Asynchronous Pre-Service Teaching Practicum and Work-Integrated Learning amid COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: In South Africa – as is also the case worldwide – schools are closed due to the current COVID-19 pandemic but learning is open. Hence, in a bid to avoid disruption to the academic calendar – which may result in postponing or cancelling teaching practicums – institutions of higher learning, particularly those running teacher education programmes (TEPs), have embraced the idea of conducting teaching practice (TP) online. Pre-service teachers – who usually visit schools for their TP in order to gain work experience – have, therefore, been forced to conduct their teaching practicums not only online but asynchronously. The following questions arose: Is there any link between the asynchronous pre-service teaching practicum, characterised by lack of engagement between the teacher and the learner, and the tenets of work-integrated learning (WIL)? And what is the implication for teacher education programme developers? The authors sought to investigate the impact of the asynchronous model of TP adopted in South African TEPs on adequately preparing pre-service teachers for future teaching practice. The authors also investigated the contribution of this teaching model to the realisation of WIL objectives – particularly preparing pre-service teachers for authentic classroom teaching experiences. Underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative research approach, narrative inquiry as research design, was followed. Moreover, purposive sampling was employed. The data were collected by means of reflective narrative essays and documentary evidence. The main findings revealed that there is a mismatch between the asynchronous teaching model and WIL. The findings also showed that the asynchronous model of teaching practicum was beneficial to TEPs, as it helped to keep learning open; however, it did not provide the required experience and serious engagements for authentic classroom teaching and learning experiences.

Keywords: Asynchronous Teaching, Teaching Practicum, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), Experiential Learning, Teacher Education, Pre-Service Teachers

1. Introduction and Background

South African higher education (SAHE) is constantly persuaded of the need to produce good-quality graduates who can address various forms of social, economic and technological development. More so, South Africa needs graduates who can develop the education sector and system through the production of a generation of teachers (for primary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities) who can navigate through the voyages of transformation and global development (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2013).

Transformation is experienced differently in geographical areas due to various political, cultural and social forces highlighted in scholarly research and media documentations on the "crisis in higher education" (Mok, 2015). The emphasis is on how higher education (HE) is standing on a cliff, either waiting to disappear into the chasm of insignificance or needing to take off, soaring to new heights in an information and communications technology (ICT) revolution, the latter currently coined the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) (Bagarukayo & Kalema, 2015). Of greater concern is how SAHE can adapt by reviewing its structures and functions to change its culture to align with transformation, changing realities and social forces brought about by the 4IR.

This paper is located within the digital educational technology choices in asynchronous teaching and learning of teaching practicums/teaching practice as a preparatory phase for pre-service teachers in HE. The terms "practicum", "teaching practice", "student teaching", "practice teaching", "field experience" and "clinical experiences" have been used interchangeably in literature to refer to the time that student teachers spend in schools as part of their TEPs in HEIs. In South Africa, the term "work-integrated learning" (WIL) is used to denote intentional and organised learning in a work setting – in this case, a school classroom – which involves learning from practice and in practice, gaining normal school-work experience (Gravett & Jiyane, 2019). In this paper, the authors use the terms "teaching practice" and "WIL" situated within the African literature. The curriculum for TEPs, known as the Bachelor of Education (BEd), adopts an integrative design – modules that include normal course work and WIL to re-enforce teaching and learning so as to produce teachers in the country (Darling-Hammond, 2005). In South Africa, students are placed in blocks to schools during their years of study. In this study, the authors focussed on third-year students in their undergraduate programme.

A collaboration exists between the university, the selected schools and the Department of Basic Education to allow for schools to be used as "teaching schools" (Gravett & Jiyane, 2019). The concept of a "teaching school" stems from the Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa, 2011–2015 (Department of Basic Education [DBE] and Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2011). The Framework suggests the solidification of teaching practice and enhances learning and teaching experiences to strengthen professional practice in the teaching profession. Furthermore, teaching practice as a method of teaching from theorised teaching pedagogies is explained in the Revised Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (DHET, 2015). In teaching practice, students are expected to participate by getting involved in the development of lesson plans and teaching aids and teaching learners, while teachers within the school mentor and monitor, observe, give guidance on class management, and provide feedback. The universities where these students are registered conduct the formal assessment (Gravett & Jiyane, 2019).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, choices had to be made as to how to conduct teaching practice in South African universities. Organisations locally and internationally – for example, the World Health Organization (WHO), The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), and Universities South Africa (USAf) – in 2020 recommended that schools and universities plan for continuing education virtually and remotely to save the academic year, as keeping students in the classroom was no longer an option during this difficult time of social distancing (Bender, 2020; UNESCO, 2020a, 2020b; USAF, 2020). This was also the case in South Africa.

The difficult choices and adjustments to be made by education managers were not based on only contextual decisions related to the move to remote learning and teaching but also human behaviour in the management of the spread of the virus and the mental state and wellness of all stakeholders in higher and basic education. More importantly, as universities are preparing to move to remote teaching, the most focal issues for its success are affordability, connectivity, assessment, and student support (Cloete, 2020). The data reported in this paper provide an opportunity to zoom in on the preparation and assessment of a WIL module in an asynchronous format, and practice-based recommendations are made to academic faculties and support structures on the re-designing of WIL modules to fit teaching in the COVID-19 era and the 4IR. The authors are concerned about the compromises that may have occurred because of the migration from face-to-face teaching to asynchronous teaching practice (ATP) and what this might mean for producing capable teachers who should take the country forward amidst transformation imperatives, both locally and internationally.

This paper broadly covers pedagogical technological choices that should be "good" and "practical" for the South African initial preparatory teaching curriculum, the diverse student populace attracted to the teaching profession, and institutional choices as regards digital pedagogies and virtual learning spaces. Thought-provoking questions are raised, and recommendations are made.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is to explore how the alternate teaching practice exercise to continue with teaching during the COVID-19 era has impacted the conventional school-based teaching practice and the quality of the preparatory teaching programme in South Africa so as to take these lessons to make important curricula choices in the new asynchronous style. This also greatly affects the collaboration agreements between universities, schools and the Department of Basic Education guidelines on the establishment of teaching schools. Two questions are explored:

- What impact does the asynchronous teaching practicum have on the WIL objectives for teacher education programmes (TEPs)?
- What is the implication for TEPs and curriculum developers?

2. Literature Review

There is no doubt that the outbreak of COVID-19 triggered the adoption of online technologies for teaching and learning in institutions of higher learning in South Africa and other parts of the world. According to Legg-Jack (2020), the outbreak of this pandemic altered work and school and the way people live and do

business. Corroborating this, Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) claim that this has led to the closure of schools, colleges and universities in Africa and other parts of the world.

To curtail the extent to which the virus spreads, different nations around the world introduced lockdowns and the practice of social distancing to discourage gathering of persons at specific points (Ferrel & Ryan, 2020). This approach has caused more harm than good to the smooth and effective administration of several organisations globally, and educational institutions that provide on-campus, face-to-face teaching and learning have borne the brunt.

Consequently, to circumvent the impact of lockdowns and to keep academic activities afloat, universities in Africa and other parts of the world embraced remote online teaching and learning through the use of ICT facilities.

2.1 Remote Online Teaching and Learning

Remote online teaching and learning is an approach to teaching and learning that happens outside the normal traditional classroom setting and provides an avenue for teachers and students to remain connected and engaged with the programme content whilst working in the comfort of their own home (Ray, 2020). This method of teaching and learning has been deemed beneficial to educational institutions, particularly during crises that emanate from contextual interruptions and pandemics (Dahya, 2016; Fox, 2004; Hallgarten, 2020; Moon, Kavanagh, Jeffrey, Gebbels & Korsgaard, 2016). Technologies used for this method of education include, but are not limited to, video-conferencing software, discussion boards, learning management systems (LMS), or applications such as FaceTime, Google Hangouts, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and WhatsApp. These technologies allow for synchronous and asynchronous connections where trainers and their students are separated by distance and time (Ray, 2020). These digital tools are used for both synchronous and asynchronous learning (Hrastinski, 2008; Ray, 2020).

2.2 Asynchronous Teaching Practicums and Work-Integrated Learning

Asynchronous teaching entails an online teaching and learning approach where participants do not have real-time communication simultaneously (Daniel, 2020; Martin, Polly, & Ritzhaupt, 2020). This type of online teaching gives both teachers and students the litheness to attend to other areas of demand, such as study, family, and work, alongside other commitments (Daniel, 2020; Hrastinski, 2008). The following tools are used in this method of teaching: e-mails, discussion boards, e-books, forums, audio visuals, web links and blogs, and analogue and digital document libraries (McGreal & Elliott, 2008; Obasa et al., 2013). This method is considered flexible, as it gives room for cognitive participation as well as increased reflection and the ability to process information (Hrastinski, 2008). In asynchronous teaching, modules are structured in a way that helps students to be organised and learn at their own pace, as there is no schedule conflict, and the programme is considered doable (Karkar-Esperat, 2018; Martin et al., 2020). In her study, Karkar-Esperat (2018) revealed that the nature of asynchronous learning is such that it alleviates student stress and increases their success in the completion of their respective programmes.

However, despite the commendation and applause accorded to asynchronous online learning over the years, some studies have revealed that this method of learning has various challenges (Karkar-Esperat, 2018; Legg-Jack, 2020; Marble et al., 2016; Obasa et al., 2013), including lack of interaction between

various stakeholders in the learning cycle; poor motivation as a result of lack of interaction with classmates; instructor absence; and low student participation (Karkar-Esperat, 2018; Legg-Jack, 2020; Martin et al., 2020). Other challenges include lack of student exposure to practise what they have learnt; ineffective approach to the delivery of technical training; lack of prompt feedback from both peers and instructors; lack of clarity of concepts; and instructor unpreparedness (Karkar-Esperat, 2018; Legg-Jack, 2020; Obasa et al., 2013). Interaction at different levels increases learning outcomes and motivates participants in online learning (Daniel, 2020; Karkar-Esperat, 2018; Legg-Jack, 2020). One major feature of online learning is interaction; hence, in planning an online programme, attention must not be given to only the course content but also the different levels of interaction that exist (Daniel, 2020). Asynchronous teaching and learning, therefore, should prioritise interaction at various levels, as suggested by Daniel, particularly between pre-service teachers and learners, as interaction forms part of the experiences that will prepare pre-service teachers for the world of work.

Over the years, scholars have called for an innovative kind of pedagogy and curriculum that would bridge the gap between acquired knowledge (taught knowledge) in TEPs and required knowledge (expected/experiential knowledge) in the workplace (in this case, schools) (Merisi & Pillay, 2020), and WIL is perceived to be the solution to this mismatch. Work-integrated learning is defined as a pedagogical practice that prioritises the integration of experiences in educational and workplace settings (Billett, 2009; Kennedy, Billett, Gherardi & Grealish, 2015). It emerged as a response to the call for a pedagogical strategy that enhances student learning and development, as it provides students with the opportunity to combine theory and practice in a real-world work environment (Cooper, Orrell, & Bowden, 2010). In the South African context, the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa, 2011–2025 (RSA DoBE & DHET, 2011, p. 3), for example, requires universities in South Africa to offer high-quality programmes that can lead to meaningful development for teachers. In addition, the HEQC review of 2007 also indicated that conceptual coherence and strong links between theory and practice are evidence of quality TEPs (CHE, 2010, pp. 59, 95-96). Furthermore, studies have shown that, although universities run teaching practicums, pre-service teachers' exposure to the classroom environment, which forms part of their preparation for future teaching practice, is minimal and unplanned compared to campus-based courses. With the little exposure they have to classrooms during teaching practicums, pre-service teachers and their mentors are mostly neglected to work out daily teaching practices on their own. This is premised on the assumption that good teaching practices are "caught rather than taught" (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Consequently, all TEPs in South Africa have been mandated to improve and revise their curriculum. This improvement is meant to focus on some cardinal areas, which include subject knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, as well as properly supervised and mentored school-based teaching practice (RSA DHET, 2011, 2015).

In this paper, it is argued that properly supervised and mentored school-based teaching practice or practicum is indispensable if TEPs are going to fulfil their mandate to the nation. A study by Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb and Wyckoff (2009) revealed that it is beneficial for TEPs to be directly linked to practice (school-based practicums). Darling-Hammond (2006) identifies three critical features of such programmes: 1) right integration among courses and between course work and clinical work in schools; 2) extensive and intensively supervised and mentored clinical work integrated with course work; and 3) close, proactive relationships with schools that serve diverse learners effectively and develop and model

good teaching. The foregoing has placed importance on the incorporation of WIL into the TEP. The CHE (2011, p. 78) defines WIL as "an educational approach that aligns academic and workplace practices for the mutual benefit of students and workplaces". Within the context of teacher education, WIL is conceptualised as a "purposeful, organised, supervised and assessed educational activity required for the completion of an initial teacher education programme that integrates theoretical learning with its applications in the workplace (i.e., school and community settings)" (CHE, 2011, p. 78). To examine how initial TEPs were preparing pre-service teachers to teach in South African schools, JET undertook a large-scale survey of final-year B.Ed. students in 2013. It was found that only a few of the TEPs were structurally and conceptually coherent: there were variations in the depth and breadth of instruction and learning subject and pedagogical knowledge. One of the major findings was that WIL was inadequate across these programmes.

The Initial Teacher Education Research Project (ITERP) further emphasised a need for pre-service teachers to be provided with real school and classroom learning experiences (Deacon, 2015). Hammerness, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) argue that much of what teachers need to learn must be learnt in and from practice rather than in preparing for practice. The foregoing places emphasis on acquainting pre-service teachers with authentic classroom teaching experiences, which, in the authors' view, the alternate teaching practicum via the asynchronous model of teaching cannot achieve.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this study, the experiential learning theory of Kolb (1984) was employed as theoretical framework. This theory provided a new direction for educational research and practice by focussing on the role played by experience in the learning process. Emphasis is placed on the importance of learning from concrete experience, and Kolb argues that learning is a process, not an outcome and that learners learn better when their learning experiences are influenced by every part of this process. This theorist further argues that learning is "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). This theory is relevant to this research because the authors' interest is to ensure that pre-service teachers become experiential educators with adequate exposure to authentic classroom teaching experience. According to this theory, becoming an experiential educator requires the teacher to conceptualise "educating" as a relationship. Amid the current pandemic and in a rush to adopt available technologies, it may be tempting to ignore the fact that teaching is above all a profound human relationship. The authors argue that this relationship or interaction is indispensable if effective and productive teachers are to be produced. Palmer (1997) defines this relationship between teacher and student as a willingness to expose one's inner world; to honour students as complex, relational beings; and to masterfully interweave these worlds with the course content. Again, this theory conceptualises teaching or educating as learner centred. Scholars within this school of thought have a constructivist view of knowledge – that is, teaching should be undertaken around the experience of learners, meaning that teachers must meet learners "where they are", both physically and intellectually. As this theory places emphasis on interaction or relationship as part of what counts as classroom experience, the authors deem this theory to be relevant in investigating the impact of the asynchronous teaching practicum on pre-service teachers' readiness to teach in the classroom, particularly relating to the aspect of WIL.

4. Methodology

This research is located within the interpretive paradigm. A qualitative research approach was followed. According to Thanh and Thanh (2015, p. 26), such an approach is a suitable means for exploring reality. The authors chose this approach because it enabled them to explore reality in terms of what the participants considered to be realities in their current practices of teaching during the COVID-19 era as they prepared for future teaching practices. Data were generated from narrative essays and documentary evidence. The participants were required to write a narrative essay (in form of reflections) on their alternate teaching practicum (also referred to as asynchronous teaching practice [ATP] in this paper). The essay was written towards the last week of their asynchronous teaching practicum in October 2020.

Documentary evidence, on the other hand, entailed recording lessons and taking photographs while teaching. Each participant recorded four of their lessons (Units 1–4). Each Unit was divided into three recordings: introduction (three to five minutes); presentation of the lesson (10 to 15 minutes); and conclusion (two to three minutes). These recordings were sent via e-mail to the university TP assessor. Moreover, the participants were required to take two photographs of themselves during their preparation for teaching and while teaching. Purposive sampling was employed to select third-year students. The inclusion criteria were Internet access and previous experience (school-based teaching practicum). These criteria helped in producing a range of responses on pre-service teachers' reflections on the alternate/asynchronous teaching practicum. The participant group comprised 21 pre-service teachers: three self-identified as Indians, and 18 self-identified as black.

Prior to the study, gatekeeper permission and ethical clearance were sought from the university where the participants studied. A class of 21 third-year students who were doing the alternate/asynchronous teaching practicum was used. The class was conducted on Zoom and WhatsApp chat, and the TP assessor was one of the researchers. However, the researcher was a participant observer, since all the teachings were asynchronous in nature; the recorded lessons, for the purpose of this study, served as the documentary evidence.

The narrative essays dataset was analysed thematically, whereas the recorded lessons were used to confirm if experiences shared in the reflections were true. The analysis followed an inductive approach where the researchers allowed themes to emerge naturally without forcing it on the data (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). Consequently, themes were identified based on their frequency of occurrence. These themes were asynchronous teaching practicum, WIL, traditional teaching approach, learner engagement, collaborative teaching, etc. Trustworthiness in the research was achieved through data triangulation from multiple sources as well as subjected to the different researchers involved (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017).

An area where the findings reported in this paper are limited pertains to the nature of the data. The study was solely conducted in a chosen teacher education programme in KwaZulu-Natal province. Though the situation at the period when this study was conducted may be similar to the situation in other institutions and provinces, the findings may not be a complete representation of the situations in other institutions and provinces. A recommendation would be that such a study may need to be carried out not just in one province, but across the nation of South Africa.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Asynchronous Teaching Practice Cannot Prepare Pre-Service Teachers for Real Classroom Teaching

The main finding is that the participating pre-service teachers believed that ATP did not have any link with the tenets and objectives of WIL. They felt that, despite the opportunities that came along with this teaching orientation – such as the opportunity to continue with the academic calendar despite the pandemic – it can only produce a pseudo classroom situation. Hence, they felt that it could not provide them with the necessary engagements required for an authentic and successful classroom teaching-learning process context. This finding is summarised below.

4.2 Asynchronous Teaching Practicum Conceptualises Teaching as a Pretentious Art

The participants perceived ATP as teaching in pretence. They thus held the view that this kind of teaching approach could only produce pseudo teaching and learning experiences. Furthermore, they felt that APT reduced teaching practicum to teaching in pretence. For example, one of the participants argued that this kind of teaching practice was difficult, as it made them (the pre-service teachers) aware that they were not really teaching. The pretence, according to her, did not only manifest itself in lesson presentation but also in planning and feedback. She said the following:

> During my lesson planning in this experience, I encountered different challenges amongst them being the most obvious ones that everyone knows. During the traditional or more common teaching practice that we do in actual schools, it is much easier to plan a lesson and be able to complete the lesson because you have actual learners, unlike doing your teaching practice online where you have to pretend to be teaching a class, whereas you do not have an actual class, all you are doing is pretending. Pretence can be a difficult thing to do in our field because almost everything that we do is dependent on the feedback we get from our learners.

Another participant similarly expressed displeasure with the asynchronous teaching model. This participant added that this model made teaching and learning demotivating, particularly for emerging teachers who had great expectations to bring about change in the classroom. In this regard, the participant said the following:

> … writing a lesson plan knowing that I was not going to present in class was a huge demotivation for me. This is because being in front of the learners, pouring information into their precious minds and seeing them move from the unknown to the known has (sic) always been my motivation; in fact, it is what made me aspire to be a teacher.

The quote above reveals the level of discouragement that this student experienced during ATP in the COVID-19 era. This revealed that there are pre-service teachers who aspire to go into the teaching profession not just because there are no jobs in the country but because they are determined to be committed to the ethos of the teaching profession and upholding the standard of the profession through dialogue in the teaching-learning process. Pretence, in whatever form it is disguised, cannot produce real

result. In addition, another participant lamented that, when teaching practicum is conceptualised as pretentious, the only good it does is to make them fake non-existing pupils as if they exist. Faking pupils seems to be the norm within this teaching orientation. The participant said, "[w]hat I believe was the most challenging issue to me was having to make videos, pretending to be teaching non-existing learners because I had to find a new way of posing questions in class, bearing in mind that no one will give me a response". The challenge does not end with faking non-existing learners as if they do exist in the classroom; the whole teaching process is manipulated, particularly the aspect of assessments and classroom activities. Furthermore, sharing personal experience of ATP, this participant added that pretending in the classroom was difficult: "I found that it was relatively difficult to pretend to teach an actual class of learners … (though) there was a need to pretend." Although this participant agreed that the pandemic situation necessitates the need to conduct lessons of pretence, it is worthy of note that such practice comes with some difficulty. This difficulty relates to the inability of the teaching orientation to produce authentic experiences that can only be had in an actual classroom. Hence, these participants believed asynchronous teaching practicum – also known as alternate teaching practice – in a sense was an alternative teaching orientation that could neither replace the actual teaching practicum nor produce an actual or authentic teaching experience.

4.3 The Asynchronous Teaching Model Discountenances the Role of Interaction in the Teaching-Learning Process

The study participants felt that the asynchronous teaching model discountenances the role of interaction at various levels of the teaching-learning process. According to Karkar-Esperat (2018) and Daniel (2020), interaction at various levels increases learning outcomes as well as motivates participants in online learning. First, they faulted the model at the first level of interaction in the teaching-learning process, that is, the interaction between the teacher and learners – a core factor in the teaching-learning process. They felt that teaching and learning cannot be faked or forced when there is no interaction or relationship between teachers and their learners. In fact, they felt that ATP erased the place of physical and mental interaction in the teaching-learning process, which they believed was dangerous to the teaching profession. According to one participant, lack of interaction did not only affect the actual lesson presentation stage but also lesson planning. He said:

> One of the challenges that I was facing is the challenge of planning, because as I am a drama educator; many of my topics need learners to be involved, like the parts where I have to teach learners how to do a monologue.

The implication for this pre-service teacher and peers in the same or similar field of study is that they may end up omitting such topics that require learner interaction, or they end up choosing activities that are inappropriate for the topic. If such topics are neglected during teaching practicum, it may be difficult for pre-service teachers to teach them in authentic and actual classroom environment. Consequently, it can be argued that ATP contradicts Black's (2004) contention that "[t]eachers who are most successful in drawing students into deep and thoughtful learning develop activities that keep students' psychological and intellectual needs in mind" (p. 42). In this paper, it is argued that ATP does not keep learners' psychological and intellectual needs in mind. Another participant reiterated this by stating:

I had difficulty in terms of creating lesson plans in accordance with learners' prior knowledge. With the lack of learner interaction, it is difficult as a teacher to create a lesson plan that reiterates learners' prior knowledge before introducing a new concept. When creating lesson plans, I was also very limited to the teaching strategies and activities that I could implement due to the lack of learner interaction.

This lack of interaction does not only affect the planning of lessons but also the lesson presentation, as stated earlier. This result corroborates that of Karkar-Esperat (2018) and Legg-Jack (2020), their studies revealed the absence of interaction associated in an online learning environment. This participant complained that it was difficult to introduce new concepts to learners whose previous knowledge was unknown. This makes it impossible to keep the learners' need in mind from the planning stage. To this student, teaching is not just about pouring out information to finish the syllabus but must be regarded as a process that prioritises learners' previous knowledge and active engagement in the learning process. It must be regarded as a journey from the known to the unknown – that is, taking learners from their actual level of knowing to their potential level of knowing. This participant held the view that this adopted model does not accommodate this smooth medium of knowledge creation in the classroom. Hence, it can be argued that the asynchronous teaching practicum contradicts the popular concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) by Vygotsky, particularly the role of mediation in the teaching-learning process. Vygotsky (1978) introduced the concept of ZPD to deal with two problems of developmental and educational psychology: (1) how to correctly assess children's intellectual abilities, and (2) how to evaluate the efficacy of instructional practices. He defined ZPD as the "distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

This lack of engagement with learners does not only have a negative impact on the learners but also on the pre-service teachers. One of the participants mentioned that the impact of such practice manifests in their lack of motivation and confidence in their virtual/asynchronous classroom. This result validates the findings of Karkar-Esperat (2018), Legg-Jack (2020) as well as Martin et al., (2020) who reported that lack of interaction with peers and lecturers; instructor absence and low student participation all contribute to poor motivation in a virtual or online learning environment. This participant said, "there was no motivation whatsoever and, therefore, my videos lacked confidence". She added, "the fact that I knew there were no learners that I was going to teach really took its toll on me and made it hard for me to carry out some of the parts of the lesson plans". The implication of this for pre-service teachers is that they may be forced or placed in a position with no choice than to conceptualise teaching practice as a mere paper fantasy where teaching is well planned but poorly delivered or not delivered as planned due to the disoriented and standalone nature of the asynchronous teaching model, particularly during the pandemic era.

Another level of interaction that is lacking in the asynchronous teaching practicum, according to the study participants, relates to the interaction between pre-service teachers and their mentor teachers. This relationship or interaction is vital in the realisation of WIL objectives. The pre-service teachers who participated in this study felt that they needed the support of in-service teachers who were already

experienced and had all the expertise in the subject they would be teaching. This level of interaction or relationship surpasses the mere theoretical understanding or knowledge of teaching they acquire in their TEPs. Although the former complements the latter, the distinction is that the latter is theoretical knowledge, whereas the former is the practical knowledge of teaching – this is the essence of teaching practicum. One of the participants expressed their pain by stating the following:

> At schools, I had the privilege of being guided by a mentor teacher as well as access to prescribed textbooks and teacher guides. Without the assistance of having a mentor teacher, when confusion occurred while creating lesson plans, I had no one to advise me on how to correctly proceed with the lesson plan.

Following this pre-service teacher's argument, it can be concluded that ATP does not create the atmosphere that allows for guidance and collaboration with more knowledgeable others (MKO) (mediation) (Vygotsky, 1978) in the teaching-learning process. Hence, it is argued in this paper that ATP discountenances the role of mediation in the teaching-learning process. Underscoring the importance of more knowledge others in their development and training as pre-service teachers, one of the participants felt, "[o]ne of the challenges that I did experience was the fact that there was a lack of guidance". This guidance or mentoring is essential for the induction of new teachers into the profession. Hence, it is not a process that can be ignored. In fact, Head et al. (1992) describe it as an educational approach of induction of which the primary aim is to pass the torch to the next generation of teachers – pre-service teachers, in this case. Ignoring such a crucial process of induction may result in putting pre-service teachers on the dark side of the required pedagogical knowledge for their immediate future authentic teaching practices.

Peer interaction is the third layer of the relationship or interaction that ATP seemingly discountenances. This level of interaction revolves around the professional relationship, instructional or pedagogical content knowledge and supports that pre-service teachers share among themselves. Participants in this study felt that ATP belittled the role of peer interaction in the teaching process. One of the participants compared the asynchronous teaching practicum to the actual teaching practicum and felt that the former was lacking in the implementation of WIL, particularly as regards collaboration with peers as pre-service teachers. He stated the following:

> I usually consult my colleagues whom I share points (same subjects) with, require their counsel and sometimes opinion and ideas, as they are future experts in their respective subjects or specialisations. They are enthusiastic as I am and usually see mistakes or weak points that I overlooked; thus, I value their critique and point of view.

This participant emphasised the role of peer mentors in their development as pre-service teachers. As academics rely on feedback from colleagues – whether during conference presentations or academic publications – it is essential that teacher educators also value the feedback that pre-service teachers receive from their peers. Thus, teaching practicum should not be perceived as adequate without the contribution of mentor peers. One participant summarised their experience of ATP without interactions with fellow peers:

> Unfortunately, neither of that luxury (interaction with peers) was available at home; instead, lesson planning at home was a walk in the desert with no one there, no shade, water and food.

The choice of the words "desert with no one", "shade", "water and food" signifies how lonely this pre-service teacher felt; in fact, this teacher's experience was little or no guidance from peers, mentor teachers and intellectual support, as well as challenges from learners.

4.4 Asynchronous Teaching Practice: The Return of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed?

A disheartening finding from this study is that all the study participants felt that ATP is a resurrection of the long-dead pedagogy of the oppressed where teaching is perceived to be one-way: teachers are authoritarian, learners are positioned to be passive or regarded as machines who only wait for instruction before they can function, and learning itself is conceptualised as a product rather than a process. The participants felt that this newly adopted teaching orientation tends to take one back to the traditional method of teaching that is teacher centred. One of the participants regretted how the newly adopted teaching model had changed their teaching orientation from the learner-centred approach to the teacher-centred approach. She said she did so "because I had to find a new way of posing questions in class, bearing in mind that no one will give me a response". Although this pre-service teacher knew that it was essential to keep the learners' need in mind when planning a lesson, she had to shift, since the norm within ATP requires the teacher to be at the centre of learning. Hence, the participant conceptualised learners as tabula rasa whose thinking could be done by another. This new way of teaching practicum opposes the view that active engagement and appropriately challenging situations make children to learn best (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007). Contrary to this expectation of an ideal classroom, ATP can be argued to have shifted attention to the teacher while making learners to be considered as mere machines.

Furthermore, the study participants also viewed ATP as characterised by a passive approach to learning. They felt that it did not give room for learners to be engaged and involved in the process of knowledge creation. One participant lamented, "[w]hen planning a lesson, I had to think like myself and also think what my learners would think". It appears that the pandemic caught academics unawares, as they never imagined that there would be a time when pre-service teachers would be forced to perform dual roles during their teaching practicum, playing the role of both educators and learners. Another participant added:

> There were quite some challenges then because sometimes I discovered that I had to use more of explanation than discussion because there was literally no one that I was teaching, I had to be more active (as I did it all alone) and I honestly did not enjoy that part. I love interacting with learners, I love hearing their views, I like to see them getting involved. But there is no one, so I had to pretend to be in class.

The question, then, is: If teachers do not enjoy the ATP experience, particularly in relation to the return of the traditional approach, what is the fate of learners? In fact, they are completely out of the learning space. This pre-service teacher's dream of hearing the learners, getting them involved, was shattered by ATP. Indeed, this is an eye-opener that this newly adopted teaching orientation is merely a fad that needs to be done with as soon as possible lest it creates more chaos than there used to be in our educational system.

We cannot afford to experience the return of the dead pedagogical goliath (traditional approach), which has once been buried, in our classrooms.

In summary, some of the participants described ATP as conceptualising learning as a product of teaching rather than a process. One of the participants said, "[t]eaching during the period of COVID-19 was a struggle, but I managed to cover all the work that we were expected to do". The implication for pre-service teachers and learners is that the approach makes one believe that the essence of teaching is to cover the syllabus rather than acquiring knowledge. In fact, there was no mention of knowledge acquisition in all the participants' responses, as learners have been conceptualised to be mere imaginary beings that do not exist.

4.5 Implications for Curriculum Designers in Higher Education

The findings reported in this paper have implications for the current practices in TEPs, particularly for teaching practicums during the pandemic and afterwards. First, there is a need to revisit the policy informing the alternate teaching practicum. The present curriculum focusses only on pre-service teachers' knowledge of the use of technology to teach, even in situations where there are no learners. The curriculum, as is, seems to be prioritising teaching over learning, placing pre-service teachers at the centre of all teaching-learning processes. Learners need to be thought of as humans, not imaginary pupils or machines. Asynchronous teaching practice could be a great asset to TEPs, particularly during crises such as this one, if attention is paid to how it is planned and executed. We seemed to have rushed into online asynchronous teaching practicum without giving due consideration to how online teaching ought to be planned and executed.

Second, there is a need for collaboration among stakeholders to ensure that WIL is fully integrated into the curriculum. This study revealed lack of collaboration or interaction as the missing link in the present asynchronous teaching practicum in South Africa. There is a need for curriculum planners and teacher educators to carefully consider the role that the three layers of interaction with learners, mentor teachers and peers play in the development and induction of pre-service teachers. They cannot be trained in isolation.

Third, the authors also suggest the need to assess the level of WIL within the current TP curriculum. It is imperative that future teachers be thoroughly prepared for real and authentic classroom experience prior to their final arrival in the classroom. This experience would enable more experienced teachers to identify certain beliefs they may be bringing into the classroom and be able to modify or correct them in a professional manner.

In summary, this paper posits the need for research findings to inform the asynchronous teaching practicum and that stakeholders need to understand what research findings argue for regarding the attainment of the objectives of WIL, particularly as regards the training of pre-service teachers during the pandemic era and afterwards.

5. Conclusion

The current asynchronous teaching practicum cannot be employed to attain the objectives and mission of

WIL; in fact, they are two parallels that cannot meet. Until this mismatch is well attended to, the TP curriculum would continue to produce teachers with no real classroom experience, as the current asynchronous model detaches pre-service teachers from the real classroom world. The present model is asocial and characterised by a lack of interaction between pre-service teachers and their learners. It provides a digitalised sort of interaction with their ghost learners whose voices cannot be heard but conceptualised to be passive in the teaching-learning process. Against this background, the authors argue that the present asynchronous teaching practicum does not have any link with the tenets of WIL and can never be relied upon as an avenue to prepare our pre-service teachers for future teaching practice with WIL in mind. The authors, therefore, maintain their stance that much of what these pre-service teachers need to learn must be learnt in and from practice and experience rather than in theory and from pretentious performance. There cannot be a successful induction for beginner teachers without the active involvement of mentor teachers, peers and the learners they will have to interact with in their future practices. Anything outside of this is mere fiction that can never produce real and authentic experience.

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