

The impact of Covid-19 on students with disabilities' access to education in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The paper used Critical Disability Theory to unpack the impact of Covid-19 on students with disabilities' learning in South African higher education. Data were collected by analysing and synthesising South African and international literature available in Google Scholar, ProQuest, books, journal articles and online resources. The finding was that students with disabilities were excluded in their learning before Covid-19, and the pandemic only exacerbated their exclusion. It was proposed that incorporating the principles of the Universal Design for Learning into the teaching practice, and training academic staff on its implementation, might be an effective intervention to enable inclusion; not only of students with disabilities, but also all diverse students in the South African higher education context, and in Africa at large. In addition, extensive consultation on students with disabilities' lived experience can assist in their inclusion, as they know what they need in terms of learning. Also, a 'new normal', as resulting from the response to Covid-19, was presented and how it can be of benefit to students with disabilities' learning

Keywords: Covid-19, Critical Disability Studies, Higher education, Learning, South Africa, Students with disabilities.

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic had far-reaching effects on education systems across the world, and specifically, South African higher education (USAF, 2020). Its effects on teaching and learning in higher education have been rendered quite visible in South Africa, which recorded the highest Covid-19 related cases in Africa (Africa Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), 2020). The effects of the pandemic are exacerbated for students with disabilities, who have always experienced challenges of exclusion in the pre-Covid-19 world. This paper examines and presents the impact of the pandemic on students with disabilities' learning, which is often under-explored in analytical research on Covid-19-related challenges. The overarching argument is that while Covid-19 and the concomitant approaches to mitigate its effects have taken a toll on various sectors of society and education systems, the impact has been far-reaching for students with disabilities. This is precisely because of students with disabilities' unique learning skills and requirements, which are often missed in generalised analyses of the visible effects of the pandemic on education systems. Similar to other periods of significant disruption, Covid-19 presents a critical basis upon which opportunities for imagining and thinking about ways of teaching and learning that are inclusive of disability can be considered in deeper ways.

Background of study

Students with disabilities in higher education in South Africa and Covid-19

Persons with disabilities broadly, and students with disabilities in South African higher education specifically, are among the marginalised social groups who have often been excluded in classroom teaching (Ndlovu, 2017; Mutanga, 2017). Howell (2006) argues that the exclusion starts with schooling and affects

the transition to higher education. Explained in the Vygotskian framework, interactions within a formal educational context play a critical role in the development of higher-order thinking skills; that is, cognitive, social and cultural development. Development is mostly a process that takes place on social and psychological levels (Vygotsky, 1978; 1986). Thus, exclusion in education broadly, and teaching and learning specifically, results in social and intellectual development negatively being influenced. However, when students with disabilities have access to formal learning at higher education level, they gain capabilities like all other students, and can contribute to the skilled labour force of the 21st century (Carrim & Wangenge-Ouma, 2012).

All diverse students' learning has been gravely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, but its impact is exacerbated for students with disabilities. They are a social group whose exact statistics are not readily available because some individuals do not declare their disabilities, especially those with invisible disabilities (Mutanga, 2017). Van Der Merwe (2017) also claims that 80% of individuals with disabilities do not have access to higher education. It suggests that 20% access higher education, constituting a significant number in the student body in higher education in South Africa. The particular students' exclusion is exacerbated because of the specialised ways through which they learn, resulting from their impairment-related disadvantages. The academic staff require the knowledge of using specialised tools and skills to teach different disabilities (Perves, Ahmed, Shahbaz & Abosaq, 2018). During the period of Covid-19, teaching became more complicated, and students with disabilities' learning have been adversely affected.

The South African Government, authorities and stakeholders in higher education have attempted for all diverse students to gain

access to learning, even during the pandemic (Nzimande, 2020), in an effort to save the academic year of 2020 (Dell, 2020). The minister of higher education was quoted assaying, "...irrespective of Covid-19, South Africa needs to be moving towards developing full capacity for online education. It's the future in any case" (Dell, 2020). Thus, despite the presence of the pandemic, which has disturbed all sectors, systems, structures, practices and processes globally, teaching and learning are continuing in South African institutions of higher education. The mantra 'no student will be left behind' has been developed following the determination to continue teaching and learning under Covid-19.

Following the outbreak of Covid-19 in the country, there has been a shift from contact classroom teaching to on line platforms. The University of Johannesburg (UJ), for example, stipulated that it would complete the first semester of the academic year of 2020 through online learning (UJ, 2020). Shay (2020) views online teaching as a way to help South African institutions of higher education to continue educating in this academic year. The platforms that are commonly used include Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype or webinars. Since the lockdown, effected in March 2020, diverse students, including those with disabilities, have been accessing learning mainly through online platforms. Service providers have also been contracted to provide students with data and learning resources such as laptops (Dell, 2020). However, though efforts have been made to support all diverse students, those from disadvantaged social backgrounds encounter difficulties related to connectivity (Harding & Brodie, 2020). This challenge also affects students with disabilities who are also disadvantaged. Universities South Africa (USAf)(2020) argues that some students from disadvantaged backgrounds have unconducive learning environments such as over-crowded homes, with inadequate amenities. Students with disabilities who are disadvantaged are no exception to these challenges, and their circumstances are

exacerbated because of their other additional requirements for learning.

Critical Disability Theory as framework

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) is the theoretical framework that was employed to underpin this paper. The proponents of critical disability studies comprise a range of post-conventionalists, post-structuralists and post-colonialists who draw many of their ideas from the foundational work of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). They seek to build on conventional disability studies, particularly in terms of the conceptualisation of disability and the issues that arise from how it is conceptualised. They acknowledge the achievements of previous scholars as pioneers in disability work, but also constructively critique and problematise specific disability issues to generate new ways of understanding disability. They aim to improve the living conditions of all diverse persons, including those with disabilities, whom they all agree are undervalued and discriminated against (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009).

Two theoretical concepts, namely context and intersectionality, were drawn from the particular theory and were specifically selected because they are relevant to underpin and explain students with disabilities' learning before and during Covid-19 in South African higher education. The CDT framework considers the material and local contextual conditions, primarily questions on the social practices and structures that result in the marginalisation of other social groups, including those with disabilities (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Moreover, the theory is focussed on the Global South perspective and non-Western settings (Meekosha, 2011). Proponents of the CDT seek to shift the understanding of issues of disability specifically, and inclusion and exclusion in general, from that of a Eurocentric

Global West perspective, to include voices from the South (Grech, 2015). The theory is primarily concerned with privileging the voice from the Global South, for it also to be heard (Grech, 2015). This will be useful in explaining and drawing an understanding of the South African higher education system broadly, and the structures and practice of teaching and learning specifically.

Through the focus on the South, the theoretical concept of context informs understanding of contextual differences, and consequently creates an understanding of the challenges confronted in South Africa, with its unique historical, political and socioeconomic background. Context, as explained in the CDT, emphasises consideration of a specific context, even when thinking about or suggesting intervention strategies. This is important because contexts of learning vary greatly. What might work in one context may not work in another. Thus, the theoretical concept assists in avoiding over-generalisations in terms of intervention, and in this paper, it could help in locating interventions within the specific context of South African higher education.

Context is a useful theoretical concept to inform an understanding of students with disabilities' learning because it provides an overview of how disability in itself is constructed and perceived in a specific environment (Sherry, 2009). Sherry (2009) asserts that disability should be located in a context since it is conceptualised differently depending on the context within which it exists. In African societies broadly, and South Africa specifically, the conception of disability is influenced by cultural tradition; as a result, persons with disabilities are often viewed as limited and associated with inability. The negative conception results in academics having low expectations of students with disabilities

(Howell, 2006) – even those with academic credentials to access higher education. When the academic staff in South African higher education institutions illustrate an unwillingness to support students with disabilities, and view them as a burden, it could be linked to the context within which disability is constructed and perceived. The issue of context therefore becomes critical in explaining some academic staff's behaviour towards students with disabilities, and the low self-esteem of those students themselves. Presently, these traits are exacerbated because of anxieties caused by Covid-19.

Intersectionality is useful for disrupting the notion that students with disabilities are a homogenous social group with 'special needs'. Critical disability scholars highlight intra/intersectionality to emphasise that disability intersects with other multiple identities including sexuality, race, gender, ethnicity or class. It should thus not be considered in isolation, but be placed in the centre of these identities (Sherry, 2009). This illustrates that students with disabilities are diverse in themselves, as influenced by their different home backgrounds, schooling backgrounds, and their unique experiences or exposure.

Intersectionality also creates an understanding that disability should be considered as fluid and ever-changing, an entity shared by all people with and without disabilities (Sherry, 2009). This implies is that even persons without disabilities can be limited in specific contexts because disability is not a rigid category. When an individual finds themselves limited in performing at one time or another, they are 'disabled'. Thus, students without disabilities could be limited in their learning during the pandemic as those with disabilities. Intersectionality further reflects that disability should not always be seen in terms of disadvantage. Goodley (2013) argues that individuals with disabilities could also be placed in positions of power. Disability should be seen as a

springboard; a space from which to think through a host of other political and theoretical issues that apply to all identities (Goodley, 2011). It is further explained that the 'disabled' body is not only understood in the context of oppression because persons with disabilities are intersectional subjects who also embody other positions, which can be powerful and valued in an ableist culture (Goodley, 2013). This is to say that some students with disabilities are not in positions of oppression, as might be overgeneralised. They have power in their other identities, or they are influenced by the power of other powerful people with whom they associate. Crenshaw (1989) thus argued that in terms of an understanding of intersectionality, disability should not always be viewed in light of disadvantage.

There has also been a shift from the view of double oppression (Crenshaw, 1989), whereby disability has always been considered the intersection of one axis of oppression with another. Mertens (2009) concurs that intersectionality can privilege and does not always yield double oppression. Understanding intersectionality in light of disability and privilege could disrupt the perspective of inequality based on gender and race, popularly manifested in African societies. There could be an understanding that a White female student with a disability from a high socioeconomic class could be privileged over a Black male student with a disability from a low socioeconomic class. Thus, intersectionality can help to explain students with disabilities' uniqueness of learning, even in cases where they have the same impairment.

As informed by intersectionality, students with disabilities' learning during the Covid-19 crisis will not be taken at face value but the deep underlying conditions of the students themselves, and their different environmental conditions, will be considered. Intersectionality helps to illustrate which category of students with disabilities are limited in their learning during the pandemic

specifically, and how they are encountering these challenges. The theoretical concept might illuminate why not all students with disabilities are limited. Covid-19 might even advantage some – rather than disadvantage them – in some ways in their learning. For example, those with physical and visual disabilities who were previously limited by the physical infrastructural obstacles might no longer be limited, by virtue of learning from their homes during the pandemic.

Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative design and data were collected by scanning both the South African and international literature available on Google Scholar and ProQuest, online resources, as well as dissertations in the UJ Library catalogue. International literature was included to gain a broader understanding of students with disabilities' learning in a wider context of higher education, outside South Africa .A combination of search terms– 'disability', 'students with disabilities', 'teaching', 'learning', 'South African higher education', 'Covid-19', 'Critical Disability Theory' and 'Universal Design for Learning' –were used to obtain relevant documents to review. The search yielded 176 texts, published between 1970 and 2020. The texts included South African and international books, book chapters, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, the Constitution of South Africa, research reports, as well as online resources like unpublished conference and discussion papers. Sixty-nine documents with texts related to the topic of students with disabilities' teaching and learning in higher education, years before and during the pandemic, were selected. The selected texts were not sufficient to generalise across all students with disabilities' learning, in all institutions of higher education in South Africa. However, the paper aligned with Bassey's (1981) thought that relevance is as good as generalisability, meaning that sufficient data could be drawn from relevant sources of data instead of many irrelevant

ones. It further implies that the issue is in the depth of analysis of the relevant literature and not in the volume of selected literature. Relevant literature was then synthesised and analysed, to establish the trends and significant themes.

Results

Students with disabilities' exclusion in learning before Covid-19

The trend in literature was that students with disabilities experienced challenges in their learning even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Literature converges in one finding, namely that the particular category of students was excluded in a number of ways from classroom teaching and learning (Mutanga, 2017; Mutanga & Walker, 2017; Mosia & Phasha, 2017). The main reason found to be underlying their exclusion was academics' lack of knowledge of disabilities (Crous, 2004; Matshediso, 2010; Haywood, 2014). Furthermore, there is also a lack of training, resulting in all diverse students, including those with disabilities, being taught in the same way. Lack of knowledge about disabilities and insufficient training among academic staff has compounded to exacerbate the exclusion of students with disabilities. The use of inaccessible media such as overhead slides and PowerPoint presentations as technologies in teaching in classrooms has been reported in the exclusion of students with disabilities and those with visual limitations, specifically in classroom teaching (Sukhray-Ely, 2008; Kajee, 2010).

Exclusion related to academic staff

There was a trend of exclusion in literature related to the academic staff's lack of training; often attributed to a lack of adequate funding (Mutanga, 2017). Yet it has also been revealed that while lack of funding contributes to lack of training, the staff members

themselves were not willing to include students with disabilities in their teaching, because they see them as a burden (Mutanga, 2017). Matshediso (2007) captured the academic staff's unwillingness to teach particular students. He noted that the disability unit's staff members in some institutions made efforts to train academic staff, but they did not attend the training sessions since attendance was not compulsory (Matshediso, 2007). It has also been noted that the academic staff's unwillingness to include students with disabilities in teaching is not a uniquely South African phenomenon. Even in developed countries, like the United Kingdom, the academic staff's attitude of unwillingness towards students with disabilities has been recorded (Kendall, 2017). The Constitution of South Africa (RSA, 1996), legislation such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act, No 4 of 2000 (Republic of South Africa, 2000), the policy of inclusive education, and White Paper 6: Special Needs Education Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (DoE, 2001b), all oppose the exclusion of diverse students in South African higher education. However, there has been persistent exclusion of students with disabilities, specifically, which starts from the level of basic education (Howell, 2006). Mutanga (2017) attributes this exclusion to a lack of inclusive national policy, particularly for students with disabilities; hence, there is a lack of obligation on the part of the academic staff, who are central to teaching and learning.

Other barriers to students with disabilities' learning

The common trend was that students with disabilities were not only excluded in learning because of academics' limited knowledge about disability and lack of training – there were other barriers in the teaching and learning context. These were barriers and other external circumstances beyond the academic staff's control, which also intensified students with disabilities' exclusion from teaching.

Tugli, Zungu, Goon and Anyanwu (2013) argue that students with disabilities received their study materials late, unlike their able-bodied counterparts. This is because converted or specialised materials are not always an option for students with disabilities' learning; they learn through available learning media. Students with total visual impairments, for example, learn through Braille when they do not have Job Access with Speech (JAWS) software on their laptops. Support staff first convert their learning tasks, from print to Braille, before it gets to the student. When the student has completed the task in Braille, work is converted to print for the lecturer to access it and give the student feedback. The process is time-consuming, and many unseen obstacles could occur, hence the delay. Mokiwa and Phasha (2012) also observed that the JAWS software does not read signs in mathematics and science. This means that an assistive device which is meant to enable their learning, limits students with visual limitations. It is therefore clear that apart from the limitations imposed on these students by academics, they also experienced other barriers and challenges, which adversely affected their learning.

It is also important to reflect that despite the structures put in place for these students, such as disability units, they are limited in their own different ways (Fotim Report, 2011; Mutanga, 2017). Firstly, not all institutions have such support structures, even before the Covid-19 outbreak. Some institutions were constrained by funding, and they were limited to the extent that they could not enrol students with certain disabilities, such as those with hearing impairments, who are expensive to support (Matshedisho, 2007). Sign language interpreters are scarce (Ndlovu, 2017) because of the expense that goes with the service as disability support. In essence, even before Covid-19, disability support was only provided by those institutions that could afford to do so.

It is therefore clear that students with disabilities' learning exclusion in the South African context of higher education did not start during the crisis of Covid-19. In fact, assistive devices are bought through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), a grant that has an allowance specifically for assistive devices (NSFAS, 2013); and deserving students with disabilities therefore still buy assistive devices through NSFAS, even during the Covid-19 crisis. Thus, exclusion is not in the pandemic's purse, but in challenges that were evident before Covid-19. One would argue that Covid-19 has not caused the exclusion of students with disabilities in learning, it only exacerbated a crisis that already existed.

Students with disabilities' exclusion during Covid-19

The trend in literature reveals that students with disabilities' support has been limited during Covid-19, and support for persons with disabilities has been disrupted in general (World Health Organisation, 2020). Regardless, an effort by disability unit staff members to support students with disabilities in South African higher education has been made and is continuing during the pandemic, provided online (Disability Unit, 2020). Teaching for students with disabilities is also online, as for all other students. It has been left to individual academic staff members to see how they creatively cater to all students in their classes. This implies that there is a lack of support for academics to include students with disabilities during the pandemic. Some students with disabilities, especially those with mild sensory limitations and physical disabilities, have access to online platforms, which are used by many universities currently. This category of students had access to learning in mainstream classes, with minimal disability support, even before Covid-19. However, there are categories of students

with profound impairments, such as those with total visual and hearing loss, whom the online platforms exclude. Most online platforms require eyesight or hearing; thus, though the particular students have connectivity in their homes, they could remain excluded during Covid-19. For the specific category of students with disabilities, their exclusion is no different from before the pandemic in their experiences of classroom learning. One would thus argue that some categories of students with disabilities are confronting, and will continue to confront, severe barriers and obstacles that hinder their learning.

As mentioned, literature revealed that the challenges imposed by Covid-19 are not only for students with disabilities but also for the academic staff, whose difficulties were exacerbated during this time. As highlighted, the academic staff lack training to teach students with disabilities, making them unaware of the complexities associated with a student with a disability; for example, students may have the same disability but different learning needs (Picard, 2015). It therefore requires knowledge and skills to use different online teaching strategies to be inclusive of all students. Moreover, some students have disabilities that are not visible, and they choose not to disclose them because it is not compulsory to do so. All these complexities are left in the hands of the academic staff to deal with.

Discussion of findings

The discussion was informed by intersectionality and context as theoretical tools drawn from the CDT. The concepts assisted in illuminating why students with disabilities were excluded before Covid-19, and why their exclusion has been exacerbated during the pandemic. The concepts primarily illustrated why the exclusion was intense for some students with disabilities, but not all, before and during the pandemic.

Using intersectionality as a torchlight, the issue of some categories of students with disabilities being able to access online platforms during Covid-19 could be explained in light of disability intersecting with other identities of privilege. As explained earlier, disability can intersect with other identities that privilege rather than oppress (Sherry, 2009; Goodley, 2013). Thus, students with disabilities who have access to online platforms and are not limited by Covid-19 could be those who are privileged by their home background, their previous schooling background, and their exposure and experience. Due to exposure and enlightenment, the particular students might have used online platforms such as Zoom to communicate with their peers, siblings or parents within their elite backgrounds, even before Covid-19. When it came to using these tools for learning during the pandemic, it was not a new learning curve. It is argued that students from advantaged backgrounds, in general, have no limitations in formal learning because of the culture in their privileged environments. They develop habitus and social capital as assets, which they easily use to navigate their new learning environments (Bernstein, 1990).

Yet for those who are limited in terms of accessing online learning platforms, the opposite scenario is true. These could be students – like other students without disabilities – who have a disadvantaged background. Those who have the double oppression of disability intersecting with positions of disadvantage in society are not only limited by online platforms but also internet connectivity. For this reason, they miss out on a number of lectures. It could therefore be argued that it would be an over-generalisation that all students with disabilities are limited in their learning, both before and during Covid-19. For those with mild disabilities and those who are privileged, Covid-19 might have negatively affected them but not to the same degree as those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Besides seeing the exclusion and inclusion of some in light of intersectionality, exclusion could also be explained from the perspective of context; different contexts of higher education institutions in themselves. In the CDT, consideration of the context is vital because it differs from one to the next. In South Africa, there has not been a total institutional transformation in higher education to include all diverse students broadly, and in teaching and learning particularly (Ndlovu, 2017). Walton (2016) argues that South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in Africa, and Covid-19 could only exacerbate and entrench inequalities (Graham, 2020). Students with disabilities who have access to online platforms and institutional support during Covid-19 could be those in advantaged institutions with better resources and adequate disability units. However, some disability units find it difficult to function because of inadequate funding (Fotim Report, 2011). Despite this challenge, one institution supported more than ten disability categories, and was awarded a prize for offering the best support for those with disabilities in the whole country by the Department of Higher Education and Training, (Ndlovu, 2017). Students with disabilities in such institutions could be the ones who are still strongly supported during Covid-19.

The challenges confronting the academic staff could also be explained in light of intersectionality and context. By virtue of intersectionality, there have always been lecturers willing to include and those unwilling to include students with disabilities in their teaching (Matshediso, 2007). Moreover, those who are unwilling may not be expected to include these students during Covid-19, when they are pressured to adapt to a 'new normal'. Yet despite the challenges of a lack of training, those who are willing often go the extra mile to include such students. Furthermore, because of differing contexts, some universities are training their academic staff to teach online; those with such support may not have the same challenges as those left to fare on their own. It is

therefore clear that academic staff also face challenges in different ways, consequently impacting on their teaching and the learning of students with disabilities differently.

Proposed intervention: Universal Design for Learning

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is proposed as a way of teaching that could assist in the inclusion of both privileged students with disabilities, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds – not only during Covid-19, but also as a 'new normal' for them. The UDL is a teaching approach designed in America by the Centre for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in 1998 (CAST, 2011). It has its foundation in the architectural concept of the Universal Design (UD), “a framework for the design of places, things, information, communication and policy to be usable by the widest range of people” (Fotim Report, 2011:98). UD is a practice in which spaces, technological devices and objects are designed to suit all people with and without disabilities (Mace, 1988), and is thus a movement that seeks to include all people in the physical, social and intellectual space from the outset (Centre for Universal Design, 1997). The design is meant to inform structures, practices, processes, policies and systems that are accessible, suitable and inclusive for all diverse people with and without disabilities.

Seven principles guide the UD, and they are listed as equitable use, flexibility in use, simplicity and intuition, perceptible information, tolerance of error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use (Centre for Universal Design, 1997). Story, Muller and Mace (1998:4) added that the principles are also used “to evaluate the existing or new design”. It implies that even existent structures, practices, processes and systems could be improved through the principles of UD. One would argue, therefore, that where the UD principles are applied from

the outset, there is a high level of inclusivity for diverse people, including those with disabilities.

The UDL is thus a teaching approach born out of UD, and it too is designed to meet the learning needs of diverse learners from the outset. It is a teaching approach that emphasises flexible goals, methods, assessments and materials. It involves thinking about and planning for all diverse students, even before they come into the classroom (Eagleton, 2008). In UDL, there is an understanding that human beings have different learning styles and preferences (Rose & Meyer, 2000). Rose and Meyer (2000) contend that when teaching practice is informed by the principle of UDL, there is a consideration of individuals' backgrounds, abilities and disabilities from the start, making for an accessible curriculum. With such a curriculum in place, teaching methods, assessment, and even the language of teaching and learning could suit all students, including those with disabilities. Planning from the outset could even help save time that is spent on academic accommodations and adjustments. Thus, UDL is an approach that optimises opportunities for learning and the key to its success is the creation of maximum flexibility from the start (Rose & Meyer, 2000).

The teaching approach has core principles, which include flexibility, engagement, representation, action and expression (CAST, 2011). The core principles speak to consideration of diversity and active engagement of all diverse students in *learning*. This is possible because barriers will be removed from the outset. As informed by the core principle of flexibility, specifically, UDL is further designed around the principles of multiple ways of representing information, multiple ways of engaging with learning materials, and multiple ways of action and expression (Lyner-Cleophas, 2020). It implies that by virtue of flexibility, there are multiple ways through which teaching can be designed and

conducted. All students in their diversities can thus find a method that best suits their learning needs in teaching practice. When the principles of UDL are incorporated into teaching from the outset, all diverse students, including those with disabilities, can be enabled to access effective learning. Thus, with the incorporation of the principles of UDL into teaching, the notion of a 'one-size-fits-all' curricular (CAST, 2011) could be disrupted, as teaching is diversified for the benefit of all students, with and without disabilities.

Possibility of UDL in the context of South African higher education

It is important to consider whether the UDL teaching approach would be appropriate in the South African context of higher education, since the context is different from the American one, where the concept was first developed. Despite being American by origin, UDL is not a new teaching strategy in South Africa. Two separate workshops on UDL are reported to have taken place at the University of Cape Town (Dalton, Mackenzie & Kahonde, 2012) and the Eastern Cape (Song, 2017), respectively. These workshops were held with teachers and therapists in basic education. Moreover, Song (2017) explains that practices and pedagogies aligning with the principles of UDL are used in special-needs schools in South Africa. It is also argued that some teachers in inclusive educational settings have applied the principle of UDL in their teaching, without knowing they were using the specific approach (Song, 2017). Thus, though the UDL approach has not been used at the level of higher education, it has been successfully used in basic education. The approach could also work for higher education as the boundaries are porous in the two systems. Furthermore, since the approach has been successfully used without awareness, it suggests the teaching strategy could be implemented with more expertise when

academic staff in higher education are made aware and trained in the instructional approach. The Fotim Report (2011) has agreed with Pliner and Johnson's (2004) view that the UD, broadly, and the UDL in particular, are necessary to inform South African higher education curricula if all diverse students are to be included in teaching and learning.

UDL for students with disabilities' learning

The UDL could benefit all students, and it could be particularly beneficial for students with disabilities' learning during Covid-19 and beyond. Lyner-Cleophas (2020) argues that teaching could be presented through multimedia formats, such as digital means, pictures, music, captioning, audio and pre-recordings. When available, students with disabilities can access learning in any of the ways in which teaching is represented. Those who cannot hear, for example, can learn through pictures, while those with mild visual impairments could utilise teaching that is audio-recorded. Informed by the principle of using multi-learning materials, different media such as voice notes, SMS, WhatsApp, blogs, group work, service learning and vlogs (Lyner-Cleophas,2020) could be used by academic staff to reach out to different categories of students with disabilities. WhatsApp and voice notes could particularly be more accessible because of the technology of smart-phones, which even students with a disability possess. Telephone calls could also be used as informed by the principle of multi-learning ways. For instance, communication by telephone could promote learning for those with severe visual limitations who can capitalise on the compensatory sense of hearing.

When multiple means of action and expression are incorporated into teaching, it could be useful for students with disabilities. Alternative modes of teaching, other than online platforms, could

be considered for those who cannot access them. Students with mild disabilities might demonstrate their knowledge and present it through various expressions such as essays, verbal inputs, web design, and tasks submitted via email, SMS, WhatsApp, blogs, vlogs, and PowerPoint presentations (Lyner-Cleophas, 2020). Thus, even when contact classes are limited due to Covid-19, when different ways of teaching, media, and ways of expression are used, as informed by the core principle of flexibility in UDL, students with disabilities can access learning.

The incorporation of technology into teaching could also add value to students with disabilities' learning during the pandemic. It is argued that UDL, as a teaching approach, requires maximum use of technology (Eagleton, 2008). When the academic staff from the outset consider the principle of maximising technology, this could be of benefit to students with disabilities. This time of crisis, in which social distancing is emphasised, calls for students and academic staff to operate with technology more than never before. However, in the South African context of higher education, academic staff could be limited in using different technologies because the way of teaching that has primarily been used before Covid-19 is the lecture method, presented in large lecture halls (Maringe, 2017). As already highlighted, this kind of teaching is most favourable for 'normal' students and has been found to exclude those with disabilities. Thus, different technology being incorporated into teaching from the outset will be an alternative that could benefit all students, including those with disabilities. Incorporating technology whereby those with disabilities can utilise their other compensatory senses would be ideal.

Incorporating the idea of the socio cultural context of learning, to structure the practice of teaching, could improve students with

disabilities' learning during Covid-19. UDL principles are also framed in Vygotsky's work of how learning takes place. This is in relation to the socio cultural contexts of the students, and how they could be utilised to influence learning (Vygotsky, 1978; 1996). Consideration of the socio cultural context in teaching is important, especially for individual students with disabilities whose learning capacities are doubted because of their impairment-related disadvantages. In the South African context of higher education, research revealed that historically disadvantaged students in general, of whom students with disabilities are part, lacked social and cultural capital and habitus to access learning in higher education (Czerniewicz & Brown 2011; Fataar 2012). Yet this view was later disrupted by Cross and Atinde's (2015) study, in which the authors argue that historically disadvantaged students also bring along habitus and social capital from their disadvantaged backgrounds, which they creatively use to navigate the university environment and access learning. It is argued that by virtue of limited resources in their home environments, they bring the habitus of sharing and using their limited resources to the maximum benefit of learning (Cross, 2018). Employing the disability experience as habitus, the academic staff could also design teaching approaches that are inclusive for students with disabilities. This could be particularly relevant during the Covid-19 pandemic when students themselves creatively use their habitus and social capital to meet the academic staff halfway for effective learning.

While UDL has possibilities for inclusion of all diverse students in learning, it has a limitation that cannot be glossed over. This limitation, as expounded by Boone and Higgins (2007), is that, while UDL principles can enable access to the curriculum, it does not automatically enable access to learning. Access to curriculum must not be mistaken with access to learning, meaning UDL principles can be applied or used to inform teaching practice, but

learning on the part of the students is not guaranteed. In other words, while UDL is a respected teaching approach, using the approach does not guarantee learning. The academic staff should be aware that they should move beyond the approach to establish whether learning is taking place by way of feedback from students with disabilities.

Training academic staff on incorporating UDL in their teaching practice

For the academic staff to incorporate the principles of UDL in their teaching, there is a need for training. It was determined that academic staff lacked training to include students with disabilities before Covid-19 (Matshediso, 2007). The pandemic, which no one anticipated, is not expected to transform the academic staff overnight to facilitate a teaching practice that can include all students. However, when they are trained in UDL and how to include its principles as they design their courses, it could help them to include diverse students from the outset, including students with disabilities. Training could be done through online workshops facilitated by those who have been involved in such training before, as highlighted above (Song, 2017). It could be argued that training academic staff on UDL, and its incorporation into teaching in general can go a long way, not only during Covid-19, but even beyond.

Extensive consultation with students with disabilities who have a lived experience

As UDL is incorporated into the teaching practice, students with disabilities who have a unique way of learning should be extensively consulted. Their learning should not be taken for granted because even with the same disabilities, they may require different support; hence, the need to consult with individual students. Giving primacy to those with lived experience of

disability is seen as a bottom-up approach, which is one of the ways to dismantle oppression for persons with disabilities (Devlin & Potheir, 2006). Devlin and Potheir (2006) and Shildrick (2012) share the view of Hosking (2008), that the voice of those with disabilities should be privileged, and they need to be heard. Traditionally, disability has been viewed and understood from the able-bodied perspective (Hosking, 2008). Titchkosky (2003) similarly argues that the voice of those with disabilities is contested, suppressed and silenced by dominant voices in the mainstream society.

When those with disabilities say things that those in positions of power want to hear, they are listened to. When they voice something mainstream society does not want to hear, it is considered an inappropriate response to disability. Thus, the voice of those with disabilities is subsumed by the able-bodied. This has led to people without disabilities speaking for those with disabilities, steadfastly contested in the critical disability scholarship. Students with disabilities represent an important source of information and advice on how to deal with their learning experience during Covid-19 and thereafter. They talk from a lived experience of disability and know what is suitable for their specific needs. Dialogue and consultation with these students can certainly minimise the burden on the teaching staff and lead to more effective learning experiences. The 'nothing for us without us' slogan should have a place in this time of uncertainty if the particular students are to be included in the present teaching and learning online platforms. Thus, overall, it is hoped that incorporating UDL principles as a proposed intervention might help alleviate the problem of exclusion of students with disabilities during Covid-19 and beyond in higher education in South Africa. This could be one of the ways through which the social development of students with disabilities as a marginalised social group could be enhanced.

A 'new normal' for students with disabilities' learning in higher education

Times of great disruption, including those resulting from global pandemics such as Covid-19, could create opportunities for rethinking, re-imagining, recreating and learning, and unlearning the old, in terms of teaching and learning in higher education. Building on this argument, students with disabilities could gain a 'new normal' that could offer better learning opportunities as a result. Before Covid-19, the particular students' learning in institutions of higher education in South Africa relied on the support provided by disability unit staff members (Fotim Report, 2011). In fact, a study by Ndlovu (2017) revealed the particular students often faced challenges in workplaces because they had significant support at institutions of higher education, which did not extend to workplaces. The Covid-19 pandemic reduced this support, even from institutions of higher education, leaving students with disabilities with opportunities for self-discovery. The removal of support could be seen as providing opportunities for students with disabilities to discover themselves in more relevant ways in terms of their capabilities and what they could do without support. This crisis might be an opportunity for students with disabilities to develop independent learning skills, in which they do not rely on the support provided by disability unit staff for their learning. Covid-19 can be viewed in light of the opportunities it presents for adaptation to the 'new normal' for students with disabilities' inclusion in more favourable ways than before the pandemic. They could use self-reliant skills for learning beyond the higher education space, and they are not limited by integrated settings for learning.

Students with physical disabilities and visually impaired students' learning was previously hindered by inaccessible physical structures in higher education in South Africa (Engelbrecht & de Beer, 2014) and in places of work (Swartz & Schneider, 2006;

National Buildings Regulations (NBR), 2008). The pandemic has unveiled that it is possible for diverse students to learn from home, including those with disabilities. It is argued that a lot of learning time was previously lost as these students negotiated inaccessible buildings to eventually get access to learning venues (Hall & Belch, 2000). Covid-19 has revealed that it is possible for those who were severely excluded by the university physical structures to learn from their homes, thereby giving them more time for learning. As Swartz and Schneider(2006) argue, retrofitting buildings to be accessible to students with disabilities was a far-fetched dream because of a lack of funds; Covid-19 could solve the obstacle of inaccessibility of physical structures for students with physical and total visual limitations. Thus, while this pandemic has certainly magnified the challenges related to learning for all diverse students, the 'new normal' world that is envisioned can provide opportunities that might be favourable for some categories of students with disabilities.

Conclusion

The paper reflected that students with disabilities had been excluded from learning in the South African context of higher education, even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Covid-19 only exacerbated the effects and rendered the impact and inequalities more transparent – even among the students with disabilities themselves. It emphasised the uneven dynamics and varying effects of the pandemic on different categories of students in the education system.

The paper proposed the incorporation of the UD principles broadly, and UDL specifically, as one of the ways that could be useful in enabling diverse students, and those with disabilities, to gain access to learning. This is because the UDL principles enable faculty staff to think, design and implement a teaching practice that

considers the needs of all students from the outset. They are inclusive in nature, and though the context of higher education in South Africa is not yet fully transformed to include all diverse students in teaching and learning, UDL emphasises all students' rights from the outset. Overall, students with disabilities' learning may not be reduced to academic staff's limitations or the students themselves, but it is a complex issue that requires efforts in rethinking, recreating, unlearning and relearning among all stakeholders involved in higher education in South Africa. Extensive consultation with students with disabilities with a lived experience of disability, and intensive training of academic staff are proposed as strategies for inclusion.

It is concluded that students with disabilities are one of the categories that endure most of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. This finding calls for an empirical study, in which individual students have an opportunity to share their lived experiences of the effects of the pandemic and provide recommendations from their lived experience. It should be understood that the Covid-19 crisis is not 'one man's problem' but a problem for everyone involved. It is therefore vital to listen to all voices, including the voices of students with disabilities.

Acknowledgement

This work is based on the research supported wholly by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant Numbers: 120773)

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