



## Vulindlela – making new pathways

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### Humanising online education: A practical approach to teaching theory online

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#### Abstract

During 2020/1, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, education has had to adapt to a predominantly online learning environment as part of an emergency response strategy that replaced the conventional *Face-to-Face* (F2F) student interaction. Fuelled by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), we are now steadily moving towards a hybrid-learning environment. The overall notion has been that within the crisis there are also opportunities to evolve, adapt, and make new pathways. However, most local institutions currently rely on a blended method of lecture delivery, which is not as radical.

The study was based on a previous paper submitted and published in 2021 titled 'The role of student-staff partnership and collaborative learning in interior design education'. The 2021 inquiry concluded with a proposal for pilot lectures that were revised and implemented during the academic year 2022 in the Interior Design (ID) Department of a private design college in Johannesburg, South Africa. The 2021 study focused on finding strategies that stimulate student engagement and participation in the theory subject of Critical Studies (CS) within a predominantly online learning environment.

The Second Phase (2022) focus was on testing the above-identified strategies as well as the Project Planners developed for ID1 & 2 towards the end of 2021. Those included shorter lectures; group work and peer review; interactive tutorial sessions and class discussions; setting weekly deadlines; and the use of a variety of media files. A valuable contribution to this paper remains the study and online publication, *Responding to the necessity for change: higher education voices from the south during the COVID-19 crisis* (SU 2021). According to Stellenbosch University (SU 2021), humanising education whilst encouraging ethics of care and digital well-being is paramount to the transition to hybrid education.

Throughout the academic year 2022, revised pilot lectures were implemented along with class observations, anonymous student surveys, and separate focus groups with ID1 & 2 students. Interviews with colleagues were conducted in 2023. The main conclusions include the need for compulsory F2F lectures as well as synchronous or asynchronous online sessions; the use of a digital collaboration platform during class discussions; data light methods and various media; setting weekly deadlines; collaborative and independent learning; site visits; guest lecturers; learning from making mistakes; empathy and understanding; accessibility and language support.

**Keywords:** Collaborative learning, digital well-being, ethics of care, humanising pedagogy, hybrid learning, student engagement, and participation.

## Abbreviations

CS	Critical studies
ERT	Emergency remote teaching
F2F	Face-to-face
HE	Higher education
HL	Hybrid learning
HOD	Head of department
ID	Interior design
SU	Stellenbosch University
TUTS	Tutorials

## Introduction

A recent study conducted at the University of Stellenbosch (SU) titled ‘Responding to the necessity for change: higher education voices from the south during the COVID-19 crisis’ by Strydom, Herman, Adendorff, and De Klerk (2021) reflected on the experiences and lessons learned during the emergency remote teaching (ERT) implemented during the COVID-19 crisis, a time of extraordinary social, political and economic challenge (SU 2021). Although we have now left the emergency period and are moving towards a predominantly hybrid<sup>1</sup> model of education, there is a need for a well-designed framework rooted in both theory and experience to inform and support this transition (Adendorff & Herman 2021). Furthermore, De Villiers (2020) emphasises the need to critically reflect on the past and discover new pathways in order to re-design the future of education.

Blended learning,<sup>2</sup> according to SU, is more of a transition phase to hybrid learning (HL) because it accommodates a traditional and physical classroom within an online world. The progression to HL requires a radical change, a shift in thinking, and alternative pedagogies (Adendorff & Herman 2021). According to Burger, Pegado, Solari, and Talip (2021), the process involves the transition from synchronous<sup>3</sup> to asynchronous<sup>4</sup> learning where students are in charge and become self-regulated, independent learners.

This research attempts to contribute to the body of shared knowledge and practice in the field of Interior Design (ID) higher education (HE). The focus of this study is on a more practical approach of teaching theory within a hybrid learning environment. The inquiry draws on a research conducted in 2021 titled ‘The role of student-staff partnership and collaborative learning in interior design education’ (Author), which concluded with a proposal for pilot lectures that were implemented during the academic year 2022 in the Interior Design Department of a private design college in Johannesburg, South Africa (refer to Appendices A, B, and C). The 2021 study focused on finding strategies that stimulate student engagement and participation in the theory subject of Critical Studies (CS) within a predominantly online learning environment.

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<sup>1</sup> *Hybrid learning (HL)* according to SU “is an academic programme or a module that involves shorter periods of on-campus teaching (face to face or F2F) and learning (block contact sessions), supplemented with sustained periods of FOL [fully online learning]” (Burger, Pegado, Solari & Talip 2021, p. 62).

<sup>2</sup> *Blended learning (BL)* according to SU includes face to face learning well integrated with other technologies, i.e., online learning (Burger et al. 2021).

<sup>3</sup> *Synchronous learning* is real-time learning which is either F2F or via an online “learning activity that involves simultaneous engagement between the students and lecturers” (Burger et al. 2021, p. 64).

<sup>4</sup> *Asynchronous learning* is learning that does not depend on a fixed time and place (not real time), and thus encourages independent learning (Burger et al. 2021).

A valuable contribution to this paper remains the online publication from SU (2021), which is identified as the most relevant and up-to-date publication available on the topic within a local South African context. Common points between the 2021 study and the SU (2021) publication include shorter lectures; group work and peer review; interactive tutorial sessions and online discussions; a variety of media files; and self-paced and self-regulated learning. An interesting addition is language support, ethics of care, digital well-being, and humanising pedagogy (SU 2021).

According to SU (2021), humanising education whilst encouraging ethics of care and digital well-being are paramount to the transition to HL.

The **aim** of this paper is to explore available strategies that can be applied when teaching theory in a hybrid-learning environment in order to encourage student engagement and participation whilst promoting ethics of care and digital well-being.

### Objectives

1. Implement pilot lectures during the academic year 2022 based on the main conclusions from the 2021 study, the SU (2021) online publication and department collaboration (refer to Appendices A, B & C)
2. Anonymous student surveys at the beginning of Terms 2, 3 and 4 (refer to Appendix D)
3. Separate focus groups with ID1 & 2 students at the end of the academic year 2022
4. Observations throughout the academic year 2022
5. Interview colleagues (2023)
6. Analyse findings using the method of triangulation.

### Literature review

According to SU, we need to design for the transition to HL and create efficient online learning activities whilst considering “content, timing, structure, sequence of learning, assessments, and pedagogical strategies” (Burger et al. 2021, p. 62) whilst remaining flexible, agile, and creative. The aim was to design an appropriate strategy that would be used to transition to a HL environment. An important point raised was the need for language support for both lecturers and students, including writing workshops, assistance, and even podcasts in various local languages (Van der Merwe 2021).

The **following topics** were highlighted during the ERT at SU and discussed throughout the online publication: Ethics of care, digital well-being, designing for meaningful learning experiences, humanising pedagogy, group work, peer review, and language support.

#### Ethics of care and digital well-being

The ERT implemented at SU and other higher education institutions focused predominantly on transitioning swiftly and efficiently to online education so that students continue the academic year. What we now need to seriously consider is “the impact of such a transition on the general well-being of students and staff” (Strydom, Sinclair & Dunn-Coetzee 2021, p. 23). The authors advocate for a systematic adoption of an “ethics of care” awareness for both lecturers and students with a focus on digital well-being, especially during periods of prolonged online presence and technology usage (Strydom et al. 2021).

Human beings are fulfilled by interaction and contact with others (Strydom et al. 2021). According to Bergman (2020), social isolation during the pandemic led to some loss of our sense of self, mostly because human beings need to feel recognised in the eyes of others in order to be fulfilled and happy (Bergman 2020). According to SU, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ERT that most educational

institutions imposed on students led to feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety (Strydom et al. 2021).

The various points discussed below are strategies that should be used to alleviate the above-mentioned conditions.

### **Designing for meaningful learning experiences**

Volschenk, Brits, Foiret, and Pinetown (2021, p. 57) maintain that “active listening to, [and] consideration” of students is an important component of care and may even lessen anxiety. Volschenk et al. (2021, p. 58) advocate for “designing for meaningful learning experiences” based on student engagement, care, and re-considered learning outcomes that better fit the new model of learning.

Breaking one lesson into smaller bites, providing clear instructions and outcomes in order to ensure independent and competent learning. Using data light methods (PDF, recorded audio notes, and compressed video files) to ensure the majority of students are reached as well as “collaborative learning experiences” (Volschenk et al. 2021, p. 58) such as forums, workshops, group work, and presentations.

### **Mutual vulnerability**

According to Jacobs (2021), humanising pedagogy may help alleviate feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. The author talks about “(re)humanising education through relationships of trust, care, [and] [...] respect” (Jacobs 2021, p. 32). Humanising pedagogy is about respecting and honouring each others’ backgrounds, identities, and experiences. The author stresses that having compassion for each other may alleviate some of the anxiety caused by the pandemic, as well as moving forward to a hybrid way of learning (Jacobs 2021).

Social inequality in a country like South Africa is an important challenge to consider when discussing hybrid education. Strydom and De Klerk (2021, p. 39) have identified the “so-called digital divide” as well as a “lack of digital literacy” in students from different social and economic backgrounds. Therefore, if we would like to humanise education, we need to find a way to be more inclusive, diverse, and accessible. In this context educators value the student-teacher relationship and online learning is more than just transmitting knowledge. Students are seen as “co-investigators in dialogue with their teachers” (Strydom & De Klerk 2021, p. 40) and learning outcomes focus on critical thinking and problem solving.

Flexible asynchronous learning where students feel encouraged to choose their own pace of learning may result in higher student engagement. Self-paced and self-regulated learning encourages embodied learning, in online education this means that students engage with a variety of media files and interactive tutorial sessions, including various critical thinking exercises that become part of the overall assessment (Strydom et al. 2021).

### **Humanising pedagogy**

According to Volschenk, Rootman-Le Grange, and Adendorff (2021), most lecturers during ERT struggled with student engagement as a result of not experiencing the same kind of physical classroom rapport with their students, which was usually immediate and included body language and facial expressions. Experiences like awkward silences, lack of spontaneous feedback, and disconnection were the norm (Volschenk et al. 2021).

Humanising education is an important strategy when engaging students using an online platform. Here, students are seen as co-creators of knowledge, and their respective histories and experiences are valued and respected. Collaborating with others may help students deal with feelings of isolation as well as learn new concepts (Volschenk et al. 2021).

Students do better if they feel supported and cared for by their lecturer. Therefore, online education is not only about uploading material that is readily available to students. Lecturers should aim to actively engage their students and look for strategies that help student and lecturer engagement within an online platform. Here, active communication with students through various channels and giving regular feedback play an important part (Volschenk et al. 2021).

### Group work and peer review

Clift, Burger, and De Villiers (2021) have observed the value of group work and peer review during the time of ERT. The authors acknowledge that although there is a certain stigma regarding peer review as not being taken seriously enough by learners, it can be seen as a way of engaging students to work with each other and broaden their perspectives (Clift et al. 2021).

Running group workshops with students and letting them evaluate each other while providing solid arguments, has encouraged student independence of learning. A major concern with group work is that weaker students usually benefit from the work of their stronger colleagues, also known as “freeloading” (Clift et al. 2021, p. 77). The authors discuss in length assessment methods they have used in order to combat this situation as well as to ensure students remain engaged and learn from each other (Clift et al. 2021).

## Research design

The main focus is on the practical and case study approach of teaching theory to ID students in a private college environment, where the author of this paper teaches Critical Studies (CS) to first and second-year ID students. The approach of inquiry uses qualitative research methods within a constructivist worldview where the researcher who is also the lecturer has observed students’ (participants’) behaviours by engaging with their activities. Data collection included observing and collaborating with students during lectures, anonymous student surveys, and open-ended interviews with colleagues. Classes are small, between 30 and 40 students per class, which makes it appropriate for this kind of practice-based and participatory research.

The 2022 project relied upon department collaboration, the HOD of the ID Department, the CS lecturer for the third year, and other studio lecturers. On Friday, 3 December 2021, the ID department conducted a 4-6 hour workshop on planning the academic year 2022 across all subjects. The main conclusions relating to the subject of CS included a need for a more practical approach to facilitate the subject of CS; considering local community engagement projects; site visits; ID department collaboration and guest lecturing. The above points were considered and included in the project planners for 2022.

The planning for CS, as well as the 2022 research, was approved by the HOD of the ID department. Following the main findings of the research conducted in 2021 (refer to Appendix A), the staff workshop, and the SU publication, proposed pilot lectures for ID 1 & 2 as well as the student surveys were revised accordingly (refer to Appendices B, C & D).

## Ethics in research

Key ethical issues in research that were considered include anonymity, consent, confidentiality, and debriefing. Both ID1 & 2 students were approached at the beginning of the academic year 2022, introduced to the aims of the research, and asked if willing to participate by signing a consent form using Google forms (refer to Appendix E). Survey anonymity was guaranteed; for the focus groups, confidentiality was agreed and no student names were mentioned. The right to withdraw at any time was acknowledged as well as the assurance that participation is a choice and would not reflect on academic performance.

## Analysis and discussion

Below is a discussion based on the main findings from the surveys and focus groups with students; class observations; and interviews with colleagues. All lectures in 2022 were F2F, as well as recorded online. Students were given the choice to attend either F2F or online.

First-year students were enthusiastic and regular at attending F2F lectures throughout the academic year 2022, about 60 to 70%, and the rest followed online. Second years appeared more independent and expressed that a theory subject can be attended remotely, with a few regular students attending out of 30. Based on the surveys students from both years greatly benefitted from F2F lectures, peer interactions, and site visits. ID2 especially enjoyed and found great value in class discussions during tutorial sessions where they were given various exercises or readings to prepare; the same can also be said for the group work, oral presentations, and guest lecturers.

Students attending online complained that they were often distracted with other activities and not as engaged and 'present' during class time. In addition, during 2021/2 we had an increase in reports of students suffering from anxiety and various mental disorders. As a result, lecturers in our department struggled to achieve the usual lively classroom discussions that would naturally happen before the COVID-19 pandemic. A common struggle amongst lecturers was delivering lectures to both online and F2F students at the same time. According to a colleague, it is "one of the most difficult parts of teaching both [...] I would choose one, either online or F2F. Also, from the students' point of view [...] it's also challenging for them".

According to a colleague who is an Associate Professor in the Architectural and Engineering Design Technology department at South Texas College and has experience in hybrid and fully online education for the last decade, for hybrid education to work we need a combination of compulsory F2F lectures as well as online sessions (synchronous or asynchronous). Also, it is vital to integrate accessibility into the syllabus, i.e., making educational material accessible for all types of students including some disabilities.

## Ethics of care and digital well-being

Speaking to colleagues, we are in agreement that we need to "*foster a sense of safety and security, students learn better when they feel seen and valued*" (colleague). According to an online student in the survey (ID1), I do "*make an effort to make the online students feel inclusive and part of the lessons*". Also, "*the lessons are clear as she is always close to her speaker. She explains the brief in detail and also ensures we all understand before moving on*". Another student (ID2): "*Lessons are well structured and information is delivered well*".

On being friendly and approachable: “Alex is always extremely helpful and friendly when I approach her for help or any questions” (ID2 student). “Alex is really competent and knowledgeable about all the topics discussed. And super helpful and friendly, will miss her next year” (ID2 student).

### Shorter lectures

Although, not always easy with the amount of theory and limited time with students, an effort was made to have several easy-to-download files, 30 to 40 minutes of recorded lectures, detailed briefs, and supporting material. Students who answered the survey agreed they preferred shorter +/- 30 min lectures; colleagues were also in agreement stating that “*we need shorter bursts of concentration [...] followed by longer discussions and question sessions*”.

A suggestion for 2023 was to pre-record some of the content giving students the opportunity to go over the material in their own time before the lecture in order to free more time for class discussions (independent asynchronous learning).

### Cameras on for the first 15 minutes and during presentations

Although we as a department agree that “*cameras on for students at certain times will make a real big difference not just for them but for us*” (colleague) we were unsuccessful at getting our students to voluntarily turn on their cameras. When asked in a survey, the top reasons given were data issues, anxiety, not having a camera. That resulted in poor-quality presentations with the majority reading and not showing their faces. For 2023, students were instructed to pre-recorded their presentations using a video.

### Miro and informal class discussions

The use of Miro (visual collaboration platform) was a great success, prompting students to actively engage and participate during class discussions. The same experience was shared within the ID department, especially studio lecturers. F2F students have one-hour tutorial session (TUTS) dedicated to class exercises working in smaller groups in addition to their weekly CS lecture. Those sessions were reserved for informal class discussions, where students were instructed to prepare a reading, a video, or answer questions related to the theory discussed in class.

Even though a few students participated voluntarily, when asked directly most had a prepared answer. In the surveys both ID1 and ID2 students felt encouraged to participate in class discussions. According to an ID2 student: “*Alex always encouraged me to talk and we had a lot of interesting discussions, going to miss her as my CS lecturer*”.

### Miro board, ID1

[https://miro.com/welcomeonboard/UzlwclVCUzFkZm1vY25QR0k0QzM2RTBUWktyTXE2UkZwbFNyN1E5QXRpek16NjdpUFhkUWphSThKdUY3OVBMZHwzNDU4NzY0NTQ0MTU4NzY1Mjc5fDI=?share\\_link\\_id=362106045802](https://miro.com/welcomeonboard/UzlwclVCUzFkZm1vY25QR0k0QzM2RTBUWktyTXE2UkZwbFNyN1E5QXRpek16NjdpUFhkUWphSThKdUY3OVBMZHwzNDU4NzY0NTQ0MTU4NzY1Mjc5fDI=?share_link_id=362106045802)

### Miro board, ID2

[https://miro.com/welcomeonboard/RDBtSjVmSU90R244QmNnOEtnbWIOVExhSmh0WnVIZzJZS2RTZ2dKMTVoVzMyC1BudDdUQ2JtaUZNRGtINU1RTXwzNDU4NzY0NTQ0MTU4NzY1Mjc5fDI=?share\\_link\\_id=576021835550](https://miro.com/welcomeonboard/RDBtSjVmSU90R244QmNnOEtnbWIOVExhSmh0WnVIZzJZS2RTZ2dKMTVoVzMyC1BudDdUQ2JtaUZNRGtINU1RTXwzNDU4NzY0NTQ0MTU4NzY1Mjc5fDI=?share_link_id=576021835550)

Use more visual examples from various sources (images, videos, movies, interviews, and examples from social media)

A wide selection of visual examples and digital media (images, videos, and interviews) were included in lectures as well as informal class discussions during TUTS. That worked well, and students felt more encouraged to engage during the lecture time, also confirmed by the student surveys.

### Weekly deadlines

Briefs & assessments included several units of submission each unit contributing in content towards the final essay submission worth 50%. For example, a summary, a mind map, and reading presentations related to the final essay submission. Those worked well and coupled with the TUTS class discussions (also part of the assessment) contributed towards a better understanding of the theory and a successful essay submission.

### Teamwork – group projects and presentations

At least one assignment per term was in the form of a group presentation, including a peer review opportunity. Although generally, students appreciated the value of group work (also confirmed by the student surveys and the focus group), the overall struggle was the presentation with the majority of students reading from their notes. Pre-recorded video presentations were proposed for 2023.

### Site visits

As a department, and especially studio lecturers we do have a culture of taking students to site. Students who attended the site visit once a term found those beneficial (also confirmed by the student surveys and focus group). Site visits are an important part of the syllabus and relate to the final essay submission, therefore they need to be included in the brief and assessment criteria.

### Guest lecturers

I did struggle with time to get a guest lecturer every term and the few sessions that we had throughout the academic year 2022 had mixed reviews and participation. The main concern for professionals and fellow lecturers was finding the time. A colleague suggested we do a department exchange, *“one for one, I take your 2 hours and you take mine”*

### Learning from mistakes

Some of the submissions throughout the academic year 2022 were presented in front of peers and the lecturer. Immediate feedback was given and students had some time to make changes until the final submission at midnight. Also, for some of the smaller units of submission throughout the term students were encouraged to go over the feedback, make corrections, and re-submit. Providing feedback directly in Word also worked well, however the online platform that we currently use needs to be re-designed in order to accommodate for that.

## Conclusion

Now is the time to look forward to the future and apply some of the knowledge and experience gained in a “post-pandemic world of higher education” (Strydom & De Klerk 2021, p. 44). In each crisis, there is also an opportunity, but that requires us to be brave and change our current way of thinking (Jacobs 2021, p. 33).

Education is about inspiring students to find their own knowledge, meaning, and voice whilst remaining critical of their environment. The process involves the transition from synchronous to



asynchronous learning where students are in charge and become self-regulated, independent learners (Burger et al. 2021). Assignments in a hybrid world should offer a more critical engagement with the theory coupled with problem-solving and presentation skills that require students to “apply, analyse, and evaluate concepts” (Volschenk et al. 2021, p. 59).

According to the Programme Overview for CS, the aim of the subject is to understand the coursework whilst enabling critical and analytical skills as well as initiating students into a personalised engagement with critical and analytical skills in response to relevant discourse in the visual arts. Reflecting on the year 2022, we managed to achieve a good level of class engagement, critical thinking, and participation. Teamwork, peer reviews, presentations, class discussions, weekly deadlines, the use of Miro, site visits, guest lecturers, and learning from mistakes were all major contributors.

Humanising education is an important strategy to use when engaging students using an online platform. Here, students are seen as co-creators of knowledge, and their respective histories and experiences are valued and respected. Moving towards a hybrid model of education for the subject of CS, it is important to balance online lectures (synchronous or asynchronous) with compulsory F2F sessions including site visits, guest lectures, class discussions, tutorial sessions, and collaborative learning including group work. For that model to work, online lectures including pre-recorded sessions should remain exclusively online, and F2F sessions although compulsory, can be attended both online and F2F to accommodate online students.

Most importantly, we need to be more inclusive, diverse, and accessible by breaking one lesson into smaller bites; providing clear instructions and outcomes to ensure independent and competent learning; using data light methods and a variety of media files so that lecture material is easily accessible and readily available whilst providing appropriate student and language support, empathy and understanding.

Lastly, it is important to note that fully online education is a key part of HL and deserves proper attention, a subject for another discussion and another paper.

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