, I am  
fighting capitalism, I am fighting inequality and I am fighting COVID-19.  
I am fighting demons I inherited.  
Lord, you said you would fight for me and all I had to do is remain silent.  
How can I? how can I remain silent?  
Are you still here? Are you still listening to me?  
I am asking, how can I remain silent?

I wander, I wonder if you can hear me.  
Do you see my struggle of healing?  
A deadly virus roams the streets, your people are confined to their “homes”  
Little babies inhaling dust, inhaling smoke.  
Mothers dying each day, beaten by men dehumanised by a toxic masculinity  
Failing to provide, queuing for R350  
Children out of school, divided by class; this is not a reality special to us  
This is South Africa, a place called home,  
This is Africa, one which you crafted my beautiful body to experience  
Both it and I, violated, raped, exploited and stripped of colour.  
Do you know that the president said we must stay at home?  
Do you know that I am at res because there is no space for me “at home”?  
Do you know that we cannot feed 5000 with two loaves and two fishes?  
Do you know that our protectors in the home and in the state are killing us?  
Do you know that we are wearing masks every day?  
Do you know that this is not a reality special to us?

Hello, are you still there? Can you still hear me?  
Do you know that I carry the trauma of my history in my body?  
Uyazi na ukuba umhlaba wakithi usemi ndawonye? Akukho mehluko kulelizwe.  
Silal'emikhukhwini.  
Imbi le ndawo, siyay'saba le ndawo  
Senzeni na?

Do you know that I am bound by duty to teach true history to children?  
Do you know that I am bound by duty to empower your people?  
How can I remain silent then?  
For if we remain silent in the present, the shackles of our history threaten our future  
Yes! You are a God that supports revolts  
You say to me that I must not trade my life, you say that my people's story must  
empower me  
Trembling as I am, I will stand and teach your children a history that incites anger  
because I am angry.

Anger is a great and powerful motivator of revolutions  
Not the anger that exacerbates cyber wars and genocides  
The anger that makes viruses subside, the anger that propels injustices to fall, the anger  
that is directed not at You, but at the evil in the world

I will teach them that history is a magic mirror that we use to see into humanity's greatest flaws; that it is also a window through which we can dream of our utopia  
I will teach them to be doers of the word: to be active in the recreation of it, to let it recreate us  
Sanitizing hands, and sanitizing hearts  
As I march towards decoloniality  
You tell me that you have not forsaken me, that I am chosen, that I am highly favoured.  
You are a man of your word, and because you said it, I will believe it.  
“may God bless South Africa and bless her people”

There is light in the dark, from my dorm room.

What is evident in this response is the stress of the student between being pulled into their inner world and then pulled again into the outer world. The strings that are woven together in this rap show both an empathy for those most affected by Covid-19, and an awareness that his own privilege provides a barrier for him against the harsher realities that black, poor people face during the lockdown. This awareness of other groups (with access or lack of access to different types of capital) (Bourdieu 2011) and the difficulties they face was a widespread reaction throughout the examination responses. This was a history class, and history was the primary focus of all the lessons; however, issues of equality, social justice, and freedom came through strongly in all the student responses, as part of a conscientising process of radical pedagogy (Freire 1985). Student number 2 spoke about an orphanage she volunteers in; however, this was not a pathway for her to feel vindicated in any way about her position in society. Rather, she used the orphanage to demonstrate the ruptures in society.

## **Student 2**

It is sadly ironic that those most unable to take precautions against the virus are those most in need of economic activity. The Orphanage relies heavily on donations and community assistance. This was difficult to supplement—particularly through Stage 5. The historical links to this sort of inequity lie in the systemic racism (Shpancer, 2020) cemented by Apartheid, as well as xenophobia perpetuated by colonial borders as many of the children in the home and their caregiver are not South African. Some of the children have been abandoned by their parents without any documents, and the occupation of an abandoned building means they are not in a sustainable or secure place.

Moreover, many other South Africans and immigrants are in a similar position regarding crowding and sanitation facilities. Once again this is linked to the systemic racism of Apartheid which left the majority of South Africans in inhumane conditions. During a sanitary-pad distribution at the Cyril Ramaphosa Informal Settlement, a volunteer described the situation as tense and desperate (Maphela, 2020). Even the need for sanitary pads has increased during this time as shelters are full, not all distribution centres were able to open, and many young girls were unable to collect their monthly packs as schools were closed. The loss of jobs and closing of various industries also contributed to this as many could not afford sanitary products (Bham-Ismael, 2020).

One of the Foundation's visits to Malaika Orphanage was over Eid. A few volunteers delivered an Eid meal and gifts, and video-called me from the home. The short video-call celebration was the only time Ramadhaan felt "normal". In any other year, Ramadhaan is associated with a communal spirit and unity. Mosque gatherings, group iftar (breaking of fasts), and community get-togethers are always lively and uplifting. I have spent many Ramadhaan months in the holy lands where one experiences true unity among millions of people—all gathered for one purpose. Malcolm X (as quoted by Institute for Islamic Education, 2020) described it in his letter from Hajj: "There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors. ... But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white."

The student's narrative discusses overarching racial and social justice themes tied into religion. The student draws on Malcom X—linking religious aspects explicitly into "race" in a way not often done in South Africa. The image used is a stark representation of where the country is 26 years into democracy. How does this translate into a pedagogy of care? This is not a neoliberal agenda of care as in charity. Rather I read this as an awakening and awareness that this student already had that is now growing into their academic career. In all the examination responses there was an awareness and a radical care for the outside world, and an understanding of the historical causes of inequality (Bourdieu 2011) as well as the framework of social justice (Fraser 2009).

*We speak about the leftovers and remains and remaining of colonialism and apartheid. We speak about legacies, and our own lives. How is this conveyed and held in an online space?*

### **Student 3: Anonymous**

Being Black and poor in this country and everywhere in the world is a crime. This is white privileged at its highest order; whereby white people are treated special. It is worse because they are now treated special by Black Police and members of the South African Army who happen to be Black people as well. The man who was killed by Police and Soldiers at his own yard is an example of local police brutality in favour of privilege and the case of George Floyd in America, an example of common international Black suffering.

What I saw today on social media and on the news were the talks about Madagascar COVID remedy and more African countries ordering the remedy from Madagascar. This gave me hope that at least African countries are not just sitting and waiting for the western and eastern countries to come up with solutions. What gave me fear and anxiety is that people in my area they do not obey lockdown regulations. They drink homemade beer and share cigarettes. Since the introduction of lockdown regulations, people have been on the streets and going up and down like normal days. I have never seen any police or South African National Defence Force patrolling in my hometown. It is like we reside in a forgotten informal settlement of south Africa.

The ideas of decolonisation play a role especially on [the] medical sector. As Africans we have traditional healers who are not given a platform to participate in the search of COVID 19 cure. Medical sector has suppressed indigenous knowledge. Madagascar's Remedy is a good example of Indigenous knowledge and you could see how it is being undermined because it comes from Africa. The Media report it as "the so called COVID 19 Remedy", whilst western and European medicines are reported as "Possible cure". The media reports tell us that Africa is not considered to have solutions to Global problems. We always rely on foreign solutions to African problems. It is worse because our leaders are quiet. This for me is the neo-colonization of Africa.

All of the above extracts share a common theme: a historically grounded understanding of inequalities, in South Africa and globally, and a view towards social justice (ideas of both recognition and redistribution) from various focal points (Ahmed 2000; Fraser 2009; Gqola 2015; Hart 2019). That is what emerged as a common theme through the thematic analysis, both with the *looking out* and with the *looking in*. The question had been framed to form a social analysis, but this was taken on in every way by the students. The social justice framework had been developed through a radical pedagogy that foregrounded fighting against oppression and an understanding of "race", class, gender, sexuality, ability, and other vectors of oppression. This was embedded in radical pedagogy drawn primarily from Freire's work (Freire 1996).

Decolonisation as a method of actively undoing the colonial remnants, specifically with regard to education (Bam, Ntsebeza, and Zinn 2018; Fomunyam and Teferra 2017; Ngcaweni and Ngcaweni 2018), was another theme that came up systematically in the thematic analysis. This is because it was co-constructed by both me and the class as a key theme of our course for the year in the lessons we had before Covid. The idea was to work with decolonisation as a central organising theory for our class for the year. What it ended up being was a core touchstone we could come back to as a fragmented class. Decolonisation requires radical pedagogy (which is what links it in lineage to Freire and hooks), so the roots we had planted were not multiplied during the online months, but rather grew into the spaces of the online examination.

This is an important part of the argument I am making. Radical pedagogical spaces that we had already made were able to flourish and grow during the online teaching period. However, it was due to the roots that we had already laid down that it was possible for the space to grow. Had we not had that foundation—as was the case with some other classes—it would not have been possible to grow any kind of radical pedagogical space. The difficulties with online learning were demonstrated by the examination response from Student 4.

#### **Student 4: Anonymous**

The online learning experience has been my worst enemy and a demon that I felt I could not get rid of. I was nervous from the very first day of our online learning experience. I then thought of what other students that are in disadvantaged areas striving for a better life are going through. I thought of students that were forced to take responsibility of



their families from teenagehood. I thought of students that had to go through worst experiences to make ends meet. All these thoughts helped me realise that I have no excuse at all but to handle the online learning situation fearlessly and with a beastly attitude. I had to search for the fighter in me, indeed that worked like magic. I have very close friends from Limpopo that are Wits students. Watching them on a regular basis, tackling the online learning experience diligently despite the various challenges that they might have come across, inspired me to strive to conquer this challenge.

While the examination response from Student 4 portrays online learning as an evil that has been conquered, it shows how difficult the experience has been, and particularly reflects on the difficulties faced by disadvantaged students (Arrington 2020; Ferdig et al. 2020). This is discussed fully in another paper (Godsell 2020); however, it bears repeating here: South Africa is a country rife with inequality, which has a social, economic and political legacy left over from apartheid and colonialism. This has meant that access to basic services, including electricity and network coverage, is unequal, and the most disadvantaged students are left vulnerable, even when (or if) the university provides data and devices. Any kind of teaching that happens is occurring in a context where those who would previously have had access (through university residences and on-campus facilities) have been excluded (Khanal 2021, 19). The historic inequality was widely reflected in the students' reflective examination. Student 4 continued:

On a larger scale, the pandemic revealed inequalities within our society. The system of apartheid has left the nation with daunting effects. The less fortunate felt the pressure of COVID-19 more than anyone else. Living in a one room home, forced to #stay at home! with 10 people in one room, is the most uncomfortable and most terrible experience ever. The government promised people housing for the longest time ever! There are still homeless people, there are still families living in skwata [squatter] camps promised better living conditions. How long will our nation suffer? All of this is honestly difficult to digest. I look at my family and everything I have and the kind of life that I am exposed to, then wonder and think about someone that has close to nothing compared to what I have and constantly wonder how this lockdown has affected them on both mental and the physical state. Young people that had goals and aspirations for 2020 are unemployed and miserable without jobs. Companies have lost large amounts of profits that they might not regain even after the reopening of the economy. Company share prices decreased; other companies had to go through the process of liquidation. Innocent workers were retrenched, left heavily indebted. People living in poverty-stricken areas are exposed on a regular basis, but the government has done the bare minimum to ensure that the less fortunate are taken care of.

The constitution stipulates various norms and standards for basic infrastructure and capacity in public schools. It elaborates on the availability of resources, classrooms and infrastructure as well as furniture in schools, facilities and the availability of water and sanitation. If a school lacks any of the above-mentioned amenities and resources then the school is responsible for ensuring that the provincial government is made aware, for provisions to be made. The constitution has also stipulated deadlines of when schools should operate as conducive spaces. For an example it is said that by 2020 November

there should be no mud schools. This means each school in South Africa will be a well-constructed building for effective learning activities.

However, during this pandemic we were exposed to rural schools that are still dilapidated spaces and unhygienic spaces. The pandemic precautionary measures relate to sanitisation and practicing good hygiene. Looking at schools in rural areas, these are not safe spaces for learners at all! These are one of the burning issues and crisis that we are facing as a nation. Private schools have managed to work efficiently during this difficult time. Each learner was introduced to online learning through different platforms such as ZOOM and Microsoft teams. These inequalities are effects of the Apartheid era. These schools in rural areas can still be fumigated to ensure the classes are bacterial free, but question is, are the schools safe enough for learners to return during this pandemic, are the classrooms safe enough for exercising social distancing. Indeed, the legacy of the Apartheid is still apparent. Wealthy families were and are still locked down in their luxurious homes in affluent areas such as Sandton while some are homeless. The unfortunate part is that, the government's powers are not entirely bountiful, one can strongly deduce that the government can only do so much.

The damage of Apartheid cannot be undone. Such injustices of the past exposed inequalities within our society. The less fortunate were given food parcels during the lockdown and some reported that the food parcels are expired foods. What does that say about those in power? Unemployed graduates are suffering from anxiety, this is exactly what I meant in the beginning that now, one's qualifications might not do justice in bringing financial freedom. The power lies not in the type of qualification that one has.

Student 4 reflects on the inequalities in South Africa, putting them in a reflective historical context. She draws on the fissure lines left by the legacy of apartheid in the country, as theorised by Bourdieu, as capital and habitus perpetuating inequality through access to money, social status, language, and the other nuances that make up habitus (Bourdieu 2011). This is a thoroughly historical reflection, drawing maps of Covid-19 onto maps of apartheid. The student draws on discussions we had in class about the past in the present, and how a reading of the present is always a reading of the past. This involves a kind of social pedagogy and reflective praxis (Ashwin et al. 2015).

I have two options with reflecting on this course: I can focus on the small wins, the microscale on which students passed their examinations well (overall) and will go on to be powerful teachers. In that narrative, I have made online teaching work. The majority of the class participated and passed; only one student dropped out. However, this would be a disservice to the content of my students' examination responses, where they were constantly reflecting on the inequalities in South Africa under Covid-19. Under a more macro lens, this course functioned because we had a face-to-face platform that had set radical pedagogy as a clear frame and method for the course. It functioned in an online sphere where this small group of students held each other together, but in a larger context of access to education being denied to those most vulnerable. It is impossible to practise radical pedagogy, a pedagogy that is oriented towards a more just society, in this context. It might be argued that if the issue is inequality, then it is never possible to

have a radical pedagogy, but my argument is that when decisions made by the university increase inequality, it is impossible to have a radical pedagogy and celebrate success within that university. I am also arguing that it is impossible to have a radical pedagogy without dialogic teaching (Freire 1996), without a community in the classroom (hooks 1994), and without face-to-face time to promote relational learning.

It is important that we include mental and physical health when we include vulnerability. Mental health has been widely affected by Covid-19, in lecturers and students. The isolation, the uncertainty, the restriction of touch, the death, the fear, the restriction of movement, and the closing of campuses further atomised an already fractured and untenable society.

## Conclusion

*Students disperse like baby spiders, each into their own corner of the world. From their computers, cellphones, devices. I sit behind my computer. Still.*

The papers and methods discussed in this article show an attempt towards, a leaning towards, a radical pedagogy during Covid-19. This attempt was at a pedagogy of care that incorporated a social orientation towards the rest of the world, a critical engagement that involved aspects of social pedagogy, as well as engaging the history methodology that we had taught in class. So why was it a failure? The students all did exceptionally well in their examinations. This can be seen as a success. Except if we start measuring education only by marks, we enter a very dangerous space, devaluing the interaction, the relational nature of knowledge, and the critical discourse that happens in class, as well as the affective and emotive nature of learning and teaching. This article has discussed the attempts and the failures. The fragmented nature of the article has attempted to address the fragmented nature of teaching during Covid-19. The article, if I have done it justice, was dislocating and jarring, jumping between different spaces and times. Much of 2020 has been jarring and dislocated. The central argument I have put forward is that radical pedagogy during Covid-19 has been and remains impossible while our country remains so unequal. While an ethics of care, an ethics of social responsibility and social justice, is possible to cultivate during Covid-19 with a firm base in community, it is impossible to hold all the students in a class together in a way that irons out the social inequalities that plague our society. When students do not have a safe place to study, we cannot do online learning. When students do not have equal access to internet connection and cellphone networks, we cannot implement any form of completely online remote learning going forward. ERT was a problematic but necessary move that did deepen existing inequalities. The residences at universities go a long way towards providing those (often) safe and connected spaces; however, these were unavailable during the early phases of Covid-19 in 2020. Until we have a more equal society, attempts at an online pedagogy will run the risk of widening the economic, social, and educational divide. And while many universities are likely to want to take what lecturers have painstakingly learnt during this time (at much personal cost) and run with it, because of the potential benefits of online courses that can be recycled

to enroll more students, we allow this to happen at great cost to what our universities can offer our country.

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