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## Cultivating a Sense of Splace in the Hybrid and Virtual Classroom at Universities

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### ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted higher education globally that required new and contingency ways of teaching. Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) propelled university educators to adopt a pedagogy of flexibility while still maintaining a sense of connectedness. In South Africa, the implementation of ERT was challenging, given the country's stark socio-economic inequalities. The South African government, therefore, adopted a more flexible version of ERT, remote multimodal teaching and learning (RMTL), to ensure that no student would be left behind. The success of multimodal models requires flexible pedagogical approaches that embrace understanding, compassion, and inclusivity because students in a remote space may experience feelings of disconnection. I argue that educators develop a strong sense of place and space (splace) in the hybrid classroom. Prior to the pandemic, a strong sense of place created in students a deeper connection to learning than that experienced in a remote learning context. The pandemic introduced new hybrid splaces that suggest a shift in both students' and educators' connections to an unfamiliar learning context. Students therefore need to feel a strong sense of connection to these new learning splaces. This paper discusses how a sense of splace could foster a deeper sense of connection in the hybrid and virtual classroom.

**Keywords:** *flexible learning; hybrid classroom; sense of splace; universal design for learning*

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### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 global pandemic brought significant disruptions to higher education institutions (HEIs) across the world. Not only did it serve as a catalyst for HEIs to find innovative solutions for the continuation of the academic year, it also highlighted the pivotal role that place and space play in an uninterrupted and successful delivery of the curriculum. In a South African context, under the theme, 'Save The Academic Year Save Lives', the Minister of Higher Education made what he considered a practical suggestion that universities adopt the notion of 'remote multimodal teaching and learning' (RMTL) as a desensitised (less threatening/intimidating) approach to

learning. He proposed this approach to ensure that no student would be left behind during online teaching. Chen and Fu (2003), Moreno and Mayer (2007), and Zywno (2003) describe how remote multimodal teaching and learning environments allow instructional elements to be presented in more than one sensory mode (visual, aural, written) to meet the needs of all students. They consider this approach to include distance education. The RMTL guidelines circulated by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) offered universities the flexibility to determine the most applicable pedagogies and resources for their specific contexts. However, the abrupt translation of approximately 600 courses (in the case of the University of Cape Town) to an online platform in the early part of 2020 signalled an emergency.

This abrupt shift to the dominant mode of instruction is what many refer to as emergency remote teaching (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020).

Bozkurt and Shama (2020) flagged the various risks linked to allowing universities unlimited flexibility in selecting what they considered the most appropriate RMTL strategies. For example, although some university educators might have incorporated technology (in varying degrees) in their teaching prior to the pandemic, in most instances, an in-depth understanding of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks underpinning online education and ERT was lacking or absent. This ‘unawareness’ resulted in many university educators operating from the assumption that the curriculum, course material, and pedagogy implemented in the face-to-face classroom could simply be translated directly to the virtual one. This flawed and uninformed conception and application may be one of the reasons why disengaged learning escalated and students became disconnected from the learning experience. Under ERT, more options for engaging in the flexible learning experience became available to HEIs and students were presented with these options in the process of selecting their preferred mode of learning based on their individual circumstances. Over time, the nature of the educational transaction also changed. However, it is fair to say that university educators and students were largely underprepared for this new educational transaction and did not necessarily know how to navigate this new mode of teaching. I argue that e-learning should be transactional instead of instructional for it to be effective (Author & Waghid, 2021). The former is based on the social constructivist theory, where knowledge is generated through social interaction and engagement, whereas the latter concerns one-directional, instrumental teaching.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

As with any abrupt change, the implementation of an RMTL approach did not come without its challenges. For example, students’ access and connectivity to the digital world remained a challenge. Although synchronous instructional delivery was adopted by most universities, using various IT tools (e.g., MS Teams, Zoom, Google classroom), many students and advocates for democratic and just education challenged this mode of delivery, arguing that remote teaching was only benefiting those who had reliable internet connectivity and were equipped with a digital device. As a result of this call, some universities allocated loan laptops to students, based on financial need, and with access to data. In addition to this initiative, South Africa shifted to asynchronous delivery, low-tech options, and off-line activities to minimise the online presence of students and limit data usage. These were some of the attempts made to accommodate students and to respond to the issues of social inequality and access (Author & Waghid, 2020).

The above challenges, I argue, resulted in most students disengaging and disconnecting from the learning process. In fact, core to these challenges is the issue of disconnection due to students not necessarily knowing how to manage or to navigate their learning in this unfamiliar setting (splace). Notwithstanding these unavoidable issues, university educators were overly focused on the deliverance of content and on mitigating the risks of e-cheating while, at the same time, forgetting or failing to address the idea that the successful continuation and completion of the academic year largely depends on creating enabling places and spaces (splaces) for students.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this paper is thus to introduce university educators to an important yet overlooked concept in hybrid and online education, namely, a sense of splace. The latter I argue is imperative in fostering a stronger connection to the teaching and learning experience in both hybrid and virtual educational settings. Understanding and fostering a sense of splace, requires that educators not only adjust their approach and adopt a more holistic, inclusive and flexible methodology, but maintain a sense of connection amongst students. Establishing this connection, I argue, can materialise through: a) thoroughly understanding these new splaces of teaching in terms of students' responses and the shift in teaching strategies; and b) both students and educators learning to navigate them in the best possible way. Therefore, I suggest that a renewed focus be placed not only on our sense of place or space in the teaching and learning domain but on the development of a more holistic and integrated relationship between these two: a sense of splace. My argument being that the latter has the potential to strengthen teaching and learning connections in the hybrid and virtual classroom. I divide the paper into four sections. First, I discuss the methodology; secondly, I introduce the theoretical framework underpinning this paper; thirdly, I elaborate on the concept of a sense of splace, and how the development and fostering of this could promote a general connectedness in students, and ultimately, inclusivity. Lastly, I deliberate on a few concluding thoughts for higher education, currently and into the future.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The paper is primarily conceptual. According to Shepard (2017) empirical and conceptual papers have one goal in common: to generate new knowledge by drawing on selected sources of information

combined according to a set of norms. As opposed to empirical papers, arguments in conceptual papers, are not derived from data in the conventional way but involve the assimilation and combination of evidence in the form of previously developed concepts and theories (McInns, 2011 & Shepard, 2017). Conceptual papers typically draw on multiple concepts, literature streams, and theories that serve different purposes. As opposed to empirical research, there is no consensus of basic types of research design in respect to conceptual papers. However, to address this issue, MacInnis (2011) considers four such types: theory synthesis, theory adaptation, typology, and model. These types assist the researcher to differentiate methodological approaches from one another in terms of the structure and development of the argument. In this paper theory synthesis was applied.

Corley and Gioia (2011) allude that theory synthesis can integrate an extensive set of theories and phenomena which is aimed at unravelling the components of a concept or phenomenon. Central to theory synthesis is summarisation and integration. According to MacInnis (2011), summarizing assists researchers by encapsulating, digesting, and reducing what is known to a manageable whole. On the other hand, integration enables them to see a concept or phenomenon in a new way by transforming previous findings and theory into a novel higher-order perspective that links phenomena previously considered distinct (MacInnis, 2011). In this paper two macro concepts namely, place and space are critically explored and conceptually integrated and transformed into a new higher-order perspective namely sense of splace. Underpinning this novice concept social constructivism, universal design for learning and flexible learning theory have been explored. The argument has therefore been structured around these multiple concepts and theories to arrive at

substantive conclusions.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIALCONSTRUCTIVISM, UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING AND FLEXIBLE LEARNING**

### *Social Constructivism*

The theory of social constructivism was developed by Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) (Ageyev, 2004). Social constructivism assumes that learning occurs through social interaction and collaboration, often in a group. It further posits that individual's understanding develops and is shaped through the social interaction along with a personal critical thinking process. At the foundation of this theory is the belief that knowledge is not a copy of an objective reality but is rather the result of the mind selecting and making sense of and recreating experiences (Vygotsky, 1962). This means that knowledge is the result of interactions between both subjective and environmental factors. All of Vygotsky's research and theories are collectively involved in social constructivism and language development such as, cognitive dialogue, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), social interaction, culture and inner speech (Vygotsky, 1962). Cooperative learning and a sense of connectedness is paramount to this theory. Although this theory might seem quite simple to employ in a face-to-face setting, it could be more challenging in the hybrid and virtual classroom. However, to effectively apply social constructivism as an educational theory in the hybrid or virtual classroom, I argue that educators could find the universal design for learning (UDL) framework useful.

### *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)*

The Universal Design for Learning

(UDL) is a theoretical and/or conceptual framework in education that addresses the accessibility of learning content whilst embracing diversity amongst students. The concept of UDL was elaborated and popularized by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the 1990s and has subsequently become widely disseminated (Sanger, 2020). The notion of UDL, is to maximize the learning of students with a wide range of characteristics by applying universal design principles to all aspects of instruction, for example: delivery methods, physical spaces, information resources, technology, personal interactions and assessments (Burgstahler, 2020). UDL theory further assumes that the multimodality of a learning environment is created by multiple forms of representation, processing, and motivational or motivation-maintaining elements in the learning environment. UDL encourages educators to provide: a) multiple means of engagement—the 'Why' of learning; b) multiple means of representation—the 'What' of learning; and c) multiple means of action and expression—the 'How' of learning (Sanger, 2020). Accessibility is key to UDL theory and aims to minimize barriers for implementing inclusive pedagogy in order to achieve student engagement, collaboration and connection. Educators could therefore implement UDL principles to create flexible learning pathways for learners to achieve their learning goals. This pathway allows all learners to be addressed by choosing different methods, materials, and assessments based on their individual needs. It also includes cooperative learning styles to generate new knowledge.

### *Flexible learning*

Although flexible learning is currently defined in terms of distance and hybrid learning in South African higher education policy documents (DHET, 2014),

it appears that there is no commonly accepted meaning globally. Jones and Walters (2015, p. 66) claim that, in the context of teaching and learning, ‘flexibility is a wide range of responses to different situations [and] needs, underpinned by different discourses. Naidu (2017) conceives of flexible learning as a state of being in which the limitations of the time, place and pace of study have been gradually relaxed for teaching and learning. She suggests that flexibility in learning for students could range from choices in relation to entry and exit points, to the selection of learning activities, assessment tasks, and educational resources. At the same time, for the educators, the choices could vary from the allocation of their time to the mode and methods of communication with their students and between students. Naidu (2017) notes that flexible learning is not a mode of study. She refers to it as a ‘value principle’, just as diversity and equality are in education and society. She further argues that flexibility in teaching and learning is pertinent in any mode of study, including campus-based face-to-face education. Thus, it is imperative that HEIs continue critical discourses on the meaning of flexible learning and how it can be optimally applied in various programmes.

Despite its theoretical complexity, there is agreement among scholars in the field that flexible learning is about *when*, *where*, *how* and at what *pace* learning occurs, and that it provides a selection of choices for a diverse cohort of students (Naidu, 2016, 2017; Outram, 2011). These choices can be classified under three main categories which form the foundation of flexible learning, namely, *place*, *pace* and *mode*. Although this paper focuses primarily on *place*, the other concepts, *pace* and *mode* also relate to the delivery of learning. According to Tallantyre (2012) and Gordon (2014), *place* in flexible learning relates to work-based learning,

which could entail learning at home, on campus, while travelling, or in any other place, and is often made possible through technology. Technology enables flexible learning across geographical boundaries and at convenient times (learning anywhere, anytime). *Pace* concerns the ‘speed’ at which teaching occurs and could include accelerated and decelerated programmes and degrees, learning part-time, and systems for recognition of prior learning and for credit accumulation and transfer. Lastly, *mode* involves the use of learning technologies to enhance flexibility and enrich the quality of the learning experiences, in hybrid or distance learning, and in synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning.

While flexible learning is paramount to the successful continuation of the academic project during and even post the pandemic, the student learning experience is about a lot more than the educator getting the design of assessment tasks right and providing students with useful feedback. Learning is a complex process in which different students and learning groups adopt a variety of motivational and cognitive regulation strategies as part of their learning. And, in the context of distance, online and distributed educational settings, which are characterised by the separation of students from educators in time and space, these variables take on new meanings, and a new level of importance. However, the tremendous pressure on university educators during the abrupt shift to ERT between late 2019 and early 2020 diverted their attention from the pivotal role that place, and space (splace) play in the teaching and learning process. In the following section I discuss a sense of splace and its role in the higher education context.

## The importance of developing a sense of space in teaching and learning settings

### *Conceptualising Place and Space*

In order to understand the concept of space, it is important to acquire some key insights into its two constituent parts – space and place. Often the two terms are used interchangeably by those who are not aware of their rich theoretical underpinnings. Various schools of thought exist around the conceptualisation of these two notions and their interrelatedness. In the hard sciences, space is often conceived of from a Newtonian perspective – as an empty, independent infinite container for matter (Lefebvre, 1974). However, space and place are intrinsically related concepts: they constitute each other. A place takes meaning from the spaces outside it, and spaces are relevant in relation to the places they surround (McKenzie, 2008).

The global pandemic proved that place is far more than just a bounded space, location or site, and that people do not live in a placeless world of geometric relationships, but in one of meaning (Buttimer & Seamon, 1980; Ley, 1983; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). This concept indicates a world where neither place nor scale is a fixed or given category, but where they are characterised by their fluidity and contingency (Marston, 2000). I concur with Basso (1996) that place is an inescapable aspect of daily life and is intimately linked to our life experiences. Places provide the context in which humans learn about themselves and others, and make sense of, and connect to, their natural and cultural surroundings. Places shape our identities, our relationships with others, and our world views (Basso, 1996; Gruenewald, 2003).

As a macro concept in education, place remains theoretically complex due to

its wide range of interpretations in different contexts and disciplines (Creswell, 2004). The word, according to its simplest meaning and use, refers to either a specific location somewhere, or to the occupation of that location. In the first instance, it is about having an address and, secondly, about living at that address. Agnew (2011) describes how this distinction is often pushed further to distinguish the physical place from the phenomenal space in which the place is located. Hence, place becomes a particular or lived space. As Tuan (1977, p. 101) has shown, the concepts of space and place can be correlated with movement and stability: a space can become a place when we stand still and observe, while place is ‘essentially a static concept’ and can, in that sense, also be defined as ‘whatever stable object catches our attention’.

A review of the literature shows that the concept of place has been studied extensively in various disciplines, including Geography, Cultural Studies, and Psychology, to mention a few. In the field of Environmental Education, Gruenewald (2003) introduces a multidisciplinary analysis of the term, comprising the perceptual, ideological, sociological, ecological, and political dimensions. Such views invite a renewed conceptualisation of the term beyond its technical meaning in terms of location on a map (for a more detailed discussion on this, see Author & Le Grange, 2015, 2016 and Le Grange & Author, 2018). Furthermore, Creswell (2004) provides three fundamental aspects of place to distinguish between the term’s technical meaning and daily usage, namely, *place as area*, *locality*, and *sense of place*. He further asserts that place, at a basic level, is ‘space invested with meaning in the context of power’ (Creswell, 2004, p. 12). This relates to Mbembe’s (2016) argument that place has been, and will always be deeply imbricated in power and is paramount in knowledge production.

Albeit various geographers claim that place represents a type of bounded space, Malpas (2016) argues that its bounds do not take the form of dividing lines in space. According to him, place is neither spatial nor temporal, but encompasses both while refusing identification with either. Malpas (2016, p. 384) writes: ‘to suppose otherwise would be to suppose that place somehow came after space, as a modification of it, whereas the reality is that it is place that comes first, and it is space that is the dependent phenomenon’.

Friedman (2005) defines space as conquering place – as something that is obsolete and empty. He claims that new technologies – the container, the internet, the cell phone and so forth – are making places themselves obsolete. This notion can, however, be challenged under the current conditions in which we live and work. In fact, the Coronavirus has shown just the opposite – that the world is, in reality, neither placeless nor obsolete; instead humans’ connections to, and actions in, places are ‘intra-actional’ – i.e., bound up in places and spaces (Barad, 2007, p. 33).

### ***The emergence of new splaces during a pandemic***

The pandemic propelled humans (consciously or unconsciously) into creating new places and spaces of work. The past two years have introduced a renewed focus on place and space and redefined the socially constructed boundaries in which humans go about their daily lives. If ever there was a time when humans were oblivious to the fundamental role that places fulfil in our lives prior to the pandemic, COVID-19 lockdowns illuminated the importance of place and space. Unsurprisingly space and place came under the microscope as lockdowns and social distancing measures were

implemented across the world. The environmental studies and politics scholar, David Orr (1992), argues that our unconsciousness or lack of awareness of place is not an unfamiliar phenomenon due to our embeddedness in it. He alludes to the idea that, as humans, we often miss that which is closest to us (Orr, 1992).

However, over the past two years, the distinctive spatial barriers between physical places, digital spaces, and biophysical spheres have become blurred, and somewhat collapsed, as people have begun to ‘make’ new places (*placemaking*) by means of digital technology. The pandemic outbreak, for instance, served as a powerful agent in transforming a place of living (home) into an instant working ‘space’ by means of technology. Yet, these new hybrid contexts in which people currently find themselves, while gaining prominence, lack a specific designation. A review of the literature shows that these contexts do not meet the definitions of space or place or even ‘non-places’ as defined by Auge (1995) more than 25 years ago. For these reasons, I prefer using the term ‘splace’ to capture our current contexts of work. According to the Urban Dictionary (2020), *splace* is a term that can, according to recent and increasingly popular/colloquial usage, be used when describing ‘a space within a place or a place within a space’. I argue that it is at the intersections of place, space and technology within the biophysical sphere where *splace* emerged. I perceive it as unsurprising that it has, or is understood to have, become the dominant setting in which humans operate currently. The diagram below illustrates the notion of *splace*.

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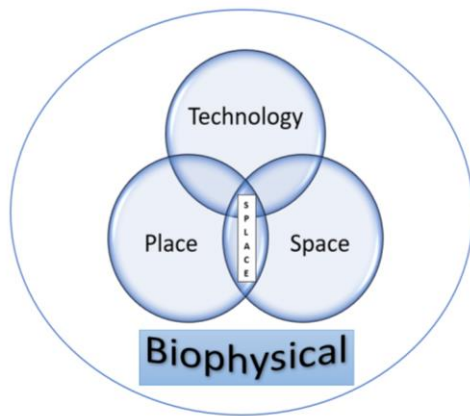


Figure 1: The Splace framework

### *Sense of Splace in Education*

In the field of education, ERT abruptly and simultaneously introduced new e-learning places and spaces (*splaces*). According to Ardoin (2006), in an interdisciplinary context, ‘sense of place’ is a holistic concept comprising psychological, social, cultural, biophysical, political and economic systems. Stedman (2003), Farnum, Hall, and Kruger (2005) and Smaldone, Harris, and Sanyal (2005) see a sense of place as broadly describing the human connection to places, including place attachment and place meaning. Thus, while the concept of place is more focused on the physical place, a sense of splace captures both the physical and the digital.

The centrality of place in shaping our life experiences is also evident in the ways in which place influences education and teaching. Tate (2008, p. 401) asserts that place shapes the broader ‘geography of opportunity’ in which universities are situated and includes the experiences of diverse stakeholders. These stakeholders include students, parents, and educators: all those in and around universities. I argue that the past two years have demonstrated that it is no longer place, but instead splace that shapes the ‘geography of opportunity’ and

experiences in education. Palloff and Pratt (2011) see the development of a sense of community in the virtual classroom as contributing to the successful implementation of remote teaching and learning. I contend that this sense of community is a direct result of the creation of successful remote teaching and learning safe e-splaces in which students can share their perceptions and experiences. I see such splaces alleviating the fears and anxieties that students might experience during these unprecedented times.

Adams (2013) predicts that a sense of splace may conjure contradictory emotions in both students and teachers – the warmth of community and home juxtaposed with the stress of dense urban living. Burnett (2014) found that classroom context shapes how students make meaning of what they learn through digital literacy practices. She specifically investigated the ‘classroom-ness’ of digital learning which, she argues, is shaped not only by the physical boundaries of the classroom but also by external environments. This implies that students can learn and understand as much from digital teaching and learning practices as from their lives outside of class. For Burnett (2014), the concept of ‘classroom-ness’ reveals the fluidity of place for student learning.

I argue that, where the teaching environment is ‘fixed’ and familiar (for example, the lecture hall or classroom), a sense of place relates more to contact or face-to-face education while a sense of splace applies to the hybrid context in which much teaching and learning currently occurs in universities (see, for example, Author & Waghid, 2020, 2021). In this context, unfamiliar at the start of the pandemic and lockdown, students found themselves entrenched in the integrated social-ecological-political-psychological and virtual dimensions of their learning



sites. In this situation, educators need to acknowledge that place and identity are closely intertwined in a process of co-production. Thus, the lockdown and current splaces of teaching and learning can be seen as the raw material for the creative production of identity, rather than as an *a priori* label of identity (Author & Waghid, 2020, 2021). In our globalised and connected world, the narratives that students create and use to understand themselves in the world are constitutive of their identities and associated with multiple splaces and movements. These narratives influence the success of flexible teaching and learning processes and should not be overlooked in the classroom. Based on the discussion thus far, I concur with Stedman (2003) who argues that a student's sense of splace is formed based on the nature of the educational setting, the kind/amount of experience s/he has with that setting, and the socio-cultural, psychological, cognitive and emotional characteristics of the individual or the student.

Considering the above influences on virtual learning, in the process of developing a sense of splace, the role of power in classroom settings and pedagogy must be revisited, and concerted efforts must be made to ensure the decentring thereof. In the face-to-face classroom, the power dynamics and systemic inequalities of society are easily observed and reproduced. Such spaces have the potential to be intimidating by making the privileged students in the room comfortable at the expense of the marginalised students (Sykes & Gachago, 2018). Places can therefore be powerful in enabling and reproducing inequality, hegemony, ideology, racism, and other forms of oppression. They can also be sites of resistance: they have the potential to function as settings in which students from marginalised backgrounds are able to escape and resist oppression while building group consciousness and

solidarity (Delaney, 2002; Haymes, 1995; hooks, 1990; Lefebvre, 1974). The integral connection between place, power, and resistance underscores another important feature of place: the link between place and social justice. Justice and injustice both have a spatial expression. However, in a virtual or hybrid classroom, justice and inclusivity result from the emergence and development of a strong sense of splace between student and educator and between student and student. This process fosters meaningful engagements between student and educator, student and student, and between a student and his/her learning splace (Iiskala et al., 2011).

I argue that, should a flat ontology be adopted, there is the likelihood of the dynamics and politics of place changing in the hybrid and/or virtual classroom (Author & Waghid, 2020). A flat ontology assumes that all entities are on an equal ontological footing and that no entity, whether artificial or natural, symbolic or physical, possesses greater ontological dignity than other objects (Bryant, 2010). In other words, in an e-learning splace, neither the educator, the student, nor the educational tool and technology are at the centre of the pedagogical encounter, but each (entity) exists in its own right. The notion of intentional correlation is critical in a flat ontology: all counterparts intend one another, and all interactions between them are based on an intentional transaction. For example, while the tool or technology is used to facilitate the task of the human agent, it is also performing its task. Thus, a flat ontology enables the educator and student to adhere to principles of fairness and inclusivity (Author & Waghid, 2020).

I also argue that, once a sense of splace has been established, a flexible learning approach could be more willingly and effectively adopted by students. It is important for university educators to

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understand that the creation of safe e-spaces is necessary for empowering students to act upon their situation and positionality (Gruenewald, 2008). Freire (1995) believes that human beings are because they are in a particular situation. Reflecting on one's situation corresponds to reflecting on the space(s) one inhabits; acting upon one's situation often corresponds to changing one's relationship to a place or, in this case, splace. If students are to feel empowered in a hybrid or virtual teaching and learning setting, then such students, with the help of their educators, need to develop a sense of trust in the learning process that may ensue. It is therefore imperative that educators and students become aware in a particularly conscious and informed way of these new emerging splaces and search for new ways to foster connections to them.

Greenwood (2013) argues that place-consciousness depends in equal measure on knowledge of, and experience with, ecological and cultural systems as well as the interactions between them. I argue that this consciousness also takes into consideration that places themselves are not predetermined but are social and/or cultural products with intended and unintended consequences (Author & Le Grange, 2015). Greenwood (2013) further claims that place-consciousness involves reflecting on the multicultural traditions that shape places and advocates the idea of not only learning *about* (s)places but also *from* them in direct ways. He further asserts that a strong informed place-consciousness aims to discover/recover/reconstruct self in relation to (s)place.

### **Concluding thoughts for Higher Education**

The above arguments imply the need for university educators to become

aware of place, space and splace, together with the embedded politics heralded by them. Gruenewald (2003) suggests that educational reform policies and practices that disregard places be challenged. I argue that using splace as a starting point in course design would enable students to understand the localness of environmental and social problems, including those that transcend national boundaries. This would guide and encourage them to realise that solutions to global environmental and social problems often require local action (as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic). Moreover, in rural areas, where students, or the families/communities from which they come, live close to the land, a renewed focus on (s)place might help these particular students to better understand the specific ways in which the livelihoods of their families and communities depend on the land. This renewed focus could also serve as a basis for integrating indigenous cultural practices and philosophies, such as Ubuntu (humanness), into education processes. With a conscious awareness of connecting with places, students in urban areas could, in turn, develop a keener awareness of the ways in which the local and global are intertwined and how global-local connections manifest in environmental and social problems. As in the case of ERT, where some students experience connectivity and internet problems, while continuing to be guided by a restrictive curriculum that does not address such concerns, I recommend that educators practice a *critical pedagogy of splace* framed within UDL principles. Such a pedagogy deals with, and would enable, both educators and students to reflect on how power works through the places they inhabit and the splaces in which they teach and learn. Eventually, by acting on this knowledge of these powers, they may change their relationship with such splaces, as Freire (1995) suggests. This process could be applied, should educators integrate

actual ‘glocalised’ (global and local) issues within their pedagogies. As a means to respond to the glocalised agenda it is therefore imperative that educators draw on universal design for learning guidelines, acknowledge flexible learning styles and ground their philosophical and pedagogical orientations in social constructivism.

I further argue and advocate for universities to realise that they are message-sending-institutions and, in this way, are silent teachers of the ethos and scholarship they wish to promote. Iconic and internationally top-rated universities, such as the one where I work, have cultural currency and, with a more flexible pedagogy, each student would be empowered to set his/her own exchange rate for this currency. I advocate for this idea to be acknowledged and embraced by academics at all universities. The dominant epistemologies, ontologies and narratives (the silent teachers) are embodied in the ways in which the university creates and orders space. The outbreak of COVID-19 presented opportunities for HEIs to create conducive and just e-learning spaces which operate from the premise of a flat ontology and take students’ sense of space into consideration during rearticulation and assessment processes. In this transformative process, the principles of fairness, inclusivity and Ubuntu would become more apparent as students feel seen, heard, and connected, and this might result in motivated and conscious student engagement during lectures. The time is also ripe for revisiting examination and assessment processes that remain deeply rooted in Eurocentric practices, and for exploring and reevaluating the pass/fail system post the pandemic.

I advocate for sufficient intellectual

space and time to be provided for rethinking how traditional practices and structures of teaching, learning and assessment can be sustainably transformed in a post-pandemic era. This would, in turn, imply that universities continuously challenge the spatial divisions among themselves, students, communities and their taken-for-granted, traditional legitimacy. This would be embarked upon not only in contextual ways, but also through examining those spatial divisions centred on identity and cultural politics.

There has never been a more conducive time for exploring the possibility of a different and more mindful metaphysical basis for higher education, for reformulating outdated, reductive teaching philosophies, and for acknowledging that students are holistic beings, not simply intellectual beings. This would require the ‘humanisation’ of the education process, and university rules and regulations being designed and implemented with compassion and discretion. In this post pandemic context, I argue that university educators must not lose sight of the cosmopolitan, interconnected human, and more-than-human world in which we live, work and play.

More than 40 years ago, Anita Rui Olds (1979, p. 41) argued that ‘the motivation to interact with the environment exists in all [students] as an intrinsic property of life, but the quality of the interactions is dependent upon the possibilities for engagement that the (physical/learning) environment provides’. Based on this, I argue that, in the context of hybrid and remote multimodal teaching and learning, spaces should act as the foundations for students’ resilience and adaptation to cognitive, social, psychological, emotional, economic and political challenges. To begin the process of achieving this holistic education goal,

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universities should consider the promotion and nurture of a sense of splace among their students, as well as their educators. This is based on the assumption that academic programmes are able to directly influence what I call the 'learning splace identity' of students. Once such an identity, in both the educator and student, has been developed, flexible learning, including RMTL, might be more effective in ensuring that no student is left behind.

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